

Three Identity Groups: Journalists Versus Algorithmic Gatekeeping

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Abstract

Identifying meta-organizational, highly polarized, hermetic groups of journalists' identities—this is the result of a qualitative research on the attitudes of experienced professional journalists from the leading Polish news media toward algorithmic gatekeeping and in this context their perception of journalists' identities. The study has aimed to expand theoretical knowledge on journalists' identities in the face of technological changes affecting a key element of journalism—the gatekeeper function. Liminal theory has been adopted as the research framework.

Keywords

gatekeeping, journalistic identity, liminal theory, algorithmic journalism

The production and distribution of content depends increasingly on technological actors (Lewis & Westlund, 2016). The use of algorithmic processes to collect and store data, as well as to create news narratives and disseminate the news, with various levels of human involvement, becomes the daily routine of the editorial office (Dörr, 2016; Kreft et al., 2023). In the face of technological change, there is an ongoing discussion about the professional identity of the journalist (Darbo & Skjerdal, 2019) and the limits of journalism in relation to a machine performing journalistic tasks (Lewis & Westlund, 2016). Journalists are expected to acquire new competencies, for example,

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concerning the interpretation of metrics (Ekström et al., 2022) and the ability to code (Anderson et al., 2012).

In this study, we focused on the gatekeeping process. The rationale behind this choice was threefold. First, it was assumed that the professional journalist decides what the audience sees, hears, and reads about the world (Deuze, 2005). Second, gatekeeping involves not only users but also “other actors,” such as platforms, algorithms, and their authors, which change the role of journalists as gatekeepers (Salonen et al., 2023). In other words, the development of algorithmic journalism and the performance of the role of a gatekeeper by machines means interfering with the basic functions performed by journalists (Milosavljević & Vobić, 2019; Yang & Peng, 2022). Moreover, there has been a shortage of research concerning the perception of journalistic identity in relation to algorithmic gatekeeping.

Having analyzed the literature on the evolution of gatekeeping and journalists’ attitudes toward these changes, we found that the research to date has focused primarily on the effects of user participation in the context of the development of online media (Lee et al., 2014) and social media (Vu, 2014). Research on the journalists’ perception of their own identity in the face of algorithmic gatekeeping has been scarce (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017). To fill this research gap, we decided to identify journalists’ opinions on algorithmic gatekeeping and its impact on their perceived identity and other journalists. To realize this, we conducted the study in the editorial offices of the leading Polish news media.

We use liminal theory as the research framework in the study. Defined as the state of being between social roles and/or identities, liminality is a characteristic of an increasingly precarious and fluctuating career landscape (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). In our research, we have assumed that liminality may be understood as a permanent condition with various spheres of life being “undetermined and ambiguous” (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015, p. 323). We have adopted the position of Ybema et al. (2011) who decided that the condition might be persistently ambiguous and described two separate positions of identity: “(i) actors that experienced the transition through a transformative change from one position of identity to another and (ii) the feeling of actors being between two positions of identity for a longer period of time” (Ybema et al., 2011, p. 22).

In the paper, we suggested that applying the theory of liminality in researching the experiences of journalists allows for a better understanding of the identity of journalists, as well as of petrification, atrophy, and the formation of a new identity. We are guided by the statement of Söderlund and Borg (2018) that research to date has been insufficient in directing attention toward the nature and dynamics of the liminal experience, the individual’s perception of the liminal experience, and what tensions were associated with it.

The basic theoretical contribution of the study has been to consider and include liminal theory in research on the professional identity of journalists in relation to technological changes, and to enrich the knowledge regarding gatekeeping. This has enabled the identification of three identity groups of journalists within the liminal situation.

Further in the paper, we introduced the concept of liminality in the context of the role and professional identity of journalists. Next, we presented an overview of the concept of gatekeeping in journalism, with particular emphasis on algorithmic gatekeeping. Based on this introduction, we provided the results of a qualitative study analyzing the identity of journalists in the face of algorithmic gatekeeping. In the summary, we presented the findings and their significance in the context of the algorithmization of journalism.

Review of the Literature

Liminality in Journalism

The concept of liminality refers to the rites of passage formulated by V. Turner (1969). The main characteristic of liminal experiences is the “perception of suspension”—the liminal experience is an uncertain, delicate, pliable state after the certainties have been removed (Szokolczai, 2009), characterized by ambiguity, frustration, and chaos, which disrupt the normal way of thinking (Engwall & Westling, 2004). Liminality is disordered and destructive, but it is also a potential part of the reforming process (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015). Some researchers view liminality as primarily a positive experience that allows the development of unique competencies and skills (Borg & Söderlund, 2015a). For others, it is a complex process involving a sense of fulfilment, as well as loss and helplessness, denoting tensions between competing value systems (Kirton, 2013). Drawing on these perspectives, in this study, by liminality, we mean a phase of an individual’s life dominated by a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity between social roles and identities.

Liminality can stimulate positive emotions such as pride and enthusiasm (Goleman et al., 2002). Sometimes, people voluntarily engage in liminal situations by developing a unique liminal identity that is both impossible to locate and undefined (Zabusky & Barley, 1997). Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) claim that some professionals successfully develop in liminality, and even look for liminal professional experiences, for example, employees in advanced technologies and media—these are situations typical of modern society (Szokolczai, 2016; Thomassen, 2016). More often, however, liminality is experienced as a threat, provoking negative feelings such as anger, fear, anxiety, resentment, and withdrawal (Bogers et al., 2010; Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021). In an individual, discarding familiar habits with simultaneous uncertainty related to the future may cause stress, anxiety, and an overwhelming feeling of a lack of belonging. Uncertainty, disorientation, and confusion, for example, pervade the subjective experiences of those undergoing career transitions (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

With time, as shown by the study of the professional and private lives of the consultants, persistent liminality can lead to a state that transforms into a crisis (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015) and may become a “trap” dominated by anxiety and dissatisfaction (Bamber et al., 2017). The concept of liminality has been applied to studies of mobile “project” workers (Borg & Söderlund, 2015a), interim managers (Guimarães-Costa & Cunha, 2009), temporary workers (Garsten, 1999), professionals with competing

organizational and professional loyalties (Zabusky & Barley, 1997), creative workers in an opera setting (Beech et al., 2012), and inter-organizational network workers (Ellis & Ybema, 2010), among others. We believe that liminality captures an important feature of journalists' current working conditions, which is the focus of this article.

The phenomenon of liminality is relatively rarely present in journalism research today. Above all, such studies are thematically diverse, and their only link seems to be the casual use of the term liminal. Instead, most of them fit into the framework formulated by Coman (2008), who noted that, according to media researchers, liminality functions as a universal tool to explain media consumption, journalists' interactions in the newsroom, the role of media in society, and the experiences of the people who attend media events. The concept of liminality was used in reference to ritualized media consumption, television events shaping liminal spaces of ritualized participation (Dayan & Katz, 1992).

Today, the Internet has been recognized as the natural environment of liminality, in which people juggle their identities and which allows for socio-psychological experiments to renegotiate themselves and their social world. Fitzgerald and Evans (2019) studied the creation of "in action" news stories by journalists in places of events ("in the liminal zone"), by resorting to various forms of speculation using metaphors within the coverage of various kinds of unfolding events or "disaster marathons." Other studies focused on the perceptibility of liminal points of view (Papacharissi, 2015) and on attitudes of journalists in liminal situations. The pressure of rivalry and emotions was also the subject of study (Fitzgerald & Evans 2019), as well as the loss of sense of uniqueness of the practiced profession, lack of the possibility of deriving benefits, and the erosion of symbolic values resulting from performing a profession that had been once considered prestigious (Tong & Lo, 2017). Original contributions to the understanding of peripheral actors located in liminal spaces have been offered by research on journalism in Africa (Wahutu, 2019). Guo (2019), on the other hand, writes about the "liminal landscape" in the context of the reception of the Western concept of press freedom in the declining imperial stage in turn-of-the-century China. In turn, Belair-Gagnon et al. (2019) have related issues of liminality to new information-producing social actors who found themselves in a "liminal space" located in close proximity to established media institutions. The concept of liminality also provides a theoretical basis for investigating the specificity of radio communication in the context of the blurring of the boundary between work and leisure (Stachyra, 2015).

Ananny and Crawford (2015), who dealt with the "liminal press"—creating news in the space between technology (news applications) design, and journalism, seem to have presented work closest to our research. Their research into the attitudes of app designers toward traditional journalism went beyond the previous simple divisions: algorithms versus editors, curation versus aggregation, and "old" and "new" journalism. Indeed, they highlighted the nuanced mix of motivations and new identities emerging at the interface between news app designers and journalists. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the identity of journalists in the face of algorithmic gatekeeping has not been studied.

As liminality is strongly related to the formation of identity (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009) and its loss, and enables reflection on one's own identity (Beech, 2011; reference anonymized), in the following section, we will address the professional identity of journalists in the context of technological change. We consider professional identity as a constellation of characteristics, beliefs based on skills, professional education, or vocations (Benveniste, 1987), and professional self-acceptance (Ibarra, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Indeed, crossing liminality implies not only a subjective experience of disorientation and anxiety, but also an objective component of the loss of previous identity (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

The Identity of Journalists in the Context of Technological and Social Changes

As new technological developments contribute to the loss of journalists' exclusive rights to create and disseminate information, and they are no longer in control of the news agenda, this prompts research on journalistic identity. Indeed, Deuze (2006) already noticed that the professional identity of a journalist was no longer based on the monopoly of controlling content and narration, and Wiik (2009) added that technological developments present journalists with new challenges and influence their identity, which is constructed in connection with the journalist's profession or the organization in which they work. Previous research on the professional identity of journalists indicates that it not only serves legitimizing functions, but also indicates common ideals that guide journalists in their daily work, including decisions related to content (Wiik, 2014). Professional identity influences and determines attitudes related to work, moral decision-making, and behavior (Caza & Creary, 2016). This, in turn, affects the way journalists do their work, what articles are published, and, ultimately, how they perceive the profession of a journalist in general.

Identity is built around normative practice, setting professional boundaries, and the concept of roles (Deuze, 2008), and is based on a common understanding of values and norms (Deuze, 2005). It is connected with the work performed, and changing it affects the journalists' perceptions of who they are and what they do.

Journalistic identity is interpreted as a source of resistance, but also an incentive toward changes where there is pressure for efficiency, and as a resource to deal with uncertainty (Sherwood & O'Donnell, 2018; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). On the one hand, research has confirmed that the professional identity of journalists demonstrates low flexibility (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Journalists were described as belonging to a relatively conservative professional environment, convinced that control over what to write and even what to publish was to be left in their capacity (Schudson, 1999). Research on the transformation of the work of news journalists, for example, has shown that while they negotiated their professional identities, they maintained their position as gatekeepers and providers of reliable information (Robinson-Link et al., 2020; Singer, 2006; Thurman & Hermida, 2010). Negotiations on a common collective identity resulted in rigid definitions of who was and who was not a journalist

(Deuze, 2008; Ferrucci & Vos, 2017). For example, with social media “interactive journalism,” journalists used various strategies to set the boundaries of their profession and prioritized such professional values of journalism as objectivism (Wiik, 2014), public service (Vos & Thomas, 2018), and authority (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021). On the other hand, studies have pointed to identity flexibility (Agarwal & Barthel, 2015; Ekdale et al., 2015; Koljonen, 2013; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). It has been investigated, for example, how journalists used identity negotiation mechanisms to cope with changes in the newsroom, and it has been demonstrated that professional identity showed flexibility, functioning as a resource for negotiating a job change (Grubenmann, 2015; Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017).

Traditional Gatekeeping Versus Digital Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping concerns how information is or is not circulating, and the factors that inhibit or advance the flow of information (Heinderyckx & Vos, 2016). Traditionally, gatekeepers include reporters and editors who collect, sort, write, edit, position, plan, recirculate, and send information to become news. Being a gatekeeper who makes qualified news selections on behalf of a society is deeply rooted in the professional identity of journalists (Janowitz, 1975). With the birth of the Internet, the traditional role of news organizations as gatekeepers has come to an end because they no longer decide what elements are in the public sphere (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). A growing area of gatekeeping research is the role of algorithms that track, analyze, and interpret individual behavior, data, and connections to tailor information to the individual, or what Heinderyckx (2015) called the “algorithmization of gatekeeping.” This includes the removal of inappropriate content by the algorithmic gatekeeper, usually as a result of a combination of automated moderation and human reporting (Gillespie, 2019).

The activity of the new digital gatekeepers has been made possible by technological developments, in particular, owing to advanced algorithms based on artificial intelligence, the use of natural language generation techniques, natural language processing techniques, and work on a variety of data collections. In their traditional role as keepers of information (Shoemaker et al., 2009), to decide what was news, journalists relied on professionalism, routine, and shared values (Schudson & Anderson, 2009), and on “gut feeling” (Gutierrez Lopez et al., 2023). The new solutions objectify decision-making, and algorithmic news recommendations caused a “positive acceleration effect” related to the placement of certain subjects (Cools et al., 2021).

In an evolving information ecosystem, gatekeeping theory struggles to describe all actors as information selectors (Wallace, 2018), and some gatekeeping paradigms have become outdated and modified (Bakker, 2014; Heinderyckx, 2015; Robinson, 2006; Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). A framework for the study of gatekeeping was proposed by Bro and Wallberg (2015) introducing three models of journalistic gatekeeping: a linear process of information transmission (1), a nonlinear process of communication where sources, journalists, and audiences interact (2), and a process of elimination whereby journalists have lost their role as gatekeepers (3).

In response to Bro and Wallberg's (2015) call to re-evaluate, re-think, and re-model the concept of gatekeeping, some researchers, as Pearson and Kosicki (2017) note, have crossed out the role of journalists. Some studies indicate that the development of digital technologies may contribute to reducing journalists from the role of gatekeepers (Diakopoulos, 2020). New technologies are increasingly "making autonomous decisions" (Diakopoulos, 2015) and are partly taking over the role of gatekeepers in the news media (Singer, 2006; Vos & Thomas, 2018; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

In a less radical interpretation, the news media are losing their role as the sole gatekeeper of the public space and gatekeeper tasks are increasingly being performed by non-journalistic actors (Wallace, 2018). Other studies, however, have suggested that journalism is not "dying out" but is transforming, conceptualizing its role and moving away from simple gatekeeper to manager and curator of information (Bakker, 2014). Moreover, it has been pointed out that the news environment is still dominated by the major players and, although digital technologies are challenging the role of the mass media as gatekeepers of information, they are still active (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015).

In these circumstances, few studies were devoted to the journalistic perception of change (Cassidy, 2005; Kim, 2010). Journalists were reconceptualizing their identity and moving away from traditional gatekeeping in favor of guardianship and being information managers (Bakker, 2014; Thorson & Wells, 2016). Studies of news media organizations and journalists outside the most developed markets are also rare.

The paper undertakes to answer the following research question: Does algorithmic gatekeeping impact the journalists' perception of their own identity?

Research Method

The basic part of the study included conducting 22 individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews with experienced professional journalists (over 5 years of experience) from leading Polish media (the most important, as regards their reach, TV and radio stations, news portals, and opinion weeklies—Annex 1). The choice was limited to journalists employed in news media that had been undergoing digital transformation. Their role was limited to the creation of content, and in their work, they were confronted with content creation algorithms (mainly in the sports and financial sections) and recommendation algorithms. Polish news media, following the example of media in highly developed countries, use algorithmic gatekeeping technologies, for example, the larger Internet portals (Onet, Wirtualna Polska, Interia, Gazeta.pl) use algorithms to match content to a specific user and content production algorithms.

The research questions in the interviews focused on the journalists' perception of their own. A snowballing technique was used to locate interviewees in which participants shared the opportunity to participate or encouraged others who met the sample criteria to participate (Patton, 2015); initial contacts were obtained from professional networks of authors. All respondents were recruited via email. All interviews were conducted in person, with a pandemic-time security regime. From the initial interviews, which lasted an average of 30 min, it was clear that all interviewees knew about the basic use of algorithms in gatekeeping, algorithmic content selection, and social

media trend identification, but did not use them in their journalistic work. The main interviews lasted from 60 to 80 min, and all were taped and transcribed. All interviews were conducted with respect for the privacy of the interviewees (Babbie, 2020). Interviews help to understand people's lived experiences and allow "a description of the interviewee's lifeworld in relation to the interpretation of the meaning of the phenomena described" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014, p. 327) to be obtained. The selected structure of the interviews gave the interviewees the opportunity to present their professional roles and identities in the context of algorithmic gatekeeping and allowed them to focus on the conversation on topic directions of particular importance to them. During the interviews, we reacted flexibly to the answers using an outline of the interview containing fixed elements: the assessment of algorithmic gatekeeping and the assessment of one's own identity in this context.

To understand the interplay of liminal experiences regarding algorithmic gatekeeping, and the journalists' professional identities and their perception and interpretation, an inductive thematic analysis (Riessman, 1993) was used in the research. Coding was used while moving between data, the emerging threads, and the existing theory (Aronson, 1995). In the first stage, to perform the initial identification of common topics and threads, the entire material was analyzed. After reviewing the data, observations regarding potential thematic threads were noted. Next, codes that would allow for the organization and classification of various information were initially created. At this stage, the constructs were reviewed and initially referred to the previous existing studies—to Deuze (2005) in particular—identifying journalists' liminal experiences and their strategies for negotiating identity; at this stage, delimitation and identity preservation strategies were identified. This led to another coding session. In the second stage, thematic threads were constructed, that is, abstract units that defined and identified the phenomenon (and its manifestations) repeated in the data—the set of these threads was a summary of the content provided by journalists (Nowell et al., 2017). Then, comparing the codes generated by the participants, the threads were thoroughly verified, defined, and named using short titles that most often referred to various activities, while trying to be as precise as possible, strictly following the content of the data and avoiding our judgments (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The analysis was completed by re-interpreting and adjusting the theory.

Findings

On the basis of professional scripts, which the journalists referred to in their arguments, three identity groups were distinguished, unrelated to the type of media in which the journalists were employed, which were defined as "preachers" (1), "guardians" (2), and the "oscillators" (3).

1. Preachers.

We have called the members of this group "preachers" because preaching openness and flexibility is a distinctive feature of this group's identity as journalists. The

underlined “declarativeness” indicates a discrepancy between preaching and practical behavior. Journalists in this group emphasize the value of professional flexibility and see the algorithmization of gatekeeping as an obvious stage of change in their profession. They accept digital instability. In their opinion, openness to novelties and the variability of digital solutions constitute the core of professional journalistic identity. They accept and expect variability, understood as providing increasingly better solutions supporting their work:

I have been practising probably the most variable but fascinating profession and I knew what I signed up for. That’s why I have to be flexible and learn constantly; it’s obvious to me. Novelties continuously appear in this line of work, especially in adapting the content to the recipient, maybe less in the journalistic work itself, and I accept it willingly. (Int. M)

They treat the ability to adapt to the changing technological environment as the most important professional characteristic. Flexibility in using algorithmic tools is a source of professional pride, an element of cult. As a value, this was confronted with “traditional journalism,” which was described as archaic and “outdated.” Journalists talked about the “decline” and “an end” of traditional journalism and stated that whoever did not use new tools “had it coming” (Int. 1 Onet), “because they had a choice; they could have adapted, after all” (Int. F). As one of the journalists notes:

I think there is no longer room for journalists who want to control content and are stuck in their ivory tower. Those times are gone, and so be it. (Int. PAP)

They accepted the technology in the role of a gatekeeper. Some journalists in this group stated that journalist gatekeeping was a historical phenomenon. As one of the journalists working in television notes:

A gatekeeper functions only in the media textbooks. In practice, I don’t know how many such gatekeepers or journalists are left who are actually able to say a definite “no” to some content. Everything is measured by clickability and viewing traffic. If some material has the potential to generate an audience, then—apart from extreme ethical doubts—no one will ponder whether to publish it or not; the only question will be how to present it. This is the death of journalistic intuition. (Int 2. TVP)

They characterized their relations with the new technologies of gatekeeping as an initiation, and willingly described their unique role in the labor market:

I know I have rare skills and I try to keep it that way. If they cannot be used, I can change my job. It’s not true that times are hard for journalists. Troubles concern dinosaurs only. There is a growing group of journalists who will manage in any modern editorial office or outside it. I think a journalist with the knowledge of a programmer is now worth his/her weight in gold. (Int. Int)

Journalists emphasized that there was a consensus in editorial offices concerning the management's expectations of the behavior of journalists toward algorithmic gatekeeping. First, such expectations concerned taking suggestions from metrics into consideration; second, they concerned the acquisition of new competencies and the use of algorithmic tools as the only way to face the challenges of the future. They described those skills as a creative use of tools. They treated these expectations as obvious.

2. Guardians.

We have collectively referred to journalists in this group as “guardians” because they are united by their staunch defense of traditional professional roles as journalists. These journalists treated the role of a gatekeeper only as a human to be an indispensable element of “real journalism,” by which they meant, for example, “inquiring into the truth” (Int. TK), working “on behalf of the people,” “informing about and explaining reality,” “independently of the financial interests of the publisher” (Int. M), because “all this algorithmization serves to sell content, not journalism” (Int. TK). As one of the journalists notes:

Nothing can replace man. An algorithm itself is not able to call a politician and ask them for a comment on a certain matter, therefore algorithms are not able to replace the journalist's work, although they may, to some extent, replace that of editors. (Int. R)

The creation of titles is to be reserved solely for human journalists:

It will always remain in the hands of journalists—gatekeepers, because an algorithm can display relevant content from the appropriate personalisation segments, but it isn't able to insert a title that would interest people. This knowledge is still in the hands of man and so far there's no indication that algorithms could take over in any way. I hope they will not take over in the future. (Int. 2 Onet)

They admitted that under pressure from technology, they were playing less and less of a gatekeeper's role, and saw their relationship with new technologies as a permanent confrontation. This resulted in a lack of control over the development of their professional career: “It seems to me that many are chasing the rabbit, but I'm not going to participate in this, because it is the illusion of an improvement in journalism” (Int. 1 TVN); however, they expressed their hopes that the journalist's job as gatekeeper may continue to some extent in the future, but it would be of a niche nature.

They saw their role primarily as providers of high-quality content. Should they not be able to act in this role, they concluded that they were ready to leave the profession:

I cannot imagine jostling with some machine for the understanding and attention of my readers. I think that algorithms writing good quality texts will be the death of all journalism and the dawn of people being managed by machines. I hope that I will not live to see it. (Int. GN)

They had no intention of expanding their competencies with knowledge related to the algorithmization of gatekeeping. They treated their situation not only as a consequence of technological pressure and editorial management decisions, but as their own conscious choice. They not only accepted it but also treated it as a reason to be proud and saw themselves in the elite group of those continuing the best journalistic traditions. They valued the journalistic creativity and the ability to contextualize that was, in their opinion, proper to humans, most of all at the stage of creating the content.

An element of limited contacts and common experiences appears in the statements of the members of the group:

I see that IT engineers and young journalists dealing with AI have good intentions but are fumbling in the dark and are encapsulated in their own imaginings and experiences. I have an impression that typically they know everything best because they are familiar with technological solutions. We have been working too much now and the changes have been rapid and there is no time for reflections. Our contacts mainly boil down to interventions when there is some emergency and to a proposal of a subject or distribution. That's probably all. (Int. KAI)

This idea concerns the perceived reasons for the limited professional relations that may have an impact on the limited transfer of knowledge: age differences, haste, and the inferred professional pride.

3. Oscillators

We have referred to journalists in this group as “oscillators” because they try to reconcile fulfilling the traditional professional role of the journalist–gatekeeper by allowing the use of some elements of algorithmic journalism. There was also the conditional acceptance of algorithmic gatekeeping, which was not seen as a boon “in itself,” but as a means to achieve individual goals and the goals of publishing institutions. Journalists saw opportunities for their professional success in the use of algorithmic tools. They believed that in the near future they could continue their profession and play a role in parallel with algorithmic gatekeeping, taking advantage of its shortcomings and acting as a “last resort” at every stage of the gatekeeping process, but they formulated their opinions with various reservations:

Not that long ago, I had my master; he has retired. The world was in order and predictable; there were masters and disciples. But that world is gone. I have been trying to be flexible, but I do not see the point in being fascinated by AI. I have learned to use the chatbot, but I am not sure if anyone in the office knows where this is going to lead us to. (Int. Interia)

They decided that gatekeeping was primarily related to the selection of content and that journalists should not be deprived of this responsibility. Therefore, “it should not be left solely to machines” (Int. TK). They appreciated exercising control over their development and the independence and freedom of their own decisions. In the new technology, they have spotted the elements that enhance and limit their profession:

AI makes my work a little easier, corrects language errors, but I am apprehensive when it suggests what subject I should deal with. This is too much for me. I want to be independent from a machine. I am proud that I simply feel what people may be interested in and what it is to be published. Having worked for years, I know how to do it. I like this feeling. (Int. WP)

At the same time, they appreciated the “objectivity” of algorithms in the selection of target groups and specific recipients as part of individual behavioral targeting. They unanimously expressed their hope that algorithmic gatekeeping would allow them to deal with what they considered most important, that is, creating high-quality content and forming a better understanding of relationships with recipients. In journalism and in IT, they have seen differences, and they have been looking for common space and a common future. As stated by one of the journalists:

Quality journalism means meticulousness and trustworthiness gained over the years. AI in journalism means speed. It takes time to find a common language. One needs to learn journalism for at least two years and I think that it also concerns machines to teach them to be more helpful. (Int. Gazeta)

The journalist has pointed out the pace and haste with which the new technologies have been appearing and have been implemented, as well as the time that would be indispensable to understand journalism.

Discussion

The research was devoted to the professional identity of journalists in the face of algorithmic gatekeeping. It was conducted in the Polish media environment, characterized by major technological changes, but remaining behind the changes in Western media, particularly considering the economic potential necessary to implement costly technological solutions. The implementation of the technology based on artificial intelligence has been limited mainly to relate to the market leaders, and it has been taking place on a smaller scale when compared to the Internet network of Western countries. The uniqueness of the research stems primarily from the identification of journalists’ identity toward algorithmic gatekeeping and their mutual relations in these circumstances, as well as in using liminal theory as a research framework.

In our study on journalistic identity under conditions dictated by algorithmic gatekeeping, the perspective of liminal experience, complementary to previous studies on journalism, was introduced. This perspective seems to be particularly useful in studying the complex and often contradictory professional identity that is shaped in the face of growing technological pressure in the journalistic profession. It helps in studying events or situations that are connected with the dissolution of order, its rules, hierarchies, and procedures, and the onset of an antistructure (Tagliaventi, 2019).

The journalists of the first group, who were called “preachers,” experienced the liminality associated with journalism and algorithmic gatekeeping as a positive experience enabling the development of unique competences and skills, liberating the

creative potential written about by (Borg & Soderlund, 2015b; J. C. Turner & Oakes, 1986; V. Turner, 1974). They experienced a constant influx of technological novelties, but declared the ability of—as one of the journalists put it—“making deals with digital chaos,” a skill they considered one of the key skills, along with “flexibility” and “openness,” for the identity of a modern journalist. This declarative openness, however, concerns the adoption and implementation of new technological solutions and not the acceptance of different attitudes toward algorithmic gatekeeping. Identifying with the journalistic profession, they rejected gatekeeping as the core of journalistic identity. They advocated the decentralization of gatekeeping and declared their aversion to journalistic conservatism, identified as exercising control over the gatekeeping process. In their opinion, gatekeeping was history. The journalists of the second group (“guardians”) experienced liminality in a negative way in the face of algorithmic gatekeeping, which they unequivocally rejected—such relations have been confirmed by research (Witschge & Deuze, 2020) and observations (Deuze, 2006) that journalism was rooted in the ideology of the “old guard” and that, as a professional group, journalists appeared to be conservative and to protect the boundaries of their profession (Lahav & Reich, 2011). This has also been confirmed by the results of the latest research on the metajournalistic discourse where journalists have considered their profession in the light of initiating ChatGPT, and demonstrated the fact that journalists perceive generative artificial intelligence as a greater threat to their profession than the previous forms of automated writing of news (van Dalen, 2024). They were the only ones reaching for the “real journalism” argument. The interlocutors constructed their identity around their own, exclusively human, control over the process of selecting topics, creating content, and their impact on its distribution, which had been confirmed by previous studies (Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017; Mourão & Harlow, 2020). The two identified extreme groups are differentiated by experience and the ability to use new technologies, as well as by the attitude to that part of the changes that undermines the traditionally understood role of the gatekeeper. They are joined, however, in a fascination with the practiced profession, as well as a lack of mutual interest and a cultivation of their separateness, and a skepticism toward journalists from outside their own identity group. Journalists of the third group were constantly constructing their identities. They saw themselves trapped in a lack of competence on the one hand and a search for stability on the other. They underlined the pace of changes and the uncertainty of what was going to happen about their place in the profession, but—what made them different from the members of other groups—they saw the need for dialogue and for noticing other values; they noticed the limitations, and occasionally they formulated paths leading to mutual understanding. It should be added that belonging to identity groups applies to all our interviewees, with the first group being the least spacious (5 people), and the third one proving to be the most spacious (11 people). Furthermore, group membership was not related to the type of media.

However, the study shows that when the mutual relationship of journalists with different identities is taken into account, journalistic identities are more complex. The declarative openness of the interlocutors of the first group concerned the adoption and

implementation of new technological solutions as conducive to fulfilling their professional role. Identifying with the journalistic profession, they rejected gatekeeping as the core of journalistic identity. They declaratively supported a culture of cooperation and innovation, but among their colleagues, they saw only similar supporters of algorithmic journalism. The idea of equating gatekeeping with “traditional” journalists was the limit of the openness of the interlocutors from the first group. They declared (indirectly) reluctance or indifference toward journalistic conservatism, understood as exercising control over the entire gatekeeping process. That is why such an attitude has been defined as “declarative openness.” They accepted and even searched for permanent liminality (Ybema et al., 2011), and they adopted liminality as a style of life (Grossman, 2005).

This observation contradicts the common interpretation of computational journalism, being known for its cooperative nature, as a discipline of science and technology, evolving through networks of alliances involving skilled practitioners who see network exploration as a form of knowledge diffusion and, moreover, a way of joint problem-solving (Almodovar & Teixeira, 2012). Among the interlocutors, openness applied only to people with the same or similar attitudes and competencies. It was a “mirror image” of the journalists’ self-affirmation of their own identity (and the indifference or lack of tolerance to different identities) as guardians of the traditional role of a gatekeeper.

Deuze (2005) notes that an analysis of journalism derived from ideal values is based on the myth of a journalist who only acts as a gatekeeper, citizen, etc., but in reality, this is a one-dimensional perspective and is probably an expression of nostalgia for a past that never existed. The image of a journalist, as a guardian and as a missionary using new technologies, is similarly a one-dimensional ideal. It seems that the ease of standing in opposition to “traditionalists” leads to the mythologization of supporters of new technologies in journalism and is masked by the hermetic nature of this group.

Being under pressure of the development of social media (Lewis & Usher, 2014), also in the face of algorithmic gatekeeping, the journalists’ attachment to gatekeeping succumbs to the logic of adaptability and openness to gatekeeping algorithmization. However, journalists belonging to this group, similar to the journalists from the “traditionalist” group, retain splendid isolation from the “inhabitants” of the group that is alien to them and from journalists searching for their identity. At a general level, we are dealing with supra-organizational groups that also operate across the boundaries of media sectors.

What all groups have in common is pride in their role and a tendency to idealize the profession that is considered ennobling—this has been the common feature of the identity of our interlocutors. Although they seem to mean something else, the binder for the journalists has been the narrative of “practicing a great profession.” While one group (guardians) upholds the tradition of the greatness of the profession of gatekeeper journalists, the other group (preachers) proclaims the dawn of journalism open to new technologies. While the former has used primarily the language of threats and lost professional position, the latter uses the vocabulary of opportunities and new

potential. Both algorithmic enthusiasts and “traditionalists” have emphasized the importance of creativity in their work, but have meant something else. Enthusiasts have meant the creative use of the available technology thus obtained, while “traditionalists” emphasized human creativity, which algorithms cannot and will never be able to replace.

Such significant differences and apparent similarities may lead to conclusions about the development of “endogamy” and “homophilia,” noticed by the media innovator (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2021); “homophilia” means a preference for similarity between people who are connected by any form of social relationship (e.g., friendships, partnerships), while the patterns of social contacts within the group are known as “endogamy” (Lambert & Griffiths, 2018). de-Lima-Santos and Mesquita (2021) note that the community of journalists dealing with data is characterized by social habits that tend to be endogamous and homophilic. The study confirms this observation, but we point out that identity groups are the result of complex factors, and experiencing liminality under the pressure of the algorithmization of a process considered crucial to journalistic identity, that is, gatekeeping, is only one such factor. The key to understanding the identity groups and the possible development of a “forging” strategy seems to be an in-depth study of journalistic identity. In the face of the acceptance of permanent liminality in the journalistic environment and, at the same time, the threat of resignation from the profession by experienced journalists, it seems important to notice the potential benefits resulting from the coexistence of different attitudes and to refrain from forced declarations of cooperation.

In the case of journalists of the third group (the oscillators), the key term seems to be “adaptation.” While journalists from the first group refer to their curiosity about new solutions, oscillators constantly negotiate their identity by gravitating, depending on the interpretation of subsequent requirements and other factors that make up their liminal situation (e.g., market, social position, employment opportunities), toward the first or the second group. We deal with permanent liminality in this group (Ybema et al., 2011). They consider the arguments “for” and “against” algorithmization but do not delve into the individual problems; they talk, for example, about the “objectivity of algorithms” but do not verify this “objectivity.” They talk about the need to exercise control over technology, not to enjoy the benefits of using it. It seems that we are dealing with a permanent liminality in this group as well. These journalists talk about the constant search for stability, but also about their permanent limitations, about distrust of technology, but also a lack of faith that stabilization may be achievable. They seem to be affected by what Bauman (2013) called “liquid modernity,” but they constantly look for solutions that could help them avoid being classified as members of the group of “redundant dinosaurs” of journalism.

To date, the term of algorithmic gatekeeping has appeared in the literature when news and public information that citizens see and hear are no longer determined solely by journalists but increasingly often by algorithms (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Crain, 2016; van Dalen, 2023; Wallace, 2018). In its definition, journalistic gatekeeping is “the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news” (Shoemaker et al., 2009, p. 73). With

reference to this definition, the algorithmic gatekeeping has been presented as “the influence of automated procedures on the process of selecting, writing, editing, scheduling, repeating, and otherwise massaging information to become news” (van Dalen, 2023, p. 2). Gatekeeping has become decentralized and, in many cases, has been the consequence of the interaction among various actors, including non-human ones. While the research to date has focused on their impact on the diversity of the news (Scheffauer et al., 2024) and on factors influencing the acceptance of the gatekeepers’ algorithms such as social trust to algorithms performing journalistic tasks and a perceived lack of legitimacy of algorithmic power among professional communicators (van Dalen, 2023), we have complemented this scientific contribution by adding the human perspective of the gatekeeping participants.

We have suggested that from the perspective of journalists and people implementing the information technology systems, we have been dealing with “hybrid liminal gatekeeping” that may host journalists for longer, if not till the end of their professional career. We have indicated a dynamic and simultaneously static character of gatekeeping (particularly from the perspective of the journalists). It is dynamic because it undermines the foundation of journalistic identity, and also because the identity groups have been characterized by various degrees of hermeticism, and there may be movement within the identity groups and between them in both directions. It is static because algorithmization may lead to permanent liminality. Such ambiguity seems an inherent characteristic of the contemporary “algorithmic shift” in gatekeeping (Napoli, 2014).

We have also assumed that the identity groups may demonstrate various degrees of hermeticity because of partial migration taking place between them (oscillators), but also because we have perceived, mainly among guardians, varied decisiveness of opinions on the impact of the algorithmization; however, we have not researched the impact of those nuances on the hermeticity of the identity groups and the mutual relations within the identity groups. We have also noticed, particularly among guardians, the decisiveness in underlining their identity. Care and diligence in choosing proper words varied: they stressed the speed of changes, but they also conceded that more time would be needed for them to see whether AI-based algorithmization was not going to be yet another shiny bright thing (Posetti, 2018). We have accepted the possibility that the care to make their statements (particularly among guardians) “the voice of reason” could have been their excuse for passiveness. For these reasons, we think that journalists have become aware of not being able to ignore new technologies anymore.

We concede, however, that further study may identify significant petrification of the preachers’ group. We also think that a deep identification of the factors of change would be needed to make the groups more flexible (or ultimately disappear). We consider the authentic (not declarative) acceptance of normative functions of journalism to be necessary. We deem the mutual appreciation (and not mere tolerance) of the members of the neighboring identity group as well as the sense of meaningfulness of one’s work to be indispensable. These issues, well recognized in research (Olsen, 2025), require further study.

The existence of the identity groups generates various challenges and again raises questions whether algorithmic recreation of the unique mixture of journalistic work is possible (Gutierrez Lopez et al., 2023). It limits more than just the familiarization with the daily journalistic tasks and induces pondering where exactly the work of information technology engineers fits into the journalistic practice (Royal & Kosterich, 2024). It also confirms the challenges for the possibility of transferring journalistic practice to a digital language and embedding journalistic values in a code (Møller, 2024; Nowak-Teter, 2025).

Therefore, a reflexion and a possible development of a strategy aimed at better understanding and acceptance or tolerance of the members of other identity groups. Such interventions may have the form of training or they may be programs, preceded by the identification of limitations resulting from shared values constituting professional identity, intended to increase the qualifications.

Our study points to the need for support from the entities that would be familiar with the specificity of the journalistic work (the role, ideology, and identity) and with the opportunities and challenges of the journalistic/editorial work algorithmization processes. They would be acting as “masters of ceremony,” assisting journalists in a liminal state and functioning as the guiding light for the disoriented ones and those in doubt (Thomassen, 2016). Support in the process should also come from those who manage the media organizations and possibly from the consulting companies specializing in crisis management and possessing competences in the field.

The limitation of this study relates to its specific national perspective. It would be interesting to conduct comparative analyses of journalistic attitudes in countries with similar or lower levels of technological change in the media, as well as those with greater advancement, and also to recognize the links between such factors as age, gender, organization, and type of media and the impact of technology on the identity of journalists. With the existing research confirming the journalists’ perception of artificial intelligence as a threat that is larger to their profession than the previous forms of automated writing (van Dalen, 2024), one may consider taking up the study on its impact on the professional identity of journalists.

Annex I

Enclosure I. Interviewees.

In. tex. reference	Media	Editorial panel
Television		
Int. 1. TVP	Telewizja Polska (TVP)	Information editorial panel
Int. 2. TVP	Telewizja Polska—TVP Info	Information editorial panel
Int. 1. Polsat	Polsat	Information editorial panel
Int. 1. Polsat N.	Polsat News	Information editorial panel
Int. 1 TVN	TVN	Information editorial panel
Int. 2 DD TVN	TVN 24	Breakfast TV
Information portals		
Int. 1 Onet	Onet Biznes	Business, finance
Int. 2 Onet	Onet	Culture editorial panel
Int. 1 WP	Wirtualna Polska (WP)	Information editorial panel
Int. M	Money.pl	Business, finance
Int. Int.	Interia.pl	Information editorial panel
Press/Website		
Int. F	Fakt.pl	Information editorial panel
Int. R	Rzeczpospolita	Information editorial panel
Int. GW	Gazeta Wyborcza	Information editorial panel
Int. TK	Tygodnik Katolicki	Religion
Int. GN	Gość Niedzielny	Science
Int. E	Eurosport	Sport
Radio		
Int. RZ	Radio Zet	Information editorial panel
Int. RMF	RFM FM	Information editorial panel
Information agency		
Int. IAR	Informacyjna Agencja Radiowa	Information editorial panel
Int. KAI	Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna	Information editorial panel, religion
Int. PAP	Polska Agencja Prasowa (PAP)	Domestic editorial staff

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