

# The Platformization of Media Structures as a Critical Juncture

## A Pragmatist Perspective on Value Mediation by Journalistic Start-ups and Established Publishers

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### Abstract

The field of digital journalism is facing multifaceted crises posed by the phenomenon of platformization. We interpret this platformization as a critical juncture and investigate how different actors address the associated challenges, focusing on processes of value mediation. To do so, we compare two German journalism start-ups and a mainstream publisher. Our study introduces a pragmatistic theoretical framework using three approaches of cooperative value mediation (or “co-valuation”) – pricing, design, and cultivation – as an analytical as well as normative tool. On the one hand, results show that niche players exhibit a tendency for autonomy from prevailing structural conditions, underlined by a collective “value commitment”, although the strategies for mediating values can differ significantly. On the other hand, established players perceive themselves as subject to deterministic influences, hindering the cultivation of enduring value loyalties. The analysis thus also highlights the role of the sociotechnical ecosystem in shaping value mediation, emphasizing the utility of the co-valuation approaches.

*Keywords: Digital Journalism, Platformization, Critical Juncture, Data Economy, Pragmatism, Co-Valuation*

Today, journalism faces multiple crises that “are in part a result of the ongoing fundamental structural transformation of our media systems, where economic and technological forces in combination generate ever more intense competition for attention, for advertisements, and for audiences’ media spending.” (Nielsen, 2016, p. 77). A key driver of this development has been platformization since the 2010s, which describes the increasing power of big tech platforms and their ongoing formation of the internet’s infrastructure (Eisenegger, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018). In order to survive economically, established media outlets adapt platform logics while additionally facing new competitors in financing and content distribution.

Whereas various analyses of digital capitalism provide useful perspectives regarding the dangers of platformization, they often focus on a seemingly inescapable platform power (Staab, 2024; Zuboff, 2019). We argue that the crisis of digital journalism can also be understood as a critical juncture (Siapera et al., 2015) that creates an indeterminate situation as described by Dewey (1946), which disrupts accepted routines thus requiring all actors to find ways to deal with the circumstances.

In this search for new strategies, actors in the field of digital journalism must consider and mediate assorted values, e.g. privacy, economic profitability or the formation of public opinion. In the following, we focus on the challenges of value meditation by highlighting the plurality of occasionally conflicting values. Adopting the concept of “co-valuation” (Draude et al., 2024, pp. 7-10), we also propose a tool to analyze the forms of value meditation. Thus, we ask how relevant values in the context of digital journalism can be mediated on the basis of ‘prices’, sociotechnical ‘design’ as well as

through processual ‘cultivation’ of public negotiations and participation. Therefore, in our article we pose the research question: How do actors in digital journalism mediate various values in reaction to challenges of platformization?

To exemplify a spectrum of possible reactions and to illustrate our theoretical approach, we focus on two empirical cases of German online journalism start-up platforms and a commercial digital media publisher.

In the following section, we introduce our perspective on the phenomenon of platformization and its impact on media structures by relating the topic specific discussion to the critical juncture discourse and the concept of pioneer journalism (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). Afterwards we present our theoretical perspective on the role of values and value mediation in critical junctures. Here, we illustrate a specific approach on value mediation underpinned with pragmatistic theory on values by introducing the concept of co-valuation. Before we use this perspective to study and discuss how media outlets react to the critical juncture of platformization against the background of their value commitments and positions in the field, we introduce our methodological approach. We conclude by highlighting how the co-valuation approaches provide an analytic and normative perspective for the assessment of opportunities and challenges of value mediation in digital journalism.

### Introducing the Platformization of Media Structures as a Critical Juncture

Current crises in journalism are often associated with the rise of digital platforms, especially Alphabet’s Google and

Meta's Facebook (Eisenegger, 2021). Today, publishers must compete with high reach and technically superior platforms in the advertising market that also occupy users' first information touchpoint. Furthermore, publishers increasingly depend on the technical infrastructure of platforms, for example in terms of the development of apps for mobile use (SDK tools, app stores, etc.) and the display of advertising (especially programmatic advertising). Publishers also curate content via user interfaces and algorithmic recommender systems or through the integration of platform elements into their own websites (like buttons, search functions, etc.) (cf. Nielsen & Ganter, 2022, pp. 1-26). As a result, publishers are increasingly exposed to, and in some cases actively contribute to, the goals and logics of action of tech companies that do not correspond to the traditional objectives of journalism (Eisenegger, 2021). At the same time, users can publish content themselves via digital platforms without having to resort to publishers and their quality checks, which weakens the gatekeeping role of publishers and potentially facilitates the dissemination of unverified information (Neuberger et al., 2023). Against this background, the profound crisis journalism is facing due to media platformization has been described as a "challenge to democracy" (Fischer & Jarren, 2024) and the public sphere (Habermas, 2022). Click-bait, fake news, filter bubbles and echo chambers, a loss of quality or the polarization of public debates are among the most frequently mentioned phenomena in this context (Neuberger, 2022).

Although these diagnoses raise awareness of the dangers of the dominant role of platforms, critical analyses of digital capitalism (e.g. Srnicek, 2016; Staab, 2024) sometimes lack the conceptual tools to recognize the ambivalences of digitization. This potentially leads to dystopian descriptions of an almost inescapable platform power (e.g. Zuboff, 2019) and to simplistic dichotomies between capitalist exploitation and a value-driven orientation towards the common good (Sharon, 2021). Consequently, responsibility for problematic situations can be shifted too easily and uncertain situations are regarded as already decided. Hence, new terminology is needed that neither denies power and interests nor elevates them to all-explaining variables. The interconnection of interests and values is apparent in approaches that assume the simultaneity of several crises in contemporary journalism. As Neuberger (2020) and Nielsen (2016) show, the financial crisis in journalism is linked to a variety of other crises, those of: quality; professional identity; epistemology, and confidence. Against this background, several challenges arise for journalism, which reinforce existing value conflicts or create new ones, e.g., concerning the issues of economic profitability and journalistic quality standards. The latter are much more difficult to maintain, for example, if large numbers of staff must be laid off for financial reasons. However, an orientation towards advertising-relevant click rates and the reach of audiences, which contributes to the spread of clickbait articles affects also issues of quality (Petre, 2021). Furthermore, the use of new advertisement formats such as native advertising challenges the separation of editorial

content and advertisement as a core element of journalistic professionalism (Schauster et al., 2016). At the same time, publishers use these formats as an alternative to highly data-intensive forms of advertising (e.g. programmatic advertising), which come into conflict with European data protection legislation and the ban of third-party cookies by the major browser providers (Engert et al., 2023). Thus, media outlets must find new ways to mediate values of, for example, quality, professionalism, or privacy with economic profitability. To a certain extent this need for value mediation applies even for the platforms, which have various dependent relationships with advertisers, users, media companies, and regulators. Platforms are often involved in legal disputes over fair prices that must be paid for by using journalistic content (Radsch, 2022). Furthermore, platforms try to position themselves as mediators between all stakeholders through design decisions such as Google's "privacy sandbox"<sup>1</sup> and are the subject of public criticism. It is an empirical question to what extent platforms can evade justification imperatives, for example through technical design decisions or competitive advantages.

In the following, we propose to understand the platformization of media structures as a "critical juncture" and combine this approach with a specific perspective on value mediation following the classical pragmatism of John Dewey (1939; 1946) and French neo-pragmatism (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). The term critical junctures refers to short periods of time, in which change is, as Cappocia & Keleman (2007) argue, significantly less restricted than in phases of path dependency due to "brief phases of institutional flux" (Cappocia & Keleman, 2007, p. 341) which may lead to an enduring legacy within the ecosystem (Collier & Munck, 2017). Lamuedra et al. (2018) describe the disintegration of "established" institutions as an indicator of a critical juncture, which in turn allows the innovation of new institutions. The authors also attest this state to digital journalism, citing McChesney (2013, p. 20) who frames journalistic institutions' current evolution to be in "freefall collapse". Using a less dramatic framing, the dissolution of institutionalized path dependencies in journalism results from the multiple crises mentioned before and leads to an indeterminate situation, which affords the establishment of new routines.

Therefore, this dissolution opens opportunities for experimental practices and new imaginations in the journalistic context, for which Hepp and Loosen (2021) coined the term

<sup>1</sup> With the so-called "privacy sandbox", Google responds to data protection regulations by preventing the use of "third party cookies" in the Chrome browser. Google thereby follows Apple and Mozilla, who have already introduced similar technologies. According to Google, the privacy sandbox enables the different values and interests of various stakeholders to be mediated: "The Privacy Sandbox initiative aims to create technologies that both protect people's privacy online and give companies and developers tools to build thriving digital businesses. The Privacy Sandbox reduces cross-site and cross-app tracking while helping to keep online content and services free for all" (Google 2024). However, the sandbox has also been criticized for further increasing Google's competitive advantage on the advertisement market without contributing to data protection (Eliot et al., 2022; Gerandini et al., 2021).

*pioneer-journalism, [referring to] a particular group of professionals who incorporate new organizational forms and experimental practice in pursuit of redefining the field and its structural foundations. Their interactions and interrelations define the social domain of pioneer journalism. It can include contributions from established media organizations, individual journalists and small startups, and organizations one might not typically associate with the journalistic field. These include tech companies and social movements as well as a variety of other corporate actors and collectives.*

(Hepp & Loosen 2021, p. 578)

However, the experimentation of new and established actors in the field of journalism could also be understood as internal critiques that “generate explanations, ideas, actions and practices” which function as “actual ways of intervening into the future of the media” (Siapera et al., 2015, p. 460). Thus, we ask whether and how novel and established actors critique journalism platforms and thereby experiment with new opportunities to reinvent journalism. To do so, we introduce a specific approach on examining these exploratory efforts within journalism. A look at these “real utopias” (Wright, 2010) shows the possible paths of a renewed journalism, but also points to potential obstacles to their implementation. However, not all actors have the same starting conditions to react to the crisis resulting from platformization. Therefore, this article takes a comparative look at both start-ups and established publishers.

### Presenting our theoretical approach: Pragmatism and value mediation

The intuition that critical junctures require an innovation of institutions also plays an important role in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. Thus, Dewey argues that societal crises call for an “inquiry”, understood as a cyclical, cooperative and society-wide learning process to develop institutions that can appropriately deal with new societal issues (Dewey, 1946). In this context, the above-mentioned crises are triggers for an indeterminate situation, not elements of a problematic situation in itself: “Turning an indeterminate situation into a problematic one is for Dewey the first step of inquiry.” (van de Poel & Kundina 2022, p. 40; see Lamla 2013a and Lamla 2013b, pp. 84-118) One of the main tasks of the (niche-)actors in journalism is therefore to translate the indeterminate situation into their own problem definition.

Furthermore, for the appropriate transformation of critical junctures into new routines values as “judgment devices” (van de Poel & Kundina, 2022) are crucial. Following Dewey’s (1939) theory of valuation, van de Poel and Kundina (2022, p. 6) understand “values as evaluative devices that carry over from earlier experiences and are (to some extent) shared in society.” As judgment devices, values can help “to discover what is morally at stake” (van de Poel & Kundina, 2022, p. 7) and guide future actions. For example, as mentioned above, privacy or journalistic quality currently serve as

guidelines against which the platformization of media structures is judged. However, pragmatism does not refer to values deontologically as abstract rules for “correct” action. On the contrary, contested values are themselves the product of previous problem solutions and therefore must be applied and interpreted in the context of new situations (van de Poel & Kundina, 2022, pp. 6-7). This practical anchoring of values as judgement devices also undermines the clear distinction between “ideal values” and practical “constraints”. Following Dewey’s “ends-in-view” understanding of values, 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 an end-in-view like informing the public about relevant societal issues also depends on the mediation with other aspects and value-laden issues like privacy, journalistic quality, or profitability (Engert et al., 2023). An adequate inquiry must thus not only mediate (variable) values and situations but also ends and means.<sup>2</sup>

The “ends-in-view” understanding of values shows that practical solutions usually require the mediation of various values and interests. Therefore, the idea of a single and isolated value as a judgement device falls short. By following Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) and their influential book “On Justification”, ‘orders of worth’ can be mobilized in episodes of crisis. Each order of worth has its own idea of what is just and appropriate in each situation. For example, outlets can justify or criticize specific perspectives on issues like privacy, journalistic content, 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 values clash. There are essentially two options available in such a situation: Either the conflict is resolved through forms of power and violence, or a compromise is reached between two or more orders of worth. To do justice to the plurality of ‘orders of worth’ and digital journalism as a complex, multi-level phenomenon, the concept of compromise must also reflect multiple levels in the search for new routines in journalism. Therefore, we want to differentiate between three forms of cooperative value mediation, which we call ‘co-valuation’ (see also Draude et al., 2024, pp. 7-10). This helps to understand not only that value mediation through compromises takes place but also *how* a compromise is reached:

- **Pricing:** Firstly, we focus on the translation of values into the economic language of prices. By following Boltanski and Esquerre (2020), prices are justified by specific values. For example, an offer of affordable

<sup>2</sup> However, not every uncertain situation triggers an inquiry based on values as judgment devices. Although established habits are the foundation for establishing new routines through societal learning processes, reactions to indeterminate situations could also try to preserve previous routines in a way that tend to reproduce crises in the long term. Furthermore, the interplay of the actors, legal frameworks, and power asymmetries can shape the conditions that enable or prevent the innovation of new routines.

quality content could be justified on the grounds of promoting democratic opinion-forming. Besides, providing free access to important journalistic content could justify financing journalism by advertising revenues. However, since various values and interests of media outlets justify a specific price, we can ask which values are (not) considered when it comes to setting prices. Regarding advertising revenues, the driving factor to justify prices that advertisers must pay to publishers is the reach of advertising space. Against the background of a normatively appropriate value mediation, this could be an issue since the reach of advertising space usually does not reflect the quality of journalistic articles.

- *Design*: Secondly, we ask how sociotechnical design can mediate various values. For instance, approaches such as ‘fair machine learning’ or ‘privacy by design’ aim to establish an infrastructure blueprint, which avoids manipulation, discrimination, or misuse of data (Binns, 2018). If discrimination-sensitive algorithms are recognized as a competitive advantage in specific sectors, value mediation takes place via fair machine learning. Furthermore, journalistic recommendation systems can foster value mediation when they enable democratic opinion-forming as well as economic profitability. A normative evaluation of value mediation through design examines whether design processes in various contexts such as the court of law or on the user side are appropriately justified (Diver, 2022, p. 163).
- *Cultivation*: Thirdly, episodes of critical junctures challenge existing values as judgement devices and often require a public negotiation to redefine values to establish new routines. Dewey (1939) suggests value mediation emerges from past experiences that ideally has been subjected to critical methods of experimental and public investigation. In this sense, the “practical problem that has to be faced is the establishment of cultural conditions that will support the kinds of behavior in which emotions and ideas, desires and appraisals are integrated” (Dewey, 1939, p. 65). Therefore, we refer to cultivation as the public and participatory process that leads ideally to an innovative adoption, redefinition, and integration of values. Cultivation in this sense depends on preserving constitutive functions of journalism for the reproduction of critical competencies of citizens. Especially the competency to evaluate existing justifications should be fostered under conditions of the digital transformation of the public sphere.

These co-valuation approaches not only provide a perspective to analyze different forms of value mediation but can also guide normative assessment of value mediation. For instance, the normative perspective concerns the application of particular co-valuation approaches, asking to what extent prices or design approaches are sufficiently justified and reflect a range of values (journalistic quality, profitability of publishers, democratic opinion framing, etc.). However, normative questions of value mediation also relate to the appropriate

integration of co-valuation approaches. Therefore, establishing a normatively justified price for journalistic content requires a legal and regulatory design that, for instance, sets criteria for prices that Google must pay for the use of journalistic content. But even if this pricing is recognized as fair by publishers there is also a need for public discussions (cultivation) regarding the question to what extent journalism should be dependent on platform-organizations like Google at all. In the following, we would like to exemplify these theoretical considerations by means of an empirical comparison of reactions to platformization. Before we proceed, however, we present our methodological approach in the next section.

### Methodological approach to study the reactions to platformization

The results presented below are based on empirical material collected as part of the interdisciplinary research project FAIRDienst<sup>3</sup>. The empirical material includes literature and document research, two workshops with experts and practitioners from the field of digital journalism and a total of 28 approximately one-hour interviews with various actors from the digital journalism ecosystem (publishers, start-ups, civil society actors, the advertising industry, journalism associations, etc.) (see Engert et al., 2023). All actors in our sample are German, but we also refer to European legislation and globally operating companies such as Google (German quotes used in the article were translated by the authors). This initial study enabled us to acquire a knowledgeable understanding of the empirical field of online journalism. Building on that, we choose in the following to focus on selected in-depth interviews with personnel working at journalistic start-ups and established publishers. These cases enabled us to investigate how various actors position themselves and react to tensions within the field. The selected start-ups were the primary unit of analysis because of their pioneering approaches that can be understood as internal critiques to the critical juncture of platformization. They aim to deviate from the existing ecosystem by introducing innovations which classifies them as niche actors (Geels 2012, p. 472). At the same time, the chosen start-ups communicate a foundational normative orientation in their external presentation, showcasing that values play a significant role in guiding their actions. To broaden the spectrum of possible reactions, we compared these start-ups against an established online media publisher platform.

We chose three cases based on the principle of minimal and maximum contrasting (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Strübing, 2019), to detect both similarities and differences between the start-ups and the established publisher, as well as to show the range of possible reactions mapped by our sample (Hummrich, 2009, pp. 149-201). For a

<sup>3</sup> “Faire digitale Dienste: Ko-Valuation in der Gestaltung datenökonomischer Geschäftsmodelle (FAIRDienst)” [Fair digital services: Co-evaluation in the design of data-economic business models], funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research under Grant No. 16KIS1249K.

minimal contrast, we selected two online journalistic start-up platforms (JSTUPP 1 and JSTUPP 2) that applied distinctive strategies in terms of co-valuation by focusing on either a pricing or design-centered approach. For a maximum contrast, we chose an established commercial publisher of online journalism (ECPOJ) that was naturally exposed to ecosystem conditions and lock-in mechanisms different to those experienced by JSTUPP 1 and JSTUPP 2. The questions asked in the semi-structured interviews focused on business model strategies, privacy concerns, value mediation strategies, user participation and power relations. The aims of the interviews were to determine the individual strategies of the media outlets and their reasons for offering innovations while at the same time dealing with the socio-technical regime. The authors transcribed and inductively coded (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) all the interviews and translated them into English. Selected key passages were examined in depth through sequential analysis (cf. Reichertz, 2008). Following this, we used the aforementioned theoretical approach to analyze the reactions of online media outlets to the critical juncture of platformization. To do so, we applied the concept of “co-valuation” to guide the further analysis process using the coded material.

## Reactions to platformization

In the following, we show how actors in the field of journalism react to current crises of digital journalism and how they use values as judgement devices. The first two cases refer to niche actors trying to establish innovations in the field of digital journalism as well as reacting to specific challenges we previously discussed. However, the start-ups follow either a pricing approach (JSTUPP 1) or a design one (JSTUPP 2). We used an established commercial publisher of online journalism (ECPOJ) to contrast the challenges that pioneer communities and proven media companies face.

### Case 1: Journalism Start-up Publishing Platform (JSTUPP 1) - Securing democratic values through fair price models

In this section, we present JSTUPP 1 that uses values as judgement devices not only to criticize developments in digital journalism, but also as a basis to search for new business models. One of the most pressing goals of this start-up is the promotion of democratic opinion-forming by giving users access to affordable quality content. Therefore, one of the founders of the start-up claimed that

*it would be cool to be able to read paid journalism [...] from different newspapers without having to pay for lots of subscriptions. Because most people can't afford to take out a lot of subscriptions and then you get more and more one-sided information.*

(JSTUPP1)

In addition, changes in usage practices of especially younger people make it necessary to rethink the distribution of news content: “[E]ven [...] the big newspapers [...] have huge problems because young people in particular no longer read them. [...] Because people are consuming media differently now. And I have the feeling that a big change is needed” (JSTUPP 1). The need for affordable quality content and the failure to reach young people point to the funding, quality and identity crises of digital journalism previously mentioned. Furthermore, JSTUPP 1 criticizes the current handling of data practices that undermine the right of (individual) information control: “The laws actually exist for [informational control, Uhlmann et al.], but [...] many apps simply don't do this. [...] they just track the data. And yes, I wouldn't call that fair” (JSTUPP1).

To promote democratic opinion forming, JSTUPP 1 aims to establish a privacy-friendly platform that provides affordable quality content from assorted publishers. To achieve these goals, the platform experiments with fair pricing models. Fairness here means that users not only receive affordable quality content, but that it also depends on the platform's decision makers to take the interests of the publisher seriously when setting prices for journalistic content. Therefore, JSTUPP 1 claims that a flat-rate subscription-based model like Netflix or Spotify “is simply unfeasible. That would never be fair for the newspapers. And regardless of the fairness factor, we would never be able to convince them [the publishers, Uhlmann et al.] to take part” (JSTUPP1). To mediate the interests of users and publishers based on price models, the platform decided that users must only pay for the content they have read. This decision aimed to provide affordable and diverse quality content while securing a fair distribution of revenues for the newspapers. Furthermore, values such as affordable quality content, privacy and democratic opinion-forming do not only guide the search for new pricing models, but also the design of platform features like recommendation systems. Due to privacy issues and the potential problems of filter bubbles, JSTUPP 1 is critical about personalization algorithms and “always wanted to avoid [...] the way it is [...] on Facebook, Instagram or other [...] normal social media apps, that you fall into feedback loops and then see the same things again and again” (JSTUPP1). Furthermore, JSTUPP 1 always resolves perceived conflicts between the efficiency of their platform-model and informational self-determination in favor of the latter:

*We also use analytics to analyze how the app is used, [...] where we can improve stability. [...] And some people switch that off too. Of course, that's actually bad for us. So, it makes it a bit more difficult for us to decide in which direction we need to develop further. But it's also just fairer.*

(JSTUPP1)

However, although the organizational culture is characterized by both high value commitments and experiments with fair prices, the platform is confronted with difficulties in acquiring new users and news

publishers. In this regard, JSTUPP 1 mentions that they “talked to so many newspapers and it was so hard to get content from them because they are all afraid to give it away” (JSTUPP1). This vicious circle leads to challenges in reaching users. However, start-up funding and usage of open-source technologies allow the implementation of JSTUPP 1 despite the mentioned challenges. Thus, whether or not this start-up could experiment with alternatives to the current platform economy depends on certain infrastructural conditions and support to survive in the long term.

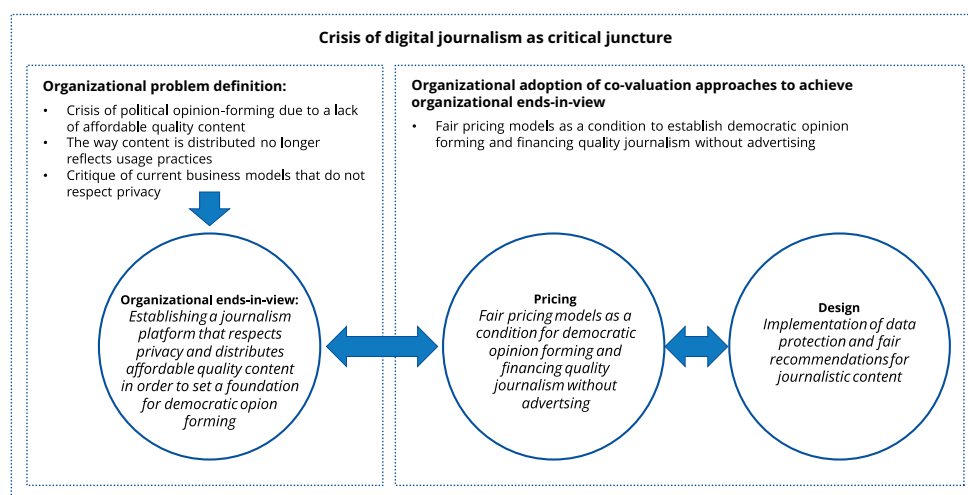


Figure 1: Start-up Journalism platform

Figure 1 shows how JSTUPP 1 would interpret the crisis facing digital journalism. As this start-up is characterized by a strong commitment to secure privacy and democratic opinion forming, values as judgement devices are mobilized to set goals for a privacy friendly journalism platform that aims to distribute affordable quality content. These organizational ends-in-view structure the inquiry for setting fair prices that are also the central means to achieve organizational goals.

## Case 2: Journalism Start-up Publishing Platform (JSTUPP 2) - Technological solutions for social challenges

In this section, we present another start-up that also uses values as judgement devices to criticize current developments of platformization and develop alternative business models. Besides the lack of adequate privacy protection of big internet companies, JSTUPP 2 mainly refers to the unchecked distribution of content that promote phenomena such as fake news or click-bait. Accordingly, users of social media “always end up in these attention-based [...] algorithms” (JSTUPP2). However, JSTUPP 2 criticizes not the social media logic as such, but its inadequate technical design and adaption:

*I think that a lot of people grow up with social media and at some point they get tired of it or want to access information that they know is*

*verified and has a certain quality feature and want to consume it in a similarly convenient way via an app or via various apps or even via the Internet.*

(JSTUPP2)

Therefore, JSTUPP 2 aims to build a platform for quality content that utilizes the advantages of social media technologies while avoiding their disadvantages on the basis of a value-oriented platform design: “We [take] social media technologies [...], but not all of them, only the basic principle [such as] personalized content, network effects through a platform model, scalability, international access to the market [...]. And combine that with our own values” (JSTUPP2). As this focus on social media technologies suggests, the central means for establishing the platform is the sociotechnical design. For instance, JSTUPP 2 differentiates itself from platforms like Facebook by using privacy friendly personalization algorithms. Therefore, contrary to JSTUPP 1, restrictive use of personalized recommendations due to specific data protection concerns and possible risks

of filter bubbles appears unfounded: “We want to know what interests you, but we don’t want to know who you are. [...] In our view, there is no conflict of objectives if you collect data anonymously [...]” (JSTUPP2). Furthermore, with the help of anonymized data analysis carried out by the platform, publishers can also find out for which content users are willing to pay and at what prices. In this regard, the CEO of JSTUPP 2 argues that

*later of course, [...] [our] business intelligence will also help and say [to a content creator], watch out, in the market with this topic we have made the experience, if you raise the threshold to 7.99€, you might only have 100 users, if you are at 5.99€ you might have 300 users.*

(JSTUPP2)

Thus, the CEO illustrates how the sociotechnical design shapes the dynamic integration of assorted actors like users and publishers and the setting of prices. Likewise, challenges regarding the establishment of a normative appropriate user participation are understood as a technical design challenge. In this sense, JSTUPP 2 refers to phenomena like hate speech primarily as a problem of data protection. In this context, the main challenge concerns having some form of identification of users and their practices that aims to prevent hate speech communication in the first place while securing anonymous use of social media functions. Thus,

*solutions could soon emerge through decentralized*

*identification technologies [like] [...] blockchain. There will probably be an identity that is cryptographically encrypted and accessible and stored decentrally, [...] without the respective service providers being able to see who you really are.*

(JSTUPP2)

Whereas it is questionable to what extent problems of a fairness culture such as hate speech can be solved primarily by technical means, this example shows the relevance of privacy as a judgement device for the design of technologies and issues like hate speech. Furthermore, JSTUPP 2 rejects classic advertising networks for the same reasons: “The advertising networks that have emerged out there [...] force you [...] to adopt their technologies [...] and then of course this complete data privacy promise is obsolete” (JSTUPP2). In contrast to JSTUPP 1, however, this start-up does not completely reject advertising but refers to content marketing to mediate economic profitability, journalistic quality aspects and privacy in the context of advertising. Here JSTUPP 2 sees the verification of specific advertising content through the platform as a competition advantage:

*We believe that the future is clearly moving towards content marketing, we also believe that [we] can be a great platform for this at some point, better than many others, because users [...] are not just on Facebook or Snapchat for entertainment, for example, and that it will be easy for many companies to produce content, good content marketing [...]. But that's a completely different form of advertising that works very well in terms of content.*

(JSTUPP2)

Generally, JSTUPP 2 aims to establish a platform model for the distribution of quality content. Compared to JSTUPP 1, quality content does not only refer to journalistic articles, but also to specific forms of advertising. The central means to distribute quality content via social media elements is the design approach that also shapes the implementation of the other co-valuation approaches. Whereas the start-up culture has a strong commitment to values such as privacy or the promotion of quality content,

it is questionable whether the focus on the design approach does justice to specific challenges of platformization. For instance, hate speech is not just a data protection issue that could be solved via blockchain-technologies. Thus, the main challenge of value mediation can be related to the design-driven approach that uses technology primarily to achieve organizational goals (see figure 2).

### Case 3: Established commercial media company (ECPOJ) - Aspects that secure economic profitability structure business-model decisions

This section focuses on a commercial media company. Since we have already discussed reactions of commercial publishers to platformization in more detail elsewhere (Engert et al, 2023), we will refrain from longer quotes from the interviews in the following. Generally, this media company relies on advertising models that use data tracking as the foundation for financing journalistic content. Therefore, developments in data protection regulation or Google’s decision to prevent data tracking via the Chrome browser are perceived as major external constraints. The reliance on data tracking for advertising has not only created high path dependencies. Furthermore, in this market-driven business model, aspects that aim to secure economic self-preservation structure organizational decisions. Therefore, the approach of *pricing* plays a central role to assess specific means to achieve this end. The reach of advertising space is the driving factor to justify prices for advertising. The important currency is the so-called „Cost Per Thousand“ (CPT) which stands for the price that advertising companies pay to media companies for reaching 1000 advertisement impressions on the booked site. To compete in the advertising market and to reach approximately the same number of users as the large platform companies, publishers aim for a certain level of user loyalty, which is expressed in the term “unique users”. These users do not land on the publisher’s pages by chance, for instance, via Google. Acquiring unique users requires a certain balance regarding journalistic content and advertising. The prices

for advertisement campaigns do not directly represent aspects of journalistic quality so that theoretically a high reach of users can also be achieved with clickbait articles. But in terms of long-term strategies, journalistic quality plays a specific role for reaching unique users. However, while in Case 1 only selected journalistic articles are associated with the label „quality content“, this publisher interprets the term content in a more flexible way. For instance, advertising formats such as

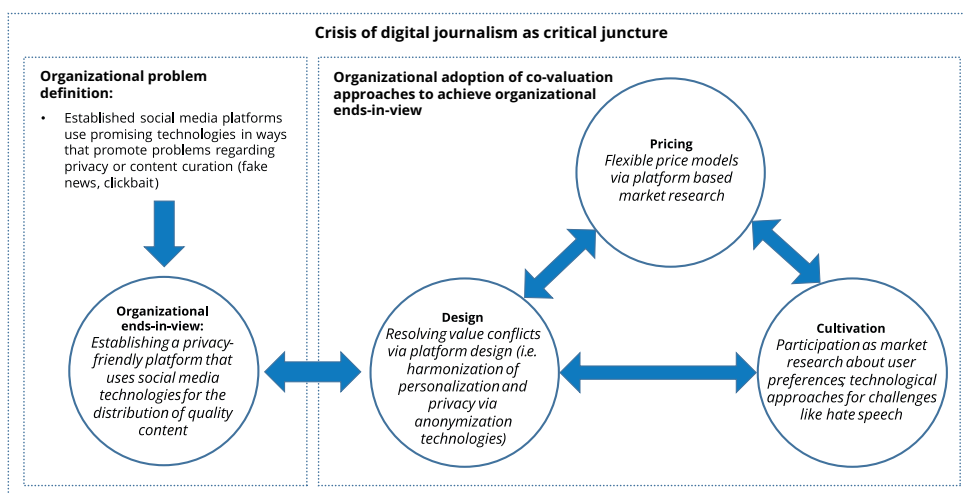


Figure 2: Start-up platform for quality content

native advertising or affiliate marketing are seen as useful content if they fulfill specific information needs (Engert et al., 2023).

Besides, the *design approach* is an important means to secure economic profitability, provided that data tracking technologies or the legal design of informed consent allow access to user data. Therefore, the publisher presented in this section tries to balance legal and technical requirements with economic profitability, „so that we do not misuse the data on a massive scale, but can still run effective advertising campaigns.“ (ECPOJ) In this sense, the publisher understands regulatory data protection provisions as an external constraint that structures decisions for business models. However, a broad interpretation of consent-layers can also legitimize data intensive business models. Furthermore, the goal of economic profitability also shapes the implementation of the *cultivation* approach. For example, the publisher relates the opportunity for users to comment on journalistic articles to economic aspects as they allow access to new data, for example via login functions: „I could imagine that there are opportunities to bind users more closely to us again and that we then also have more data from them when they are logged in. [...] Then you can do exactly what Facebook does when you log in to comment, then you have to actively accept that advertising from third-party data comes across.“ (ECPOJ)

## Discussion

The previous chapter illustrates how various actors interpret critical junctures of media structures differently due to their position in the field. Whereas the start-ups refer to the platformization of media structures as a starting point for critique and a search for new solutions to critical junctures, the publisher perceives data economic dynamics as potential disruptions of larger organizational path dependencies.

The presented niche actors mobilize values like privacy or the distribution and financing of journalistic quality content as judgement-devices to establish new business models. However, the two cases provide different strategies for mediating values that also lead to specific opportunities and challenges. Case 1 uses primarily pricing models for the distribution of quality content to promote democratic opinion-forming. Therefore, this start-up can be linked to current proposals for journalism platforms which argue for new pricing models. For example, the study of Ebrich et al. (2024) suggests that establishing a flat-rate model for journalistic content similar to the logic of Spotify would generate new market potential for publishers and could promote journalistic diversity. However, as mentioned before, the start-up in case 1 is critical of a flat-rate model due to potential challenges of a fair remuneration of publishers. Thus, publishers

and platform initiatives do not necessarily recognize specific proposals for new price models as a means for a fair value mediation. Whereas considerations on establishing new platform models as well as our presented case 1 see the central lever for value mediation in finding new pricing models for journalistic content, they do not focus on the quality of public negotiations between users on platforms that we address with the cultivation approach. Finally, the institutional framework and cooperation conditions required to

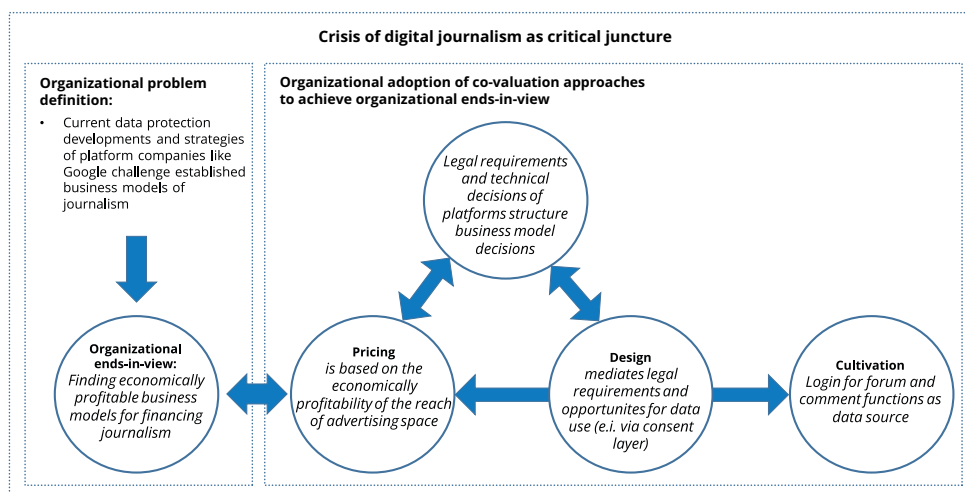


Figure 3: Commercial media company

Therefore, aspects like privacy, democratic opinion-forming or journalistic quality play a limited role as judgement devices in this market-driven business model. Because this publisher perceives itself as being driven by large platforms, data protection, for example, does not appear to be a value in itself, but rather an external condition that could enable or prevent economic business models. Furthermore, users are addressed less as citizens and more as suppliers of data, provided that the communicative exchange between users is primarily used as a new source for generating economic profitability. The following figure illustrates the business culture in which aspects that are critical for economic profitability structure the adoption of co-valuation approaches.

convince established publishers of journalistic content to participate on a journalism platform also remain an open question in research to date.

While in case 1 the value commitment to foster democratic opinion forming structures the search for fair price models, in case 2, the design-driven organizational culture shapes the strategies for the mediation of values. For instance, case 2 uses anonymization technologies to harmonize data protection with personalization algorithms. Furthermore, the start-up uses data analytics to adjust prices for content accordingly to expectations of publishers and users. In this regard, case 2 can be related to contemporary discussions regarding the so-called "Solutionist Ethic" in which value derives from



solving social problems through the means of technology (Nachtwey & Seidl, 2024). According to solutionism, social challenges are business opportunities that can be fixed by technological design. Thus, the CEO claims that technological solutions for data protection are “similar to climate protection. The technologies are already there, it’s more the political will that’s missing to actually implement it.” (JSTUPP2) As case 2 exemplifies, solutionism is less about establishing compromises between different values, but about proposing a *resolution* of value conflicts through the use of technologies. Therefore, potential value conflicts between the efficient use of personalization algorithms and privacy seem unfounded, provided that anonymization technologies appear to be a proven solution here. However, it is questionable to what extent technology is the appropriate means for every organizational end-in-view. In case 2, the design-driven organizational culture also influences how challenges such as hate speech are addressed. Although the start-up takes the issue of hate speech seriously, we assume that challenges of establishing normatively appropriate public negotiations cannot be framed as privacy challenges that are tackled by technical means such as blockchain alone. Therefore, the Solutionist Ethic tends to close the debate about potential value-laden issues that require an open public debate and the cultivation of new practices. Whereas the specific focus on establishing pricing models in order to foster democratic opinion forming leads to a lack of dynamic *integration* of co-valuation approaches in case 1, example 2 shows that the design-driven approach risks to overrun specific challenges of value mediation. However, the publisher faces limits to use values as judgement devices and co-valuation approaches due to external constraints and path dependencies. As a result of using advertising to finance journalistic content, publishers see changes regarding data protection regulation or the prevention of third party-tracking by browser companies as potential threats to business models. Consequently, the ECPOJ in case 3 uses native advertising or affiliate marketing that enable privacy-friendly advertising. However, they blur the boundaries between advertising and journalistic content and therefore create new problems for journalistic quality and public opinion formation (Lobigs, 2018). While current discussions focus on challenges to mediate journalistic quality and economic market pressure (Petre, 2021), our example shows that these aspects have to be mediated with challenges of legal and technical developments of data protection, too. In contrast, the presented start-ups try to avoid such value conflicts between privacy, economic profitability and journalistic quality from the beginning and aim to be independent of larger platformization dynamics. However, there are specific normative challenges regarding the integration of the different co-valuation approaches with respect to all three cases. Although both start-ups are committed to specific values, they focus primarily on pricing (case 1) or technological design-solutions (case 2), while participatory and public negotiations in the sense of the cultivation approach are not fully addressed. Furthermore, the ECPOJ and to some extent JSTUPP

2 understand opportunities of user participation as a potential data source that can be used for data economic revenues. Current debates around digital journalism criticize this rather reductionist understanding of cultivating audience engagement that neglects emotional and normative dimensions of participation (Karlsson et al., 2023, 564). In this sense, the appropriate cultivation of public negotiations seems to be overlooked by both the ECPOJ and the two JSTUPPs. But not only the setting of prices and establishing a justified design depend on public negotiations, but also issues like hate speech require the *cultivation* of democratic practices.

Whereas niche-actors can experiment with co-valuation approaches more freely, established outlets depend on changes of larger ecosystem conditions to find new ways for value mediation. For instance, there is a need that enterprises like Google pay appropriate prices to publishers for the use of journalistic content. However, the publishers are also, to some extent, responsible for current conditions. Instead of establishing individual and short-term contracts with Google, it would be more appropriate in the long run for publishers to cooperate to change ecosystem conditions of digital journalism (see Draude et al., 2024, pp. 43). Transforming these structures is necessary to enable more appropriate co-valuation strategies that use values like privacy or journalistic quality as judgement devices. Therefore, established publishers can also benefit from a perspective that understands critical junctures in media structures as a starting point to question established path dependencies. In particular, the long-term reproduction of value conflicts could potentially be avoided if critical junctures are taken seriously to promote a collective inquiry that leads to a more appropriate understanding and mediation of values as judgement devices.

However, although the three case studies exemplify the analytical potentials of the proposed co-valuation perspective, applying our understanding of value mediation to a broader range of media outlets would be necessary for further generalizations of our findings. In this regard, while all three cases are German media outlets, our findings can be applied beyond Germany’s borders. Furthermore, our perspective could benefit from a comparison of business models of publishers that are, for instance, not only dependent on advertising, but also use paid content. Besides, our empirical material represents only a snapshot and not a larger development of co-valuation processes of different actors. Therefore, further research could benefit from long-term studies that show how values are negotiated and change over time due to the interplay of organizational cultures and larger ecosystem conditions of media platformization.

Furthermore, our perspective on co-valuation could be broadened by a mutual integration of a pragmatist perspective on value mediation with more philosophical theories of fairness and justice to develop an equally empirically grounded and normatively appropriate perspective on data-economic fairness. A stronger entanglement of the co-valuation approaches with discussions regarding “data justice” (Dencik et al., 2022), theories of structural injustices (Young, 2011)

and perspectives that highlight the plurality of spheres of justice (Walzer, 2009; Sharon, 2021) could be promising.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we related current challenges of online journalism to the discourse of digital capitalism and platformization. This discourse usually focuses on a seemingly inescapable power of platforms and rather simple dichotomies such as capitalist exploitation through private platforms and the common good that are not sufficiently sensible for the potential ambivalences of digitization (Sharon, 2021). In this regard, we argued for a perspective that understands platform-induced crises of digital journalism as a critical juncture that could offer windows of opportunity for “pioneer-journalism” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). Furthermore, we focused on challenges of the mediation of values that are relevant in the context of the platformization of media structures. By using a pragmatistic understanding of values as “judgement devices” (van de Poel & Kudina, 2022), we proposed an analytical perspective that differentiates various forms of “co-valuation”. Thus, we asked how values can be mediated on the basis of prices, sociotechnical design as well as through cultivation of public negotiations and participation processes. To exemplify this perspective, we analyzed how two online journalism start-ups (JSTUPP 1 and JSTUPP 2) and an established publisher of digital journalism (ECPOJ) adopt various co-valuation approaches. Furthermore, we highlighted how routines and selective factors such as solutionist orientations towards technology shape how actors in the field of journalism adopt various forms of value mediation and

define organizational goals due to current challenges of platformization. As the journalism start-ups try to overcome conflicts across values by proposing new platform models, the established publisher considers itself unable to use values as judgement devices in the same way due to external constraints and specific path dependencies of established business models. Although we focused on the analytical potential of the co-valuation perspectives, we also showed that they could guide the normative assessment of value mediation. In this regard, two aspects are important: On the one hand, each co-valuation approach raises the question of a normatively appropriate value mediation. Regarding the approach of pricing, we can ask which values are (not) considered when it comes to setting prices for business models. Enabling a normative appropriate value mediation through design requires the contestability and justification of the design-process through various relevant parties, such as users or the court of law. Furthermore, sociotechnical structures that undermine public discourse by establishing conditions for polarization dynamics or algorithmic manipulation of public opinion need to be criticized from the perspective of the cultivation-approach. On the other hand, our three cases exemplify the specific need for balancing the various co-valuation approaches. In this sense, although implementing new pricing models and privacy friendly algorithms are important for developing alternative models of journalism, challenges such as hate speech also require the cultivation of user practices and public negotiations. Generally, these aspects of value mediation could be understood as normative challenges in the sense of balancing various values as well as regarding the integration of different forms of co-valuation.

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