The Impact of Digital Media on Urban Discourse:
The Journalists' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The media plays a crucial role in disseminating public information. This holds particular significance in urban contexts where it is vital for citizens to be informed about local issues as an integral element of urban discourse in the public sphere. With the growth of digital media, concerns about the quality of media content are increasing. This study investigates media perspectives on the quality of urban discourse, drawing on interviews with 51 journalists across four countries (Ireland, Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom). The findings underscore the immense potential of local journalism in shaping interactions between local government and citizens. While digital media has led to an explosion of content availability, it also poses challenges in providing reliable information to citizens. The study reviews these challenges and proposes solutions to enhance the quality of urban discourse.

KEYWORDS

Journalism, Online Media, Political Accountability, Urban Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban discourse is a social construct that provides a framework for interpreting territorial realities. This framework not only helps us to understand urban reality but also fosters ideas about the future of cities. Urban discourse is multi-faceted accommodating the perspectives of professionals, stakeholders and residents. First, there are well-known urban discourses constructed in the field of urban planning and communicated top-down (Karsten 2009), including concepts such as attractive city, creative city,

smart city and resilient city. These discourses are crafted on a global scale, albeit with local specificities woven into the fabric. Second, there are city discourses shaped by its residents and communicated from the bottom-up. These residential discourses, often underpinned by daily local interactions, can intersect with urban planning discourse. However, they tend to be fragmented and elusive making them challenging to integrate in urban policy processes (Karsten 2009).

Short (2000) provides a novel perspective distinguishing three primary discourses of the city: the authoritarian city, the cosmic city and the collective city. These discourses frame urban social relations, intellectual discussions and political forces. The authoritarian city discourse encompasses social aggregation and is charcaterised by order and discipline but also resistance, contestation and anarchy. According to this approach, a city reflects and embodies various authorities and powers in its street layouts, location of functions as well as citizens' behaviors. By contrast, the cosmic city discourse views the urban environment as a religious artefact. Cosmologies created in the past by various beliefs justified the social hierarchy of urban areas and built their spatial structures. Today a steady secularisation of the city is observed, undermining the city as the site of cosmic narrative. The collective city discourse is the most appropriate for this study. It depicts the city as a site of collective provision, consumption and action with a stronger role for civic society - a shared space, a place of joint projects and neighborhood effects (Short 2000).

This article adopts a simplified definition of 'urban discourse': a public discussion on urban affairs through speech or writing, producing meaning and involving various types of actors. The media, acting as a primary source of understanding and a vital public forum (cf Talbot 2007), plays a critical role in communicating and shaping urban discourse. Journalists can provide reliable and in-depth information to inform deliberation and decision-making. The quality of urban discourse depends on the media's ability to communicate a diverse range of information and perspectives. In this paper, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What role does journalism play in creating urban discourse?
2. How do journalists contribute to political accountability?
3. What is the impact of online media on urban discourse?

These questions will be addressed from the perspective of journalists, offering a unique insight into the functions of the media and their relations with their audiences. Consequently, urban discourse will be evaluated by the key actors who are responsibile for the quality of information and commentary disseminated in the media.

The paper is organized as follows. It begins by setting out the conceptual framework on the role of the media in public discourse. This includes an examination of mediated deliberation, the role of language and digital media. The methodology and data sources employed for this study are then presented. The empirical section provides the key findings from the interview research. A wider discussion synthesizes the key findings. The final section draws conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this article explores how the media represents and shapes urban discourse. It highlights the interactions between media, language, and digital technology in influencing public deliberation, policy-making, and urban development. The framework identifies key components and relationships in urban discourse, providing a foundation for understanding the complex interplay between mediated deliberation, language, digital media, and their impact on urban discourse. Particular attention is placed on the importance of reliable information dissemination, diverse perspectives, and ethical public relations practices in shaping informed and inclusive urban discussions.

2.1 Mediated Deliberation

The media plays a crucial role in urban policy by disseminating information about spatial transformation processes and providing commentary on these processes. The objective presentation of facts and transmission of new information contributes to public discourse, providing a basis for social interaction. Media framing occurs when journalists present a story from a particular viewpoint, which can impact public attitudes by changing the weights attached to issues already in memory (i.e., Leeper and Slothuus, 2019). This can alter the audience's knowledge state, potentially influencing public opinion and driving societal change.

A case in point is the "local news poverty" phenomenon observed in Canada. This concept explores the extent to which local news media fulfill the information needs of people living in rural areas, suburban municipalities and smaller cities and towns outside of the major media hubs. Local news poverty is greatest in communities where residents have limited or no access to timely, verified news about local politics, education, health, economic and other key topics necessary to navigate their daily life (Lindgren 2017).

Media play a significant role in in the success of urban transformation by promoting new urban investments and municipal practices. Journalists and publicists can contribute to the success or failure of existing or newly built housing estates, shopping centers or other types of buildings and public spaces. Experienced journalists are aware of the competing interests between groups engaged in urban politics (Ossowicz 2020). Indirectly, the media can influence the views of interest groups, activating them, inspiring, suggesting and persuading them to take action. They can also facilitate interaction between actors – a process referred to as 'mediated deliberation'.

Mediated deliberation is a form of discussion enabled by the media acting as a mediator between the public and elected officials. Media professionals communicate information, values, and contrasting viewpoints to the public facilitating deliberation – a process essential to a functioning democracy (Page, 1996). The quality of this deliberation is important, requiring an assessment of whether media coverage is comprehensive, well balanced and free from oversimplified descriptions, distorting speculations and partisan reporting (Pomatto, 2019).

The media's awareness of their role in deliberation processes becomes evident from the interplay between the media and strategic public management. Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified four main models of public relations in the context of policy-making: the press agentry/publicity model; the public information model; the two-way asymmetric model; and the two-way symmetric model.

The press agent/publicity model is characterized by communications professionals using persuasion to influence their key audiences. This model involved one-way communication where accuracy is not prioritised and feedback is from the audience is not sought.

The second public information model abandons the manipulative tactics used in the press agent/publicity approach and presents more accurate information. However, the communication pattern is still one-way, with no audience analysis undertaken.

Moving to the two-way asymmetrical model, it introduces a more persuasive way of communicating with key audiences. In this model, content creators conduct research to better understand the audience's attitudes and behaviors, yet the organization still benefits more than the audience.

Finally, the two-way symmetrical model proposes that public relations practitioners should serve as intermediaries or negotiators between the organization and its key publics. This model fosters a mutually beneficial scenario for all parties and is considered to be the most ethical model, which ought to be applied in everyday tactics and strategies by professionals.

The importance of public relations to public administration has also been stressed in longitudinal studies by Lee (1998, 2009), which observed a renewed attention and re-establishing of public relations as a valuable part of contemporary public administration. With the increased power of the news media and other rapidly growing communication channels defining this information age, public relations has regained its relevance for public managers (Lee 2009). However, public communication officers are often not involved in strategic decision-making in the public administration but rather contribute

to operational activities, such as development and maintenance of internal communication, providing public information, or building relations with the media (Valentini 2013).

The public relations practices employed by public administrations provide the background for the discussion on urban discourse in this article. The news content produced by public authorities is influenced and shaped by these public relations efforts, which underpin the content provided by the media. The role of media outlets then is to report on urban development processes and outcomes often in the form of frames offering alterative interpretations of reality, which can trigger different evaluations among citizens. The mediated deliberation mentioned above can be related to a wide range of political and policy issues including economic and social consequences, power, human interest and responsibility attribution (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).

2.2 The Role of Language

The "linguistic turn" in the social sciences (Howarth, Torfing 2005) revolutionizes the perception of language from being neutral, as proposed by the positivist tradition, to a system of signification through which actors use language not only to describe the world but also to construct it (Hajer 1993, Shirazi 2023). Language is acknowledged for its potential to shape politics, recalibrate power dynamics and engender political conflict (Hajer & Versteeg 2005). As policies are developed, debated, negotiated, and discussed "in" language, and communicated and implemented "through" texts, it underlines the importance of the discursive approach in understanding and analysing policy-making.

The language used in policy discussions can directly influence the resulting policies. Policy deliberation carries discursive meaning relating to the underlying linguistic-practical structure that constitutes classifications and objects shaping our everyday world. Yet, these are often overlooked by individual agents (Wagenaar, 2015). Consequently, the unconscious use of terms has implications for the way society is constructed. Certain phrases in urban discourse are implicitly assumed to be "neutral", but in reality may suppress alternative meanings. Questions such as what is a "crisis" and what is the "normality" that needs to be restored, who is the "we" that is often called on to act, who or what is "a city" are pivotal in urban discourse. Similarly, terms like "planning for growth", "the public interest" and "peace" are often used as linguistic oversimplifications that obscure critical questions about the underlying realities and political dynamics (Marcuse 2015).

Urban scholars recognize the critical role of language in human affairs and widely acknowledge qualitative methods for its analysis and description (Fischer 2011, Shirazi 2023). The key role discourse plays in urban processes is often highlighted in the literature (Hastings 1999), and attempts have been made to integrate the study of language into urban research and analysis (Lees 2004).

This article seeks to address the recent changes in urban public discourse resulting from the development of digital media. The rise of online communication has significantly altered the roles of language and of the actors who generate content on media.

2.3 Digital Media

The power of media is rooted in its ability to transmit information rapidly and frequently to a vast audience (Ossowicz 2020). Providing up-to-date information is a key element in modern democratic processes. However, the significant acceleration in information transmission over the past two decades, due to digitalization and online media development, have fundamentally altered urban discourse.

Digital media can facilitate interaction between public actors and citizens enabling dialogue on public issues. The Knight Commission (2009) proposed a vision of informed communities that maximised the availability of relevant and credible information, strengthening the capacity of individuals to engage with information, and promote active engagement in the public sphere. This approach largely remains valid today, as online technologies continue to reshape the way citizens communicate, socialise and deliberate with each other and with the public sector.

The growth in the online public sphere has also given rise to polarisation and misinformation in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. The phenomenon of 'echo chambers' illustrates this

development, where individuals predominantly encounter opinions that align with their own. For instance, social media users often selectively engage with like-minded others and ideologically-aligned content. This pattern, exacerbated by social media platforms' algorithmic curation of content based on past users activity, limits the novelty and diversity of the content that users encounter. Instead of contributing to viewpoint diversity, it leads to online clustering and polarization (Terren & Borge 2021).

Conceptual and empirical research on mediated deliberation in online media has expanded greatly. Yet, a recent survey of the literature shows that research on mediated deliberation in the urban context is a surprisingly underdeveloped field of research (Pomatto, 2019). This paper aims to contribute to this field by addressing the digital shift in urban discourse.

Summing up, the conceptual framework informing this study has explored key aspects of contemporary urban discourse, including virtualization effects and mediation functions. These elements encompass the presentation of facts, responsibility for information quality, the role of language in policy discussions, the comprehension of reality, the generation of future ideas, elements of collectiveness, inclusiveness and diversity, the construction of a civic society, the positive and negative effects of digitization, public relations and mediated deliberation. Collectively, these elements provide a cognitive framework for further analysis and interpretation of journalists' perspectives on urban discourse.

3. DATA AND METHODS

This research was conducted in 2022 across four countries: Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. The selection of countries was determined by the Horizon 2020 research project DEMOTEC (EC grant number 962553). The countries differ significantly in terms of geography, political history, economic development and civic society patterns. They also vary in terms of press freedom. Based on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index, the counties can be classified in three groups ranging from good (Ireland, Netherlands) to satisfactory (United Kingdom) and problematic (Poland). Despite the diverse settings, the respondents' views shared a number of common themes and complementarities. Therefore, the approach adopted aims to link the perspectives and experiences of European journalists working in diverse contexts to provide a comprehensive picture of urban discourse. In this study, 51 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with professional journalists, encompassing both traditional and online platforms (Table 1).

Various recruitment strategies were used to recruit interviewees. Some were intentionally chosen from a range of quality newspapers and digital media, including those with a focus on political issues. Others were invited using a snowball method, based on recommendations from the journalists, local authorities and affiliated universities, who provided further contacts within their professional network. As a result, only selected media have been included in the research sample in each country and the 51 respondents should not be considered a random representative sample of their national media environments. Despite this constraint, the approach adopted in this study offers insightful observations into the role of the media in shaping urban discourse in Europe. Furthermore, it enables drawing comparative conclusions on the impact of digital media on urban discourse.

Table 1. Number of interviews conducted in each country by media type. Source: author's own research.

Media type	Ireland	the Netherlands	Poland	United Kingdom
Traditional only	4	4	6	0
Online only	0	10	5	8
Traditional+online	3	1	4	6
Total	7	15	15	14

The interviews were conducted by the DEMOTEC research team between March and November 2022. The interviewees were informed about the project goals and scope, and asked for consent to participate in the research. The interview questionnaire covered various themes related to the journalists' professional experiences as well as democratic challenges and innovations at the local level. In particular, participatory budgeting (PB) was a key focal point of the interviews. PB is an urban policy practice which combines direct citizen involvement in allocating public funding and local territorial governance. Given that most participatory budgeting projects are embedded in local spaces (such as neighbourhoods or urban public spaces) and often include a deliberative dimension, PB provides an insightful lens for investigating urban discourse.

Each interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, was audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymised and the names of the interviewees were replaced by ID numbers. The transcripts then underwent a thematic analysis. Some of the interviewees' statements are quoted verbatim while others are referenced across the cases to identify common themes and understandings. The primary objective was to assess public discourse from the lens of journalists, given their pivotal role in reflecting and reshaping public opinion.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Role of Journalism in Urban Discourse

The journalists interviewed highlight the important role of media in shaping urban discourse through the provision of reliable and understandable information. According to most of the interviewees, the primary role of journalists is to inform the public by providing factual and unbiased accounts of real-world events and issues:

Try as much as possible to ensure that people understand the world better. That there are big things happening, and that readers understand the things that matter to them [Interviewee NL14].

The role of journalism is to explain the world and provide some simplified thoughts (…) so that the events and facts described are free from misleading or false information [Interviewee PL08]

Fact-checking, exposing inaccessible matters and presenting diverse opinion are seen as key journalistic tasks [Interviewees IR01, IR04, UK01, UK12, UK13]. Journalism may sometimes take an advocacy role by asking questions on behalf of the public [Interviewee IR01], or by holding power to account [Interviewees IR02 and IR06]:

As a journalist, you have a role in controlling politics, you have a role in informing readers. Properly informing readers, and making clear what choices they have, but ultimately it is up to politicians themselves to get people to vote. That is in the end not the role of journalists [Interviewee NL03].

While journalists are expected to maintain neutrality and support different voices [Interviewees UK01, UK02, UK06 and UK10], they are not political activists nor public relations experts:

Journalists do not promote anything, they inform. Journalists promote by informing [interviewee PL06]
A journalist (…) only presents the facts (…); conclusions should be drawn by the readers themselves [interviewee PL12]

The informative function of journalism also has the potential to encourage citizen engagement and bridge the gap between society and politics:

In the end, you have to defend democracy. And you have to create transparency where there is no transparency. That is the most important task (…). Especially nowadays [Interviewee NL11]

Some interviewees emphasized that promoting democracy should be a desired role of journalism – a duty even [Interviewees IR01, OR03 and IR07], while other are more cautious or opposed to the promotion of specific policy instruments or agendas [Interviewees IR02, IR04 and IR06]. Despite these differences, there is a shared belief in in the value of 'good journalism':

But still a good and reliable information, showing various perspectives, has its value [interviewee PL02]

In summary, journalism serves multiple functions in creating urban discourse, including informing, explaining, presenting diverse viewpoints and ensuring transparency, while journalists perceive themselves as neutral reporters and advocates of the public interest. The next section turns to the political accountability function.

4.2 Political Accountability of Journalism

Journalists play an important role in promoting political accountability by exerting pressure on politicians to answer for their actions [Interviewees NL04, NL07, PL08 UK01 and UK10]. The interviewees unanimously emphasise the need for controls on politicians, with some regarding this as the primary purpose of journalism [Interviewee NL04]:

Commercial media are the guards of politicians, they look at their hands. This is the most important function of media [Interviewee PL08]

However, the implementation of the political accountability function by journalists seems to be far from optimal. Political accountability, particularly at the local level, is not perceived to be satisfactory according to most of the respondents [Interviewees IR02, IR03, IR04 and IR06, UK01, UK02, UK05, UK07, UK09, UK10, UK12, UK13 and UK14]. Structural capacity issues within the local media industry and the diverse nature of politicians are cited as challenges.

Political accountability is sometimes masked by a "superficial inclusiveness" which is disrespectful towards citizens/readers [Interviewee UK01], and the complexity of the democratic political landscape in multilevel governance settings further complicates scrutiny. This makes it even more difficult to trace and implement control:

Because that is the policy, officially municipal, but in practice it is very often regional (…). Purchasing, for example youth care, is far too complicated and far too expensive to do that as an individual municipality (…). Democratic control really falls short there (…). And there is also a shortage of local journalists who have enough time and therefore money to monitor it properly. [Interviewee NL08]

A systemic factor that would need to be addressed to increase accountability is to grant more decision-making power and responsibilities to local government [Interviewee IR03]. Additionally, there is a perceived lack of cooperation between local authorities and journalists hindering transparency. It is acknowledged by many respondents that the media and journalists themselves play a role in the decline of democratic standards, especially media conglomerates [Interviewee UK02], by making deals with public actors and failing to make them accountable:

The level of accountability is low. Journalists contribute to this by making deals with the local authorities. [Especially] when they depend on the municipality, they do not control it [interviewee PL05]

To address these challenges, interviewees suggest decoupling funding sources of the mass media from political parties [Interviewee IR07], promoting consistent and comparative reporting on local authorities' performance [Interviewees IR01 and IR02] and fostering cooperation among the journalists themselves [Interviewee IR07]. Two interviewees (NL04) noted the importance of journalists being physically present in decision-making processes (IE2, NL04). Journalists competencies in promoting political accountability include honesty, transparency and an apolitical attitude, although not all journalists adhere to these values:

You need to be critical in your views, you need to be apolitical. Honesty is important [interviewee PL01]

Only few journalists are competent enough to hold politicians responsible [interviewee PL02]

In conclusion, journalists try to hold political actors to account despite the challenges in doing so, and also feel politically accountable and responsible for the state of urban discourse (at least at the local level). There is a consensus that transparency in decision-making processes and independent, trustworthy and reliable journalism are essential goals.

4.3 Setting the News Agenda

Journalism has long been perceived as a professions with a relatively high level of public trust, although trust in the media varies across countries and has been declining in some cases due to growing pressure on the journalism profession. Some interviewees [UK03, UK04, UK07, UK10 and UK11] highlight how the downgrading of journalistic standards has led to a focus on sensational stories to attract audiences.

When asked about their news selection process, most journalists base their choices on the current flow of information rather than targeting specific issues. Factors such as the nature of the media outlet, specialization of the journalist and the perceived popularity among the targeted audience influence topic decisions. Finding an interesting angle and readability are crucial steps in preparing the news [Interviewees UK06, UK10, IR03, IR04, IR05, NL11, NL03 and PL09], particularly for online media where considerations revolve around generating traffic [Interviewees IR01, IR02, IR03, IR05 and IR06].

Some journalists actively seek controversial or exclusive stories [Interviewees UK01 and UK14] with a mission to "speak the truth" [Interviewee UK11], while local journalists priortise news that relates to their covered area:

When they say, 'we are going to do it throughout Rotterdam', that is of course a reason. If a new square has just been completed, it is a reason, then, but there always has to be a news cause because otherwise you think, why am I reading this? That's really important. And it must be real, there must be something to tell so it must be different or special or provides an answer to a certain problem. [Interviewee NL06]

The selection criteria presented by the interviewees include shaping citizenship skills [Interviewees UK05, UK10 and UK12], advocating for the community [Interviewees PL14, UK01 and UK09], stimulating debate [Interviewee UK02], educational values, accidents and disasters, diversity, VIP visits:

It has to be the current news (…). The main goal is to provide some practical information for people and sometimes some fun facts [interviewee PL04]

Practical considerations such as the availability of information [Interviewee IR04] and the potential for direct interaction with the involved people also factor into news selection. Presenting human angles and empathy to builds trust locally was also emphasized [interviewees PL07, UK11, NL11].

The interviewed journalists strive to maintain objectivity and avoid supporting a particular group or individual, aiming to present different views in a fair and unbiased manner [Interviewees IR01 and IR02]:

You should not present your own opinion, you should rather show more neutrally what you see, what you hear, what you talk about [Interviewee PL03]

Editorial decision-making and the need for approval from publishers may impose limits on their choices:

Topics (…) need to be approved by the publisher; they are discussed by the editorial board [Interviewee PL08]

Nevertheless, most of the interviewed journalists express a sense of autonomy in selecting topics:

I have worked in this portal for 15 years (…) and my boss never influenced our activity (…) no one has imposed me any topic [Interviewee PL07]

The most common criteria for choosing topics include their interesting or attractive to the readers, relevance to local context, and their usefulness or advisory nature. Overall, the interviewees pritise people's lives, stories and experiences, various viewpoints aiming to be as objective as possible. The next section turns to the knowledge and skills required to be a journalist.

4.4 Skills and Knowledge Needed for a Journalist

There was agreement among the respondents about the need for journalists to be equipped with a range of skills specific to their profession. Foremost amongst these is the capacity to identify reliable sources and process information accurately [Interviewees IR01, IR03, IR04, IR05, IR06, PL01, PL06, PL08]. The ability to discern relevant information amongst abundant data, thereby recognising what is vital and newsworthy [Interviewees IR01, IR03, IR05, PL08 and PL12].

A sizeable number of interviewees emphasized 'soft' skills as crucial components of journalists competence. These predominantly revolve around interpersonal abilities such as empathy, attentiveness, capacity to listen to others and social acuity. Attributes such as sensitivity, tolerance, understanding and patience also emerged as key qualities [Interviewees IR01, IR02, IR03, IR04 and IR07, NL11; PL11 and PL15]:

For me the core characteristic of a journalist is sensitivity (…). A sensitive journalist can notice much more and 'feel into' the emotions accompanying a particular event [interviewee PL11]

Patience, I guess. Is being nice a quality? I think it's very important. Empathy, that's the word I was looking for. Empathy is always important. [interviewee NL11]

Practical abilities form another crucial skill set encompassing abilities such like writing compelling narratives, synthetizing knowledge and processing data efficiently. Journalists must be proficient in storytelling and articulating ideas and presenting information cogently and succinctly [Interviewees NL05, IR02, IR04, IR05, IR06 and IR07, PL03, PL05, PL06, UK07, UK09]. Relevant excerpts include:

I think you have to be able to tell a story well and in whatever form you do it. Whether writing or TV or radio, in itself an open door [interviewee NL05]

Good writing skills, synthetizing of thoughts [interviewee PL06]

Verifying and fast processing of data [interviewee PL05]

Efficiency surfaced as another desirable characteristic, encapsulating the ability to work in a fast-paced environment, with limited resources and under significant time pressure [Interviewees IR04 and IR07, UK01, UK02, UK07, UK08, UK09, PL05, PL07, PL11].

Curiosity, encapsulating the ability to listen, observe and understand the broader picture, was underscored as a integral attribute [Interviewees NL03, PL06, PL12, UK02, UK05, UK06, UK10, UK12 and UK14]. This intrinsic thirst for knowledge [Interviewees IR01, IR02, IR04, IR06 and IR07] was perceived as essential, and is linked to readiness to learn continually:

Curiosity. That is the most important thing, if you are not interested in people, their motives, then you will not get anywhere as a journalist. You really have to want to know what's going on. Being able to write well, or film, podcast, video, whatever, those are tricks. But it starts with curiosity. [interviewee NL03]

Inquisitiveness, curiosity about the world [interviewee PL06]

A deep knowledge of their topic of interest can be advantageous for journalists as it facilitates access to network of sources and contacts [Interviewees PL03, PL06, PL12, UK05, UK06, UK10, and UK12]. Some respondents [like PL03] argue that subject knowledge is more important than journalism education:

One important thing is (…) that journalists should graduate in various studies, but not journalism (…). We can teach a young person this profession very fast and it does not require 5 years of studying [interviewee PL03]

Journalistic competence also extends to maintain a broad perspective by staying informed, up-to-date and interested in the wider context [Interviewees IR01, IR07, PL07 and PL15], including relevant legal considerations [Interviewees IR04, IR05, IR07 and PL07].

Maintaining integrity and accuracy, and possessing a moral compass [Interviewees UK09 and UK11] were also identified as non-negotiable attributes. A journalist's professional responsibility includes honesty, precision and the avoidance of bias [Interviewees IR01 and IR07].

In the contemporary digital era, an understanding of digital media technology is increasingly important. Journalists should be adept at navigating the internet and social media [Interviewees PL07, PL13, UK01, UK10 and UK13], including sifting through online content for newsworthy material [Interviewees UK05 and UK10]:

You don't necessarily have to be a data analyst. I am not myself at all. But at least some knowledge of how to find things online in pieces [Interviewee NL08]

In conclusion, the interviewees agree on a comprehensive set of qualities needed for journalist to contribute to urban discourse. These qualities combine personal attributes with professional competencies that enable journalists to adopt a critical and constructive perspective towards on events.

4.5 Impact of Digital Media on the Urban Discourse

A key research question concerned the impact of digital media on urban discourse. Digital media emerged as a central and cross-cutting theme in the interviews, despite not being explicitly addressed in the interview questionnaire. The digital transformation of media and the public sphere has expanded communication channels and their reach. The growing importance of the internet and social media has also brought challenges related to increasing competition and lower information reliability:

The internet has speeded up some processes and thus the reliability dropped [interviewee PL06]

Moreover, the rise of online media and the proliferation of fake news have provoked confusion and negatively impacted discourse and trust in journalists [Interviewees UK02, UK03, UK04, UK07, UK08 and UK10].

While the rise of the internet and social media has transformed journalism and manner in which citizens consume media and information, there is a lack of consensus in the interviewees' views. Some do not think that the role of journalism has changed significantly over time even if communication channels have changed dramatically [Interviewees IR01, IR04, IR06, UK12]. Others stressed significant shifts linked to the development of online media and commercial pressures that have reduced the capacity for in-depth coverage of topics [Interviewees IR02, IR03, IR05, IR07, UK14].

Digitalization has also fostered the development of online citizen participation tools, increasing the opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes at different levels:

They [citizens] have a more meaningful role (…) now than they ever had, because they have a platform to call people out, whether it's politicians or journalists, and there are better ways of being represented. There are better ways of counting things, there are better ways of polling people that are all coming via the Internet and social media [Interviewee UK10]

Nevertheless, most of the interviewed journalists are critical of media digitalization effects. According to interviewee UK09 the transition from print to digital media incentivizes sensationalism over content quality, impacting citizens' engagement and trust in government negatively. This trend is compounded by the use of algorithmic news selection techniques:

(…) that is not necessarily the selection of an editor who has thought about it extensively (…). But there are random or algorithmic things that determine the news menu. [interviewee NL02]

A deterioration in the standards of journalism has been witnessed over time due to commercial pressures aimed at maximising audience share [Interviewee IR01, IR02, IR05 and IR07]. Even though the journalists themselves are critical of the "popularity contests" instigated by the internet and related audience metrics [Interviewee UK14], they feel obliged to follow the current trends. Most of the respondents claimed to be actively looking for ways to extend their audience through online publications and social media.

In this context, the need to generate advertising revenue has contributed to the de-professionalisation of journalism [Interviewees UK03, UK04, UK07, UK10 and UK11]. This tend has led to less emphasis on evidence and data, fostering the dissemination of lower-quality news and disinformation [Interviewees UK02, UK03, UK04, UK07, UK08 and UK10]. The rise of fake news incites confusion and disengagement among citizens.

Contradictory views emerged regarding the role of journalism in online discourse. Some interviewees maintain that digital media now strive provide comprehensive information and 'deep dives' into topics by introducing 'reportages' and long-form interviews supported by stronger visuals [interviewee PL01], while others contend that journalistic content is becoming more simplified and condensed:

Unfortunately our audience wants to look through pictures, watch a short video material or read a small piece of information. (…) When I was beginning my work in this profession many years ago, we tried to (…) describe various topics in a thorough way (…). Now it is first of all a short information [interviewee PL03]

The professional integrity of journalism is further undermined by non-professionals entering the media realm. The rise of social media has led to activists often being mistaken for journalists, which can propagate misinformation and decrease trust in institutions [Interviewees UK03, UK04 and UK05].

The issue of superficial (shallow) news was repeatedly raised by the respondents. Reporting with limited analysis provides a narrow and one-sided view [Interviewees UK09, UK11 and UK13]. There is a notable trend towards presenting brief information, limiting the opportunity for in-depth reporting:

Today I have an impression that unfortunately people read less, and first of all they want to read and listen shortly – an information should last 2-3 minutes no matter if it is to be read or viewed, so this automatically shallows the information [interviewee PL03]

The phenomenon of digital exclusion was also noted by the interviewees. For example, in Ireland, older audiences and those from rural areas continue to prefer printed newspapers [Interviewees IR01 and IR02].

In the ever-changing news environment, journalists are continuously adapting their approach to engage their audience. Some aim to deliver more detailed and thorough information, while others simplify and condense their messages. However, the core principles of journalism endure: providing reliable information, showing various perspectives, and organising and prioritizing information.

5. DISCUSSION

The main contribution of this article lies in the evaluation of urban discourse in the media from the perspective of 'insiders': journalists that shape urban discourse through mediated deliberation. Previous research in this area (e.g. Short 2000, Karsten 2009) has primarily focused on structuring public discourse and its components using varied criteria, but these studies invariably take an external researcher's perspective. While this approach provides valuable cognitive insights, it lacks the personal experience of the discourse participants. This study, on the other hand, offers unique insights into the approaches and opinions of one of the primary actors in urban discourse: professional journalists. As crucial contributors to the creation of urban discourse, they possess the agency and knowledge about what constitutes 'good' journalism. Hence, we shed light on how urban discourse is crafted, emphasising the journalists' viewpoint. This addresses gaps in knowledge and research on the role of journalism in mediated deliberation in the public sphere (Pomatto 2019)

In this study, informed by the concept of the 'collective city discourse' proposed by Short (2000), a framework for analysing journalists' insights on urban discourse has been adopted. The original

concept posited that the city is (1) a site of collective provision and consumption, (2) a way space for building civic society, (3) a shared arena of joint projects and neighbourhood effects. Reflecting on the literature (in particular Hastings 1999 and Pomatto, 2019), we have delineated ten salient dimensions of collective urban discourse, complemented them with digitalization and mediation effects, and juxtaposed them with a synthesis of the data collected through empirical research in Table 2.

Table 2. Key dimensions of urban discourse addressed by the interviewed journalists. Source: author's own research.

Dimensions of urban discourse	Findings from the interviews with journalists
Responsibility for the quality of information	Rigorous fact-checking and objective informing is the primary role for journalists. Upholding professional integrity requires them to be honest, accurate and impartial.
Constituting role of language in policy discussions	Journalists should have exemplary writing abilities, including skillful synthesis of information and adept storytelling.
Facilitating understanding of reality	A primary task of journalists is to explain reality in a manner that is understandable for their audience. They ask challenging questions and expose issues that are inaccessible to the public. Journalists should have the capacity to present complex issues succinctly and clearly.
Shaping ideas for the city's future	While journalists typically exercise caution to avoid endorsing specific policy instruments or agendas, they should maintain a broad perspective, staying informed and engaged with the wider context (including relevant legal implications of their work).
Promoting collectiveness, inclusiveness and diversity	Journalism strives to represent a variety of viewpoints, underlining its commitment to pluralism. Journalists should exercise impartiality abstaining from taking sides especially in contentious situations. Journalists They should possess interpersonal virtues such as empathy, attentiveness, readiness to listen to people, observational skills, sensitivity, tolerance, understanding and patience.
Cultivating civic society	While journalism is distinct from activism, it can contribute to fostering civic attitudes by providing information about the current participation opportunities offered by local authorities. Furthermore, it can serve a crucial oversight function in relation to politicians.
Positive digitalization effects (facilitated interaction, open dialogue)	Digitalization increases the opportunities for public deliberation and participation in public decision-making processes.
Negative digitalization effects (polarization, misinformation)	The rapid surge in the volume of information often leads to a decrease in its reliability. Journalists and news outlets may prioritise eye-catching headlines over the substance of the story. This may indirectly fuel polarization and misinformation.
Public relations in public administration	A decline in the quality of information disseminated by the media can negatively impact citizens' engagement and trust in government institutions.
Mediation between actors (mediated deliberation)	The role of journalism can extend to mediating between actors. This involves journalists assuming an advocacy role asking questions on behalf of the public or holding elected authorities to account.

This synthesis of the research results underscores that journalism holds great potential to inform urban discourse. Journalists see themselves as playing an important role in the creation of urban discourse, informing and explaining to the public the key events and issues occurring in the world. They act as fact-checkers and expose issues that are inaccessible to the general public. Journalists sometimes act as advocates for the public, asking challenging questions and holding power to account. They strive to maintain neutrality and support different voices, focusing on informing rather than promoting. The societal role of journalism includes promoting democracy, though there is debate over the extent to which they should promote specific policies or agendas. Journalists play an indirect role in encouraging citizen engagement and act as a bridge between society and politics.

Despite the transformation of journalism by the internet and social media, there is a lack of consensus regarding the extent of these changes. Some argue that journalism's fundamental role remains unchanged, while others emphasize the significant impact of online media and commercial pressures on the quality and depth of coverage. Furthermore, it is widely recognsied that the rise of fake news and the presence of non-professional actors in the media realm have eroded trust in both journalism and institutions.

While this study has provided valuable insights on urban discourse from the viewpoint of journalists, its scope was somewhat limited. Future studies should broaden this focus to integrate and triangulate the views of a wider array of actors, such as citizens, public authorities, businesses, NGOs. Additionally, it is crucial to further investigate the possible solutions and contingency plans to address the identified decline in the quality of urban discourse.

6. CONCLUSION

The quality of urban discourse is shaped by the breadth and depth of information provided by the media. This study explored the role of the media in shaping urban discourse, fostering political accountability and navigating the impact of digitalization, using insights from interviews with 51 journalists in four European countries (Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom).

In terms of the role of journalism in cultivating urban discourse, the interviewees collectively identified the provision of information and interpretation of the world as their main duty. They also emphasised the importance of advocacy through challenging questions and scrutiny of politicians. However, they concurred that journalists should refrain from activism, and maintain neutrality or impartiality by presenting various viewpoints and allows reader to form their own assessments.

What is the role of journalists in fostering political accountability? The interviewed journalists expressed a strong sense of mission in creating public discourse. They felt accountable for the quality of information provided, guided by ethical and professional standards, and recognised their role in holding power to account and promoting civic societal values. In building the news agenda, they weighed the newsworthiness of information, its timeliness, local relevance and advisory role. These responsibilities demand unique knowledge and skills, including empathy, attentiveness, sensitivity, tolerance, accuracy, integrity, and honesty.

However, they face several obstacles in fulfilling their professional mission including new challenges arising from development of information and communication technologies that could potentially jeopardise the quality of urban discourse.

First, digital media's impact can be seen in the reduced reliability of information due to the accelerated pace of media production. Second, digital media tend to prioritise headlines over in-depth, investigative contents in order to maximize audience share, linked to commercial pressures related to advertising revenue. Moreover, reporting with limited analysis provides a narrow and one-sided view to readers. The respondents also agreed on the need for greater efforts to tackle fake news and provide citizens with concise, curated overviews of trustworthy content. Finally, the transformed media landscape has fostered greater competition among media outlets, enabling politicians to favour

more sympathetic or ideologically aligned outlets or journalists, or even bypass journalists altogether by communicating directly with audiences through social media.

The overall view of journalists about the impact of digital media is pessimistic. The interviewees believe that digital media is compromising the quality of information, undermining journalists' authority and reliability, and gradually eroding the quality of urban discourse. However, an alternative interpretation might consider the decline in journalistic standards as a natural evolution in the progression of public discourse. In a future positive economic climate, political polarisation may diminish paving the way for higher-quality public communication. This scenario is plausible if journalists' call-to-arms for deeper reporting and more stringent political oversight is heeded.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questionnaire

General Info of the Participant

Medium (name):
Type of medium (online/traditional):
Geographic coverage of the medium (local/hyperlocal/national):
Beat of the journalist (area of expertise/coverage):
Has the journalist covered a PB in the past?

Perceptions Over Democratic Malaise

1. In your opinion, what are the reasons for the low levels of trust toward public institutions and low levels of civic participation ("democratic malaise")? Is this a recent or long-lasting phenomenon? Has there been a change recently with regards to this phenomenon?

   Is journalism contributing somehow to the alienation and disengagement of citizens?
   If yes, how? Why?
   If no, how is journalism positioning itself towards democratic malaise?

2. Have you ever heard the term "democratic innovations" (e.g. town hall meetings, deliberative polls, participatory budgeting, e-petitioning, crowdsourcing, and issue forums)? What do you think about them and do you think they can help ameliorate the aforementioned phenomenon (democratic malaise)?

   Have you heard about Participatory Budgeting (PB) before?
   If yes: what do you think of it?
   If no: what do you imagine Participatory Budgeting to be?

Perceptions About Citizens' Participation and PB

3. Do citizens (currently) have a role in the way decisions are made about their lives (participatory democracy)? In your opinion, to what degree should they be involved in decision-making and for what kind of decisions?

   Generally speaking, do you believe that citizens are interested in participating and being engaged in deliberation processes, in decision making?
   In your opinion, are citizens capable of being constructively engaged and making decisions?

4. Going back to the PB in particular.

   In your opinion, how should a PB be organized?

- Who should make the decision for the budget priorities? Elected officials, experts, citizens, mixed committees including representatives of these groups? Others?
- How should these budget priorities be defined? Through an open process of deliberation, or should the local authorities provide a predetermined list where citizens can choose from?

- After a list of things to be funded is finalized, should a deliberation process take place before voting or should citizens simply vote for their preference?
- Should PB processes refer to substantial amounts of the municipality's budget or small ones?
- Ideally, what role could journalists have during a PB process? What would it take to accomplish that?
- Do you think that citizens in your country would embrace a PB process? Why?
- In your opinion, what are the main problems that may arise through a PB process?
- Overall, in your opinion, what is the purpose of adopting such a policy? What kind of problems/ issues would it solve?

Coverage of PB

5. What kind of a "media story" can be written when it comes to "participatory democracy"? How newsworthy are such stories?

   Follow up: if not deemed especially newsworthy, why is that?
   How would coverage of such issues become more appealing?

6. If a journalist decided to provide full coverage of a PB process, what are the key challenges he/ she would encounter?
7. Let's suppose you were assigned to cover a PB process. How would you cover it? What would the starting point of your reportage be? What would you like your reader/user to get from your story?
8. Do journalists today tend to stick to a superficial level of description of events that take place without offering additional interpretation/going beyond the "facts"? Is this a problem?

   If yes, what can be done about it?
   If no, why isn't it a problem?
   According to your professional judgment, should the coverage of PB be strictly informative or should relevant coverage attempt a more interpretative approach?
   If yes, in what direction(s)?
   If not, why?

News Judgement/ Audience Perceptions

9. When you decide on topics to cover, what are the main criteria which drive your choices?
10. When you determine the perspective, the angle of coverage, which factors shape your approach?
11. How 'free' and autonomous do you feel when deciding stories and writing about them? Are there any types of constraints which tend to shape your news judgement and eventually the content you create?
12. How do you think of the audience? Who are those people you are writing for? What are their needs and characteristics?

Role of Journalism

13. Do you think that journalists should promote forms of participatory democracy (through democratic innovations/ tools)? More generally speaking, should journalists mobilise citizens to be more actively engaged in political affairs?

Is this a feasible and desired role for journalism?

If yes, what would it take for journalists to act in this direction (to truly engage and mobilise citizens)?

14. What is the role of journalism today? What does journalism do?
15. Is this role adequate? In your opinion, what should journalism do?
16. Have your perceptions of the role of journalism changed since you entered the job market? If yes, in what direction?

Accountability

17. In your opinion, in your country, is the level of pollical accountability satisfactory, particularly for lower levels of government?

    Do journalists have some responsibility for the lack of accountability?

18. How could accountability on a local/regional and national level be improved? What would it involve?

    What are the factors -both eternal and external- which hinder journalists from holding local and national authorities truly accountable?

Skills/Knowledge

19. In your opinion, what are the main skills a journalist should possess nowadays?

    Are there any specific skills and knowledge needed for journalists to cover democratic innovations, like PB in an effective manner?