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Pricing, Design and Cultivation – Conceptual Tools for the Normative Assessment of Fairness in the Age of Media Platformization

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ABSTRACT

The platformization of digital media is linked to various crises in digital journalism. At stake are values that define journalism as a multi-layered activity with economic as well as democratic functions. The reinvention of digital journalism is therefore also a reformulation of its normative requirements and self-image. The article argues for a threefold interpretation of the concept of fairness to transform this normatively indeterminate situation into a more definite one. We tie the term back to empirical processes of co-valuation, in which the distributed actors who jointly constitute digital journalism attempt to pragmatically clarify questions of their economic balance (pricing), the anchoring of suitable socio-technical infrastructures (design) and the sustainable safeguarding of critical competencies (cultivation). Thus, we provide a substantial set of tools for the analysis and critical assessment of current developments as well as normative proposals in digital journalism.

KEYWORDS

Fairness; John Dewey; science and technology studies; economy and sociology of conventions; valuation; platformization

Introduction

The platformization of digital media has created a social situation of uncertainty about what information quality is and how it can be ensured. Amidst this crisis is digital journalism, which needs to reinvent itself under increased economic pressure and in the face of disruptive technological developments. At stake here are values that characterize journalism as a multi-layered activity with both economic aspects and public democratic functions. The reinvention of digital journalism is therefore also necessarily a reformulation of its normative requirements and self-image. The paper elaborates on the significance and potential of the concept of fairness to transform this normatively indeterminate situation into a definite one. The supposedly vague concept of fairness, so our thesis, can gain clear contours through a thorough investigation and play out its advantage, which consists of reckoning with contradictory pragmatic requirements in social reality from the outset. To this end, we tie the term back to empirical processes of co-valuation, in which the distributed actors who jointly

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constitute digital journalism attempt to clarify questions of their economic balance, of the anchoring of suitable technical infrastructures and of the sustainable safeguarding of critical competencies.

As Altmeppeen et al. (2012, 329) highlight, the concept of fairness in journalism research is not a central normative principle and often related to more common concepts such as media ethics, objectivity or professionalism. Fairness in this specific sense relates to the expectation to “consider the entire aspects of public communication.” (Altmeppeen et al. 2012, 329) However, recent considerations also refer to fairness when it comes to the design of recommendation systems, artificial intelligence (e.g. Zou and Schiebinger 2018) or political institutions and legal regulations, such as the Digital Service Act and the Digital Markets Act, for instance (Helberger et al. 2024). Although these considerations address various normative challenges, they apply fairness primarily to algorithmic accountability or economic power inequalities, as is also the case with the well-known example of fair trade. In this article, we propose to use the concept of fairness more fundamentally in order to focus on currently open problems regarding the search for new normative orientations of digital journalism. As Witschge and Harbers (2018) argue, normative considerations of digital journalism often reproduce a gap between normative ideals of professional journalism and concrete socio-technical practices. For instance, Habermas (2022), among others, argues for a strengthening of the normative principles of professional journalism, which is strongly oriented towards the classic mass media and tends to reproduce the forementioned gap. However, other considerations ask for the establishment of new normative codes to ensure information quality and democratic functions in the context of, for instance, recommendation systems and digital business models (Karlsson et al. 2023). Nevertheless, it remains an open question how to assess concrete processes of practical mediations of various values and normative orientations of journalism in an appropriate way. Therefore, Karlsson et al. (2023, 567) as well as Helberger et al. (2022) propose a future research agenda that explicitly considers the practical balancing of various codes of ethics and their trade-offs.

In the following, we unfold the potential of the concept of fairness for the normative analysis of digital journalism to address the mentioned challenges. Therefore, the paper draws on a combination of theoretical approaches from philosophical and sociological pragmatism, in particular the theory of valuation following John Dewey (2004), but also the theory of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and Science and Technology Studies (Ryfe 2022). In short, our approach understands fairness as a negotiation process between the actors involved in digital journalism, but without reducing it to economic questions of fair share. Fairness in this sense also goes beyond the idea of balanced reporting associated with it in journalism (Altmeppeen et al. 2012). Rather, the latter aspects are only part of the collectively negotiated value issues that require intellectual clarification in the wake of the upheavals caused by digitization and platformization. The negotiation process, which we examine from the point of view of fairness, is therefore a process of valuation or, more precisely, a process of clarifying those values that have become central to the reorganization of digital journalism in crisis. The strength of the concept lies in not suggesting an ideal standard for this reorganization in advance, but in recognizing that this is necessarily an experimental process, without, however, abandoning claims to intellectual honesty and consistent justification.

Regarding the platformization of digital journalism, we focus on three levels of co-valuation: On a first level, economic distribution conflicts and the associated challenges of fair price negotiation are important. These include not only authors, editors, readers, publishers and advertisers, but also intermediary players involved in the development and operation of complex platforms. We call this aspect of co-valuation pricing. With the influence of platforms on the structures of journalistic markets and public spheres, a second level of negotiation comes into view, which cannot be limited to fair prices. At this level, the aim is rather to determine which technological infrastructures correspond best to the various social values such as freedom of expression, democratic deliberation, ensuring professional quality standards, but also topicality, diversity of information, economic efficiency, appropriate payment, etc. This is the design aspect of fair co-valuation. However, designing a balanced technical framework structure is not enough to solve the problem of reorganizing digital journalism. Rather, these technical structures require ongoing critical evaluation to keep the requirements for fair digital journalism alive in the public sphere in the long term. This closes the circle, insofar as a fair digital journalism is not only a consequence of, but also a condition for cultivating skills for critical evaluation of public issues. We call this aspect of fair co-valuation its social and public cultivation.

We approach this theoretical project in the following steps: In section 2, we look at the normative resources of journalism that current considerations use to criticize developments within platformization. The discussion leads to a problematization of the reference level of current normative debates, which often fail to bridge the gap between normative ideals and practical constraints. Therefore, we introduce a different theoretical approach in section 3 that draws on pragmatism to move away from values in favour of processes of fair value mediation. Section 4 introduces fairness as a meta-principle, which allows normative assessments of processes of value mediation on the three levels of pricing, design and cultivation. In chapter 5, we illustrate how media policy and academic discussions propose alternative options to the current platform economy, which could include new platform models. We highlight how these discussions refer to specific co-valuation approaches in order to reinvent digital journalism. However, our fairness concept sensibilizes for mediating different co-valuation approaches, as the discussed examples often refer to fairness in a one-sided way. Although we do not focus on the regulation of big-tech platforms in the following, we highlight that discussions regarding fairness must also reflect the dependency on big-tech platforms.

The Search for Normative Foundations in Digital Journalism in the Age of Media Platformization

Platformisation of the Public Sphere as a Challenge for Classic Normative Principles of Journalism

Democratic theory was always central to set the normative foundations of journalism (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990). As Witschge and Harbers (2018, 107) highlight, the “perspectives on journalism that developed are rooted in a particular predefined normative conception, emphasizing journalism’s democratic function.” In this regard,

Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere and democracy is a central point of reference here, as Habermas relates his normative understanding of the public sphere to a process of communicative deliberation that ideally contributes to the formation of a well-founded public opinion (Habermas 1996, 362). To fulfill its normative function of legitimizing and influencing political processes, the media ought to be independent from political and social pressure to establish foundations for a critical public (Habermas 1996, 378). To make the convergence of normative standards of journalism with deliberative politics plausible, Habermas (1996, 378) refers to normative ideals that Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) emphasize for journalism. From this perspective, journalism is responsible for surveilling the sociopolitical environment, representing a diverse range of views, providing mechanisms of accountability of public officials and establishing incentives for citizens to learn and participate in political issues (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990, 270). Nevertheless, these normative ideals are not a description of concrete practices of journalism but rather counterfactual ideals (Habermas 1996, 378; Nerone 2013, 452). Therefore, Zelizer (2013, 466) argues that the western perspective on democracy and journalism "was more stable, more morally unambiguous, less contingent, more socially useful, less corrupt, and most importantly, more aligned with western notions of democracy than it ever could be on the ground."

However, the discrepancies between normative ideals and practices of journalism are even more acute in relation to digital platforms. Thus, publishers do not only compete with these platforms in the advertising market which leads to an orientation towards audience reaches and potentially contributes to a spread of click-bait and a loss of journalistic quality (Petre 2021). Furthermore, publishers also depend on platforms for the display of advertising, the curation of content *via* algorithms and personalized recommender systems or the integration of platform elements on their own websites such as like buttons or search functions (cf. Nielsen and Ganter 2022). As political actors can address their potential voters directly *via* social media and users can publish content by themselves, this also weakens the classical gatekeeping functions of publishers. This in turn could contribute to phenomena such as hate speech, filter bubbles or echo chambers (Neuberger et al. 2023).

Habermasian concepts of the public sphere often judge these developments against the background of the ideals of the classical era of mass media, as this era seems to represent a phase where professional journalism was central for promoting public discussions (Fischer and Jarren 2024). Accordingly, Habermas argues to strengthen traditional structures of societal agenda setting by professional journalism to establish a counterpoint to the challenges of platformization (Habermas 2022, 165). However, in view of the platformization, adherence to this normative ideal of an inclusive public sphere created by professional journalism likely contributes to a consolidation of the discrepancy between normative ideals and the current transformation of journalism.

Current Quests for Normative Foundations of Digital Journalism

Whereas Habermas focuses on a rather traditional understanding of professional journalism, other considerations such as proposed by Robinson et al. (2019, 374) ask

how important normative concepts such as professional quality assurance, democratic deliberation and criticism can more directly linked with new structural transformations of journalism.

Therefore, Karlsson et al. (2023) “suggest six primary categories of codes of journalism that are implicit, non-formalized, and yet undoubtedly exist as journalists and members of the public already use them to assess the authority and legitimacy of journalism. These are codes of aesthetics, automation, distribution, engagement, identity and proximity.” (Karlsson et al. 2023, 560) For example, codes of aesthetics refer to expectations of “how journalism should appear and look like.” (Karlsson et al. 2023, 560) Thus, codes of aesthetics ensure that only actual news have the appearance of news. This becomes relevant in the context of native advertising that passes as journalism by using its aesthetic forms. Codes of automation are about establishing an appropriate balance between editorial decisions and quality checks of professional journalists and algorithms, whereas codes of distribution refer to appropriate prices for the distribution of quality content or to pathways to decrease the dependence on third parties such as platforms (Karlsson et al. 2023). Furthermore, the increasing relevance of artificial intelligence and personalized recommendation systems in digital journalism triggers a search for normative foundations of these technologies (Helberger et al. 2022). Thus, instead of dismissing personalized recommendation systems as a potential threat to democracy from the outset, they could under specific socio-technical conditions also be used to strengthen normative aspects of journalism and democracy (Draude et al. 2024). To integrate democratic values such as securing a plurality of perspectives in recommender systems, Helberger (2019), for example, refers to approaches of democratic theory and value sensitive design.

While these considerations adapt rather classical normative principles of journalism and democracy to the digital transformation, normative orientations also develop that might conflict with a traditional understanding of journalism (Kreiss and Brennen 2016). This becomes apparent in discussions about public and participatory journalism (Ahva 2010), especially regarding social media elements on platforms or websites of publishers that open spaces for the public negotiation of societal issues (Fischer and Jarren 2024, 206). These new forms of audience participation challenge the strict distinction between a public and private sphere that Habermas highlights to preserve the inclusivity of the public (Habermas 2022, 165). However, not only has the inclusivity of the public sphere been more of a normative ideal than reality (Fraser 1992). There are also normative expectations to enable the participation of broad social groups, which in turn call into question the traditional gatekeeper role of journalism as well as a clear distinction between private matters and public issues (Fischer and Jarren 2024, 206). Nevertheless, against the backdrop of a rather reductionist audience orientation in terms of statistical metrics that could lead to a decline of journalistic quality as well as risks such as hate speech, polarization and the spread of fake news, various authors assess the new forms of audience participation as ambivalent (Karlsson et al. 2023, 564; Splichal and Dahlgren 2016, 13). Accordingly, the question of conceptual tools that allow a normative assessment of these ambivalent dynamics becomes relevant.

Open Challenges regarding the Normative Evaluation of Digital Journalism

As shown in section 2.1, a traditional understanding of journalistic norms as a coherent set of practices “fails to acknowledge the non-coherent and at times arbitrary nature of practices, in which strategic claims and everyday practices interact with each other more equally and are not necessarily aligned as lofty ideals clash with commercial and practical constraints.” (Witschge and Harbers 2018, S. 106) Nevertheless, normative aspects such as strengthening citizens’ critical faculties, the need for public justification, the orientation towards standards of civility or the preservation of editorial independence are still central in the normative evaluation of journalism (Karlsson et al. 2023). However, compared to a traditional perspective that relates these normative orientations to a specific form of professional journalism, we need to ask how journalistic values can be justified and practically integrated in the context of recommendation systems, the use of AI or new forms of audience participation under conditions of platformization.

The remaining open question in the search for normative orientations in digital journalism relates to the concrete practical *mediation* of various and potential *conflicting* normative standards. Thus, Karlsson et al. (2023, 567) propose a future research agenda that explicitly considers the balancing of various codes of ethics and their trade-offs. Furthermore, Helberger et al. (2022) refer to open questions of value mediation regarding the implementation of AI in digital journalism and argue that the “next challenge lies in the more concrete conceptualization, balancing conflicting values and a critical assessment (and improvement) of the decision-making processes and how they can be made more inclusive and more contestable.” (Helberger et al. 2022, 1610) As various technical and legal data protection initiatives such as the ban of third-party cookies challenge existing business models of journalism, also the mediation of economic profitability, journalistic quality and privacy is of central importance (Engert et al. 2023). Since this mediation of values always takes place under concrete economic and sociotechnical conditions, we need a methodological perspective that does not stop at a dichotomy between normative ideals and practical restrictions (Maeyer 2020).

Pragmatism, Theory of Conventions and STS as a Theoretical Basis for Conceptualizing Normative Challenges of Digital Journalism

Section 2 presented various approaches from journalism research that respond to the normative challenges associated with platformization in different ways. While Habermas, among others, argues for the preservation of institutions from the age of mass media, which are supposed to stand for the fulfillment of normative expectations towards journalism (2.1), others seem to take the current media constellation more seriously (2.2). However, it is unclear, how to find a new normative orientation and how to integrate conflicting values. Furthermore, all approaches tend to reproduce the gap between normative expectations and practical constraints in journalism (2.3). To meet these challenges, we propose a methodological reorientation based on the classical pragmatism of John Dewey, but also integrate more recent pragmatistic approaches (cf. also Uhlmann et al. 2024, 38-39). First, we understand the search for new

normative foundations as a collective democratic experimentation in socio-technical infrastructures (3.1). Second, we specify this quest as a practical and normative process of co-valuation for which (procedural) fairness criteria can be indicated (3.2).

The Public and Its Problems in Socio-Technical Infrastructures of Digital Journalism

For Dewey (1946), publics potentially arise where actors are affected by the consequences of the actions of others, especially when these actions generate “issues that existing institutions cannot settle” (Marres 2007, 770). If, for example, private business practices of platform companies influence the possibilities of disseminating news or lead to the violation of users’ privacy rights, we potentially deal with public issues, provided they are collectively identified and problematized. Dewey assumes that such crisis situations first require a collective search for an appropriate definition of the problem, which then potentially triggers an experimental process in which hypotheses need to be formulated, evidence provided and tested to finally arrive at new routines and institutions and thus transform the indeterminate situation into a definite one (Lamla 2013, 350). Dewey’s procedural and functional approach to the public sphere has consequences for the assessment of journalism: First, it may be seen as a prerequisite for a democratic inquiry because it can lay the foundations for an informed search for solutions in problematic situations. To this end, journalism must attempt to address social “issues” (Marres 2007). However, this function must be examined regarding specific conditions. For example, some business models in journalism might counteract an appropriate issue orientation and therefore block the collective learning process, if they provide an incentive not to take issues seriously and present them appropriately, e.g. due to a focus on a metrics-based audience reach. Secondly, journalism becomes an “issue” in itself. From this theoretical point of view, the disruptions in journalism mentioned before are not necessarily signs of a collapse but might under certain conditions be interpreted as triggers for an experimental inquiry to find new routines that change traditional understandings of journalism – without denying the possibility that strategic action or power dynamics undermine democracy (Uhlmann et al. 2024). The debate about new normative foundations of journalism is thus itself a sign of the uncertainty caused by the questioning of previous routines through platformization.

Dewey wrote his book on “The Public and its Problems” in the light of two challenges of industrial societies and thus has already focused on technological and social change: “First, new forms of media, such as daily newspapers, radio and cinema, increasingly related citizens to public affairs, and second, in an industrial world such affairs were increasingly complex.” (Marres 2007, 676) The first challenge points to the fact that media change is directly linked to questions of the public sphere – as an enabler of the public, as a public issue, and sometimes as a cause of critical situations in itself (Antic 2017, 274). The second challenge implicates that complex societies with rapid media change afford an experimental understanding of democracy, since these societies permanently generate issues that established institutions could not solve sufficiently.

Moreover, Dewey is highly compatible with approaches from the fields of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Science and Technology Studies (STS), which

emphasize that technical artifacts are a constitutive part of journalistic practices and by no means normatively neutral. These approaches see humans and non-humans as co-constituted in specific “assamblages” (Ryfe 2022). The configuration of a consent banner, the digital infrastructure required to operate a business model such as programmatic advertising, or the aesthetics of websites that might blur the boundaries between advertising and editorial content are examples of how values are inscribed in (technical) design and affect user behaviour. While the debates on the platformization of media structures refer to aspects of socio-digital infrastructures, affordances and materiality, criticism of this structural change often refers to normative theories that do not sufficiently reflect these socio-technical conditions (cf. the criticism by Staab and Thiel 2022 on Habermas’ conception of the public sphere). In the same vein, a perspective that anchors normative requirements of journalistic recommendation or AI systems solely in liberal conceptions of personal autonomy or freedom of users, as proposed by Helberger et al. (2022, 1610), neglects the collective conditions and interplay of users and technology in evaluating the quality of digital journalism and strengthening a critical will formation. In contrast, our conceptualisation of design as a co-valuation approach, presented in more detail in section 4, incorporates this socio-technical perspective.

Furthermore, ANT approaches follow Dewey’s pragmatic conceptualization of democratic institutions by moving away from a predefined understanding of what counts as journalism, since they focus on the specific assamblages of different actors that form around various “matters of concern” (Latour 2004). In other words, this perspective avoids a too narrow understanding of journalism without denying the importance of professional standards for such a normative orientation of digital journalism (Ryfe 2022, 2). In this sense, like Robinson et al. (2019, 374), we propose to understand the current normative quest in journalism as an experimental process that goes beyond a classical perspective of journalistic institutions.

From Normative Standards to Fair Value Mediation

To overcome the dichotomy between normative ideals and practical constraints, we argue for a methodological perspective that does not use abstract norms as a starting point. In this regard, Dewey (2004) suggests shifting the perspective from values to processes of valuation. We follow Dewey on this point but add another consideration: Since values rarely appear in the singular in problematic situations, one must pay attention to processes and forms of value mediation. Here, we refer to the neo-pragmatist sociology of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) which points out the simultaneity and potential conflicts between a plurality of values.¹

If we assume that issues evolve in situations that lack the institutional routines to react to new problems and add that these issues should be dealt with through a democratic experimentation, one could ask what the resources are on which this experimentation can be based. Here it helps to understand values – those that are already formalized as normative guidelines, but also those that are more implicitly anchored (sections 2.1 and 2.2) – as “evaluative devices that carry over from earlier experiences and are (to some extent) shared in society.” (van de Poel and Kudina 2022, 6) As such they can help “to discover what is morally at stake” (ibid., 7) and

guide future actions. This is the case, for example, when journalistic actors criticize platformization with reference to the distribution of data-economic revenues, privacy or the formation of public opinion. However, following Dewey's theory of valuation, values do not exist outside of concrete practices in a deontological sense. On the contrary, values are always the result of past problem solvings and must be re-interpreted in the light of a new situation (Dewey 2004, 238). Furthermore, Dewey rejects the artificial separation of ends and means, of ideal values and situational constraints. In Dewey's "ends-in-view" understanding of values, ends and means are always connected and must be mediated with each other (Dewey 2004, 217). Thus, Maeyer (2020, 119) argues that journalistic values and orientations (e.g., informing the public about relevant societal issues or getting page views) depend on how to achieve them (e.g., data protection requirements or the balancing of advertisement and journalistic content). Therefore, achieving a goal such as informing the public about relevant social issues also depends on mediating it with other aspects and value-laden issues such as privacy, journalistic quality, or profitability. An adequate inquiry must thus not only mediate (variable) values and situations, but also ends and means (Uhlmann et al. 2024, 38). Following this perspective, we do not present yet another list of normative principles that journalism is ought to correspond to. Instead, we aim to offer a guideline for the normative quests that already take place in journalistic practice as well as in journalism research.

While privacy, journalistic quality, or profitability might serve as judgement devices, it is not self-evident how actors practically apply these values. In their book "On Justification" Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) argue that "critical moments" occur, when established forms of cooperation fail. Here, the actors tend to voice critique, and they need to justify their respective positions with reference to specific ideas about what is just and appropriate in the situation and what serves the common good (for further explanations regarding the term "common good," see Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 65-82). Boltanski and Thévenot identify a limited plurality of historically evolved "orders of worth" that relate differently to the common good and that are virtually present in critical moments. For example, actors can justify or criticize specific perspectives on issues like privacy, journalistic content, fair remuneration, or the integration of users on journalism platforms with reference to technical efficiency, economic profitability, democratic opinion-forming or creative innovation. The plurality of valuation principles becomes apparent when different values clash. There are essentially two options available in such a situation: Either the conflict is resolved through forms of power and violence, or actors reach a compromise between two or more orders of worth. Boltanski and Thévenot use a descriptive approach and are therefore not interested in classifying these compromises normatively. This is precisely where we would like to intervene with our concept of fair and cooperative value mediation.

Thus, we understand fairness as a normative concept that refers to the justifiability of value mediations and compromises. As a fair compromise cannot be traced back to a single grammar of justifications and value mediations without loss or bias, a higher-level procedural order is required. On the one hand, we argue for a perspective that does justice to normative demands for symmetrical consideration and maximum inclusion of value aspects – comparable, for example, to an idea of domination-free discourse. On the other hand, the normative assessment of value mediation should

not lose contact with the negotiation of the practical situation and should involve all its actors. This regulative idea of *fair co-valuation* considers different levels and grammars of value mediation simultaneously and strives to balance them appropriately to the situation. The normative aspect of fairness does not determine top-down what such a balanced mediation of values should look like. Rather, it uses the pragmatist intuition that a redefinition of an indeterminate situation that can practically stand the test of time presupposes and must imply a viable set and framework of values.

This does not mean to ignore the fact that social practices and routines often rely on normatively questionable power relations. However, to the extent that actors consider this power illegitimate, the lack of value integration continues to be criticized and can hardly be completely suppressed as long as public pressure and regulatory action hold platforms accountable for their practices. We consider such initiatives as necessary for reducing power imbalances and enabling experimentation processes in the ecosystem of digital journalism. However, these aspects are not the main focus in this article. Instead, we are interested in proposals for options of digital journalism that aim to be more independent from the platform economy. In the following, we show how a fairness perspective can clarify these quests for alternative paths.

Pricing, Design and Cultivation – Conceptual Tools for the Normative Assessment of Fairness

For the case of digital journalism – but presumably also for other crisis situations induced by digization – we distinguish three levels of co-valuation, which must be simultaneously considered to normatively assess intellectual and practical experiments of journalism. These are the procedural modes of pricing, design and cultivation, understood as three different toolboxes for a fair co-valuation. Thus, in our concept of co-valuation, we not only take the plurality of “orders of worth” in digital journalism into account but also focus on different approaches to value mediation. All three modes are suitable for both empirically reconstructing value mediation processes that journalistic actors already mobilize as well as normatively assessing the range of values articulated and considered in the process.

Pricing

At a first level, we ask how to analyze economic negotiations from the perspective of fairness, e.g. regarding the distribution of data economy revenues or for the financing of journalistic quality content. To provide a normative assessment, we propose to analyze price negotiations regarding their implicit valuations or explicit justifications: From the perspective of economic sociology, prices always refer to a wider understanding of valuation processes (e.g. Beckert and Aspers 2011). Prices therefore relate to questions of normativity and are subject to a justification imperative under certain circumstances, as, for example, Boltanski and Esquerre (2020) argue. Thus, values as instruments to justify prices can be assessed from a fairness perspective. However, assessing appropriate pricing models regarding fairness requires analyzing their amount of inclusivity. This not only means to ask, which actors are involved in the

pricing process and how, but also to examine if non-economic values (e.g. journalistic quality; privacy; collective learning and democratic resilience) are also considered.

Design

In the same way, one can analyze questions of a fair value mediation regarding the processes of designing digital platform architectures and technological as well as institutional (e.g. legal, administrative, material) conditions for digital journalism. This includes, for example, the design of recommendation systems, user interfaces but also AI in journalism. The separation or combination of different spheres of journalism, in particular the relationship between journalistic content and advertising, is also an important design issue. Regarding a normative assessment of fairness, we advocate to focus on the design process and questioning underlying design decisions and procedures of existing technologies and platform architectures. Therefore, not only the isolated design object is of interest, but also how socio-technical systems and user practices are co-constructed. A fairness perspective needs to consider, for example, that the socio-technical design remains contestable in various contexts, such as courts or on the user side (Diver 2022, 163).

Cultivation

A normatively acceptable institutional setup of a previously indeterminate situation and thus a well-thought-out technological design is, like fair prices, dependent on public and justified negotiations and criticism. As this not always happens spontaneously, the cultivation approach, as a third level of the fairness concept, points to the need to establish conditions that maintain the possibility of different forms of critique (Lamla 2024). Since fair value mediation in journalism, understood as a form of social processing of issues and the dissemination of relevant information, is not only dependent on a receptive and critical audience, but also contributes significantly to the reproduction and improvement of their journalistic literacy, the question of cultivating public value mediation skills arises. Here, the procedural aspect of fairness enters directly into the experimental and institutionalized ways of reinventing journalism. We can ask, for example, to what extent a proposed solution to the challenges of journalism makes not only current but also future value mediation problems accessible for intellectually rich negotiation processes or blocks them in populist confrontations, attention-seeking news, and fragmented information environments (Figure 1).

In the following section, we refer to fairness issues in terms of pricing, design and cultivation in greater depth using samples of typical (both practical and scientific) experiments, discussions and negotiation processes. We aim to examine critically to what extent aspects of fairness are included in current processes of value mediation. Contemporary movements of digital journalism at least implicitly consult and discuss all three modes of value mediation in view of the diverse challenges posed by platformization. However, as we argue in the following, actors in digital journalism do not always use pricing, design and cultivation as toolboxes of co-valuation in a balanced manner, but often in a simplifying and one-sided way. This is where our threefold fairness perspective unfolds its critical power.

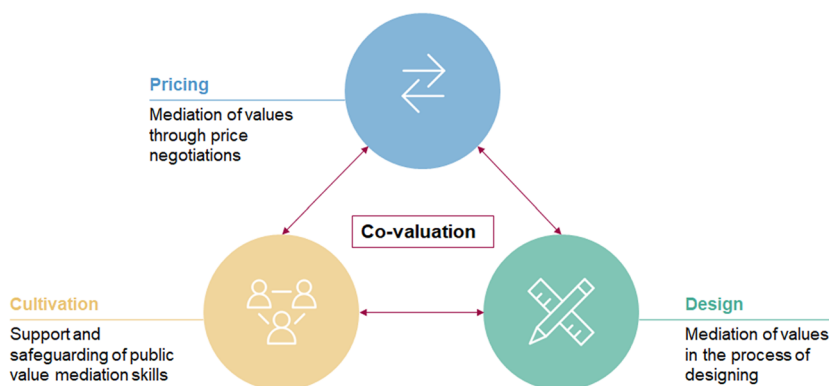


Figure 1. Co-Valuation approaches².

Assessing Current Experiments of Digital Journalism from an Integrated Fairness Perspective

To assess the value mediation processes in digital journalism, we examine three particularly important segments of this arena in more detail below. On the one hand, our brief reconstruction of current debates about the future of journalism shows that actors often focus on value mediation in a one-sided way. On the other hand, we highlight that all three co-valuation approaches need to be considered simultaneously to assess the actual value mediation of journalistic actors in terms of fairness. As reactions to the challenges of platformization, these current debates first focus on questions of fair payment models as well as their monetary distribution effects and selective incentives on different actors in the journalistic ecosystem (5.1). Secondly, questions of content curation and their implications for the use of technologies such as algorithmic recommendation systems need to address the mediation of diverse value aspects such as personalization, privacy, quality or diversity of opinion (5.2). Finally, the change in journalistic role differences, relationships and forms of participation under conditions of platformization are on the agenda of a critical evaluation of trends in digital journalism, for example, regarding the circumvention of professional intermediaries, public scrutiny for solid justifiability or the alignment of news and attention-grabbing entertainment (e.g. click-baiting) (5.3).

Negotiating Values Through Payment Models

In view of the crisis phenomena in section 2, there are proposals for new payment models (cf. Buschow and Wellbrock 2022; Erbrich et al. 2024). While these proposals focus on aspects of pricing as described above, we argue in this section that they need to take the other two modes of co-valuation (design and cultivation) into account. Considerations regarding payment models argue for a cross-publisher bundling of journalistic content based on a flat-rate pricing approach that shares similarities to subscriber-based platform models such as Spotify or Netflix. Such pricing models intend to promote a diverse and affordable range of quality journalism also for audiences that are often reluctant towards journalism. Due to a potential increase

of a willingness to pay, these pricing models are not only associated with expectations to stimulate economic potentials for publishers. Furthermore, the control over access, revenue distribution and user data could also decrease the domination by tech platforms (Erbrich et al. 2024, 2). By enabling access to affordable quality content whose distribution and financing is not dependent on large platform companies, these pricing models can also be related to some of the requirements that Karlsson et al. (2023, 563) set out in terms of so-called “codes of distribution.”

However, there are also potential fairness challenges regarding subscription-based pricing models. For example, publishers fear that they will lose control over the curation of their content due to a centralized platform logic, as it is currently the case with Spotify (Erbrich et al. 2024, 13). Although a decentralized platform design that gives users access to content with a single sign-on solution can provide a remedy here, as the content remains in the publisher’s environment (Erbrich 2024, 1284), questions regarding a fair distribution of revenues among publishers remain. For example, a flat-rate model raises the question of a distribution formula that does not favor the big publishers from the outset. Not only proponents of these pricing models emphasize that publishers could be critical of an equitable distribution of revenues in connection with a flat-rate pricing model (Erbrich et al. 2024, 13). Also, current experiments with journalism platforms that have a high commitment to foster fair pricing models are skeptical of a flat-rate model (Uhlmann et al. 2024, 43). Without proposing a silver-bullet solution, we can refer to the importance of an integration of the design and cultivation approach here. Thus, pricing models cannot only be justified on seemingly logical economic arguments such as a potential increase of a willingness to pay on the user side. Furthermore, there is a specific need for a decentralized platform design and for cultivating public negotiations that include publishers and potentially a wider range of actors in finding appropriate pricing models.

Publicly financed platform models also play a central role to enable long-term alternatives to big-tech platforms. As Dogruel et al. (2025) have recently argued in an analysis for the German public service provider ZDF, the function of publicly financed service media should go beyond solely promoting a counterbalance to private media and digital disinformation of big platforms. Thus, public service media could also be an active enabler for designing alternative infrastructures. In this sense, cooperation between public service media and private media companies regarding the joint use of open source platform models could be relevant in this case. According to Buschow and Dobusch (2025), it would be crucial that cooperations do not restrict competition in the publishing sector and that private media companies perceive the respective initiatives as fair. Such cooperations are even more urgent to reduce dependencies on platforms, considering that actors such as Google try to offer publishers short-term contracts to prevent cooperation formats among publishers (see Draude et al. 2024, 44).

Negotiating Values through Curation

In addition to alternative payment models, discussions also emphasize specific socio-technical conditions for the curation of journalistic content (e.g. Heitz et al. 2022). As we show in this section, the integration of pricing and cultivation is

important regarding establishing an appropriate socio-technical design for curation. The search for normatively appropriate curation formats is often linked to criticism of the fragmentation of the public sphere. This criticism is in turn associated with personalized and machine learning algorithms. While widespread personalized recommendations can create relevant matches between users and journalistic content, the focus on users' preferences and advertisers' expectations contributes to the dominance of economic standards in the curation of journalistic content (Petre 2021). To meet these challenges, various discussions explore ways of designing recommendation systems that take journalistic and democratic values into account from the outset (Helberger 2019). Thus, although personalized recommendation systems that use behavioral predictions are often subject to criticism, they could also intentionally recommend journalistic content and perspectives to users that go beyond their reading habits (Heitz et al. 2022). However, the personalized curation logics do not use the specific content of journalistic articles but behavioural predictions to operationalize, for example, content diversity (see also Heitz et al. 2022). To counter such opaque and privacy harming algorithmic designs, considerations on alternative curation formats based on approaches such as "Mapping of Controversies" (Venturini and Munk 2021) refer directly to the societal issues or justifications taken up in public negotiations and attempt to map their complexity in a more appropriate way (Draude et al. 2024, 38-43).

If most publishers are primarily concerned with their economic survival, such scientific considerations on recommendation systems are not very likely to become the subject of actual design processes. In the same vein, Helberger et al. (2018, 192, 196) suggest that publishers apply an aspect such as "diversity" often against the background of data-economic objectives – to avoid repetitive recommendations and to meet company expectations of user satisfaction, for example, which is measured by increased click rates or usage time. Thus, to make the design of recommendations less dependent on economic logics, considerations on alternative payment models of journalism discussed above are relevant. It is conceivable that designers of journalistic infrastructures could use values like diversity or privacy as judgment devices in a more open way in their design processes if the economic survival depends less on quantifiable audience reach and large platforms. In addition to alternative business models, the formalization of ethical standards is important, which, for instance, consider the distribution of responsibilities in the designing process of recommendation systems (Karlsson et al. 2023, 562). To ensure the integration of such ethical standards in concrete practices of designers of socio-technical curation systems, they must additionally be accompanied by elements of professional ethics. These ensure, for example, that recommendation systems not only aim to achieve a data-economic fit between users and companies, but also work towards promoting a cultivation of contestability of curation formats as well as critical evaluation skills among users (Lamla 2024).

Negotiating Values through Audience Participation

As shown in section 2.2, discussions on audience participation in digital journalism emphasize normative potentials as well as challenges concerning the public negotiation of societal values. Whereas social media elements on platforms or on websites

of publishers can play a role in the discursive mediation of values and the inclusion of broader social groups, in view of issues like hate speech and populism, the scientific discourse views audience participation *via* social media elements mostly as ambivalent (Quandt 2018). However, larger platforms and journalistic actors have also recently begun to address the potential dark sides of audience participation. In addition to blocking accounts or exploring various forms of content moderation, social media platforms also appeal to the civility of user behavior *via* community standards (Hallinan 2021).

While the cultivation of user practices is clearly an important prerequisite for normatively appropriate communication processes (cf. Habermas 2022), referring primarily to the civility of users underestimates the socio-technical design and dataeconomic conditions. For example, the design of “X” prioritizes simple short messages and impulsive communication over communicative reflexivity which can contribute to political polarization (Bratslavsky et al. 2020). In addition, even at the beginning of digital journalism, participation had not only an intrinsic democratic value but was also linked to economic potentials (Quandt 2018). Thus, in relation to the financial crisis of journalism, publishers see the involvement of users *via* commentary functions as an economically relevant data source. Karlsson et al. (2023, 564) relate such forms of user integration to so-called “metrics-based code[s] of engagement” that reduce engagement to behavioural and technical interactions. To counter this reductionistic understanding of audience participation, Karlsson et al. (2023, 564) argue for “codes of engagement” which ensure “that news organization owners and managers [...] make every effort to assess audience engagement with means that go beyond metrics and what is measurable.” A distance from logics of metrization is not only relevant to make public negotiations less dependent on opaque economic logics. Also, from a normative perspective, the public sphere cannot be reduced to statistical aggregates of citizens (Habermas 1996, 362). Yet the integration of codes of engagement that focus on a normative understanding of the public sphere presupposes alternative financing formats of digital journalism as described in section 5.1 that are more independent of metrics-based business models.

Thus, a normatively appropriate establishment of the above mentioned “participatory” paradigm depends on sophisticated economic and socio-technical forms of value mediation that provide the conditions for cultivating democratic faculties – and vice versa. Just as it is too short sighted to understand participation in a reductionist sense for data generation, we propose a broader understanding of the “audience” of participation in digital journalism. Depending on the specific issue, different actors from the civil society to the broader public or specific stakeholder groups could be part of this critical audience. Thus, delegating fact-checking practices solely to users, as it is the case with so-called “Community Notes” on the platform “X,” reproduces a narrow understanding of the disinformation problem. This libertarian logic of platform regulation neglects the integration of the designers of curation systems and various intermediaries who take responsibility on quality assurance and content moderation to ensure conditions for public value negotiations (Matamoros-Fernández and Jude 2025). However, as citizen perspectives play an important role in assessing journalistic quality, they need to be integrated in these processes of professional quality assurance (cf. Neuberger et al. 2023).

Conclusion

To summarize, we propose to consider the aspects of fair pricing, fair design and a public culture of fairness in a more integrated way as key structuring parameters for redefining and reassessing the crisis of digital journalism through careful problem analysis and formulation. On the one hand, these three concepts mark central normative “construction sites” for the appropriate mediation of the various values that pervade digital journalism, both in terms of its normative goals and its means of achieving them. On the other hand, however, they also provide toolboxes for a collective experimentation process which cannot be clearly determined by normative ideals. However, as a pragmatic heuristic for fair value mediation, we do not understand the proposed co-valuation approaches as exhaustive. For example, we implicitly consider ethical professional standards of journalism or the organizational potential of associations in digital journalism, but possibly without adequately acknowledging them as means of fair co-valuation by the conceptual triad of pricing, design and cultivation. Furthermore, we only focused on specific examples to illustrate our co-valuations approaches. Further considerations must also reflect in more detail on possible regulatory framework conditions that are necessary for cooperation between private and public journalistic actors. Such opportunities for cooperation, which can open scope beyond the dominant platform economy, are indispensable in the long term given the current global political upheavals.

Conversely, our analytical proposal is also not a technocratic approach, insofar as it emphasizes the link between negotiation and design processes and the improvement of the audience’s critical testing and competencies. It is important to finally highlight this, because the redefinition of journalism in view of the platformization is taking place in an environment in which the design of information technologies has become the dominant driver of social transformations. The emphasis on the cultivation of fairness requirements through the ongoing involvement of a critical audience, which characterizes journalism both in terms of its goals and its means, represents a strong counterweight to the solutionist fantasies of designing digital technology and current AI hypes. Today it becomes quite clear that this civil culture depends on suitable socio-material information infrastructures and appropriate remuneration for the various tasks, especially journalistic work, that are necessary for its ongoing functioning and long-term maintenance.

Notes

1. A similar argument is also published in Uhlmann et al. (2024, 38–39).
2. We are grateful to Simon Engert, who created an earlier version of this graphic (icons from Orion Icons Library).

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