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DOCTORAL THESIS

**The Platformization of Journalism: Challenges to
the Integrity of the European and Romanian
Information Ecosystems**

Abstract

Doctoral Supervisor:

Professor Alina BÂRGĂOANU

PhDDoctorand:

Oana-Andreea ŞLEMCO

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The doctoral thesis entitled “The Platformization of Journalism: Challenges to the Integrity of the European and Romanian Information Ecosystems” was motivated by the ongoing transformation of the information and communication ecosystem under the influence of online social networks, as well as by the vulnerabilities that may arise from this process. Furthermore, the research is grounded in concerns expressed by a broad academic community regarding the pressures exerted on the integrity of the media landscape in a context characterized by the dominance of digital platforms governed by opaque algorithms.

Within this ecosystem, journalism is regarded as an important component of the critical information infrastructure of democratic societies (Benson & Pickard, 2024; Stiglitz, 2021). Consequently, the transformations affecting journalism may have implications for the quality of public debate, citizens’ ability to make informed decisions, and democratic resilience.

Against this backdrop, the research aims to examine the relationship between the platformization of media systems, journalistic practices, and resilience to disinformation through an approach that combines a comparative European perspective with an in-depth analysis of the Romanian case.

To this end, the following research objectives were established:

- O.1.** To conduct a comparative analysis of the degree of platformization of media systems across 24 European countries.
- O.2.** To examine the relationship between the degree of platformization of media systems and societal resilience to disinformation.
- O.3.** To examine Romanian journalists’ attitudes towards the integration of online social networks into their professional routines.
- O.4.** To analyze how platformization influences the professional practices of Romanian journalists, with particular emphasis on the use of social networks and the selection and verification of sources.
- O.5.** To examine the role of journalists in combating disinformation in the context of platformization.

In line with these objectives, research questions were formulated to address the following aspects: (1) the identification of patterns of platformization across European media systems, based on technological, behavioral, and economic indicators; (2) the relationship between different forms of dependence on digital platforms and levels of information resilience across European countries; (3) Romanian journalists’ perceptions of the use of online social networks for newsgathering and research purposes, as well as their role in the selection and use

of digital platforms in professional contexts; (4) journalists' perceptions of the risks associated with the use of online social networks and the role of editorial policies in managing these risks; (5) the reasoning and criteria underlying Romanian journalists' decisions regarding the selection and use of sources in the context of platformization; (6) journalists' perceptions of the effects of disinformation; and (7) journalists' assessments of measures to combat disinformation and the obstacles encountered in their implementation.

To address the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, corresponding to the two levels of analysis. At the macro level, the research draws on a comparative analysis of media systems across 24 European countries, based on secondary data aggregated at the national level. Statistical correlation analysis and principal component analysis (PCA) were employed to identify patterns of platformization and examine the relationship between platformization and resilience to disinformation.

At the micro level, the research focuses on the professional practices of Romanian journalists and adopts a qualitative approach based on 24 semi-structured interviews with journalists working in online, offline, and hybrid media organizations. The interview data were examined through inductive thematic analysis to identify perceptions, practices, and professional reasoning associated with the use of digital platforms, the selection and verification of sources, and efforts to combat disinformation.

In this thesis, the terms „online social platform”, „online social network” and „digital platform” are used interchangeably to refer, in a broad sense, to the digital infrastructures that mediate the production, distribution, and monetization of information content. These include platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok.

The thesis is structured into six chapters, four of which are devoted to the theoretical framework and two to the empirical research.

In Chapter I of the thesis, entitled „The Metamorphosis of Journalism in the Digital Age”, I examined the main transformations of journalism resulting from technological and economic changes in the media industry. The chapter explores the changes brought about by the development of digital technologies, as well as by processes such as deregulation, concentration, liberalization, and globalization, which have influenced how information is produced, distributed, and consumed (Castells, 2013). In this context, platformization is also examined from an economic perspective, with particular emphasis on the relationship between media organizations and major digital platforms. The analysis shows that the economic transformations initiated by deregulation affected not only advertising departments but also the editorial operations of newsrooms, where they contributed to a decline in news quality. During

this period, sensationalism became increasingly prevalent in response to growing competition for audience attention (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). At the same time, the tendency to treat news as a commodity emerged and intensified. Digital platforms have further amplified all these trends.

Transformations in the media industry raise questions about the identity and role of journalism in the contemporary information ecosystem. On the one hand, access to digital technologies enables almost anyone to produce and distribute information to the public, which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish journalism from other forms of communication. On the other hand, platformization has reshaped editorial practices and newsroom business models. Under competitive pressure, news organizations increasingly prioritize content popularity, sometimes at the expense of information quality and accuracy.

In this context, it is necessary to clarify the practices and principles that define journalism and provide it with social legitimacy. Although journalistic activity adapts to technological and economic changes, its professional identity remains rooted in adherence to specific norms and values (Şuţu, 2015; Zelizer, 2004). Based on these considerations, Chapter I proposes the following definition of journalism:

Set of fluid and adaptable routines associated with the practices of selecting and verifying information, producing and distributing news of public relevance, in accordance with professional norms and values. These activities are carried out by professional journalists with the aim of providing the public with accurate and balanced information.

I further argued that the most recent waves of technological development tend to marginalize journalism through two distinct mechanisms. First, the emergence of new actors in the information ecosystem intensifies competition for audience attention, with these actors gaining greater influence than journalistic institutions among certain audience segments (Newman et al., 2023, 2024). Second, digital platforms not only capture a substantial share of advertising revenue but also, through advanced targeting technologies, call into question the effectiveness of traditional advertising models associated with television, radio, and print media (Attali, 2022). All these transformations, which alter the position of journalism within the information ecosystem and reshape the economics of the media industry, require adaptations to the business models and working routines that underpin journalistic practices.

In Chapter II, entitled „The Platformization of News in the Hybrid Communication Ecosystem,” I argued that platformization represents a form of adaptation of journalism to

emerging challenges, albeit a problematic one (Şlemco & Bârgăoanu, 2025), particularly in terms of the power asymmetry between media organizations and digital platforms, the media's dependence on platform algorithms, and, above all, the risk of amplifying disinformation.

Platformization refers to the process through which the infrastructures, economic logic, and regulatory frameworks of digital platforms penetrate media industries, bringing about structural transformations in how content is created, distributed, and monetized (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). I examined the differences between media logic and digital platform logic, drawing on the theoretical contributions of Altheide and Snow (1979), followed by those of Van Dijck and Poell (2013) and Klinger and Svensson (2015).

Within this framework, I continued the analysis of platformization, shifting the focus to how digital platforms influence journalists' work from an editorial perspective. Platforms do not merely host content; they also filter, organize, and prioritize information through algorithms and moderation mechanisms that determine what becomes visible and what remains marginal in the online environment (Gillespie, 2010). They mediate interactions between content producers, audiences, and advertisers, influencing both user behavior and institutional practices. In this way, platforms establish the rules of participation and redefine relevance according to their own commercial interests (Gillespie, 2017; Hagar & Diakopoulos, 2025). These advantages highlight the asymmetrical relationship between media organizations and digital platforms.

In platformized media systems, all actors in the media market, from news organizations to content creators and distributors, become dependent on the infrastructures and internal rules of digital platforms. In this context, platform dependence emerges as a direct consequence of platformization. In this thesis, dependence refers to situations in which subordinate actors rely on resources controlled by dominant entities to achieve their objectives (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). According to the literature, dependence manifests itself across multiple dimensions, ranging from technology and economics to information consumption (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal).

Based on this perspective, I proposed examining platformization as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three dimensions: technological, as newsrooms rely on the infrastructures and data provided by platforms; economic, as advertising revenues shift towards platforms while the general public increasingly prefers free access to information; and behavioral, as news consumption patterns change, with some audiences shifting away from channels controlled by media organizations towards digital platforms (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

This approach provides the basis for the subsequent measurement of platformization in the quantitative research presented in Chapter V of the thesis.

The chapter then examines how platformization transforms some of the working routines that underpin key journalistic practices, particularly the selection and verification of sources and the production and distribution of news. The concept of a source has expanded in the digital environment, as a source may now also take the form of an account on an online platform (Johnson, 2019; Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020; Reich & Barnoy, 2016; Van Leuven et al., 2018). At the same time, virality has become increasingly important, as visibility, clicks, and engagement metrics can influence editorial decisions. Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill examined contemporary journalistic content shaped by search engines and digital platforms and identified 15 criteria used by journalists to determine the newsworthiness of information (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). The criterion most relevant to this thesis is "shareability," which refers to the potential for content to be shared across digital environments in order to increase its visibility.

Thus, media organizations are increasingly dependent on platforms for news distribution and audience reach, a relationship that may reduce newsrooms' control over the visibility and circulation of their own content (Bruns, 2021b). At the same time, adaptation to platform logic and the pressure to achieve visibility, generate clicks, and produce viral content may conflict with journalistic practices such as fact-checking and selecting news based on its public relevance.

These issues become more apparent in the context of disinformation. Digital platforms do not directly produce disinformation, but their operational mechanisms and structural characteristics can facilitate the circulation and amplification of false or misleading content. Research has shown that false information spreads considerably faster than accurate information on online social networks (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Another study indicates that content which elicits strong emotional reactions is considerably more likely to be widely shared (Chuai & Zhao, 2022).

In the context of intense competition in the media market and the pursuit of clicks, these phenomena may encourage newsrooms and journalists to amplify disinformation in an effort to retain audience attention (Amini et al., 2025). Furthermore, the use of online social networks as sources for newsgathering and research may increase the risk of journalists incorporating and disseminating disinformation in their reporting. These vulnerabilities therefore warrant an examination of the relationship between platformization, journalism, and disinformation.

In Chapter III, entitled „Digital Disinformation and the Role of the Press in Amplifying or Counteracting the Phenomenon” I examined, based on the relevant literature, the characteristics of computational disinformation and how emerging technologies can facilitate the amplification of false or misleading content. I established the conceptual boundaries of computational disinformation, explained why I do not use the popular but imprecise term “fake news” in this thesis, and presented the pillars of disinformation (attention hijacking, narrative construction, and psychological and technological factors), the mechanisms of synthetic amplification in the online environment, the effects of disinformation, and strategies to combat it.

Perhaps more importantly, I argued that disinformation cannot be explained solely through the actions of those who produce false or misleading information, but must also be examined in relation to the structural characteristics of digital platforms, media organizations’ dependence on these platforms, and the transformations that platformization brings about in journalistic practices.

I emphasized that the migration of disinformation from online social networks into mainstream news media does not always occur accidentally but may result from deliberate strategies. First, the transfer of disinformation may represent a response to the financial pressures created by digital platforms in the competition to capture and retain audience attention (Amini et al., 2025).

From a technological perspective, digital platforms are strongly commercially oriented, lack human gatekeepers, allow information from anonymous accounts to be published and amplified through bots and trolls, exacerbate the problem of information overload (Hartog, 2017), and exploit human cognitive biases (confirmation bias, the anchoring effect, and the underdog effect) (The Decision Lab, n.d.).

These characteristics may negatively affect the activities of media organizations integrated into the digital ecosystem if newsrooms adapt their content to platform algorithms at the expense of professional standards. Concerns about these issues are well founded, both in the context of newsrooms’ dependence on digital platforms and in light of the interconnected nature of online environments, which facilitates the circulation of news across different channels.

At the same time, the large volume of information and the pressure to publish rapidly may reduce the time available for source verification and editorial review (Minotakis & Avramidis, 2022). Furthermore, the pursuit of visibility and personal brand development may encourage deviations from professional norms (Brems et al., 2017).

Platformization also transforms the relationship between journalists and their audiences, with the latter gaining increasing influence over editorial decisions (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; E. Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017). In addition, political manipulation campaigns and online harassment may exert pressure on journalists and contribute to self-censorship (Howard, 2020; Waisbord, 2020).

Journalists themselves may also become targets of strategic disinformation. Claire Wardle examined the amplification stage in the disinformation chain and observed that disinformation typically originates on lesser-known websites or platforms, circulates through closed groups on WhatsApp, Facebook, or Reddit, and subsequently migrates to open groups on online social networks before reaching mainstream media (Wardle, 2018). She referred to this pathway, which identifies mainstream news media as the actors with the greatest potential to amplify disinformation, as the „trumpet of amplification” (Wardle, 2018). Wardle explained that once disinformation reaches mainstream media, the disinformation actors have achieved their dissemination objective, even when professional journalists merely attempt to correct false or misleading content and establish the facts (Wardle, 2018). A report by the Demos research centre similarly indicates that the primary objective of disinformation actors is to introduce or push messages intended to influence or manipulate public opinion into mainstream media (Krasodonski-Jones et al., 2019).

The chapter also examines the measures adopted by the European Union and news organizations to counter disinformation and reviews the scientific evidence documented in the literature regarding their effectiveness. I presented the factors that may strengthen resilience to disinformation and discussed strategies such as proactive responses, debunking, fact-checking, media, information, and digital literacy, content labeling, Community Notes-style systems, and interventions based on social norms (Sharevski et al., 2022; B. Zhang, 2024; Drolsbach et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2023).

The chapter concludes that computational disinformation is a complex phenomenon that extends beyond individual information consumption and affects democratic processes, trust in institutions, and the credibility of journalism. Addressing this phenomenon requires a collective effort involving citizens, public institutions, and journalists. However, financial pressures may lead newsrooms to prioritize popularity or speed over accuracy, or prevent them from updating their information verification techniques. As a result, journalists may become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

In Chapter IV, entitled „Romanian Journalism Between Platformization and Disinformation”, I examined the platformization of Romanian journalism in relation to the

types of dependence identified in the academic literature and their potential effects on the functioning of the information ecosystem. More specifically, the chapter addresses questions such as: “Where do Romanians get their news?”, “How are advertising budgets distributed between traditional and digital media?”, “How much traffic do news organizations receive through digital platforms?”, “How vulnerable are Romanians to disinformation?”, and “What is the level of public trust in the media?”

To address these questions, I examined academic studies on journalism in the pre-digital era to identify the problems that existed before the emergence of the internet and to distinguish between the profession’s historical vulnerabilities and those associated with digital transformations. I also reviewed specialized studies and reports on changes in news consumption habits, the distribution of advertising revenues between online and offline media, public trust in the media, and resilience to disinformation. Furthermore, I requested data from the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau (BRAT) to assess news websites’ dependence on digital platforms in terms of online traffic.

The findings indicate that Romanian news organizations’ dependence on digital platforms manifests itself across three dimensions. The first concerns audience behavior, as news consumers have changed their habits and increasingly access journalistic content through digital platforms rather than directly through channels controlled by media organizations, such as news websites and applications. This trend is reflected in the Reuters Institute reports published between 2020 and 2025. The second dimension is financial, as major technology companies capture a substantial share of advertising budgets allocated to digital media. This observation is supported by the Media Factbook reports covering the 2020–2025 period. This dependence is further illustrated by the extremely low level of direct audience contributions, with only 11% of online news users paying for access to journalistic content, according to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism’s 2025 report. The third dimension of dependence is technological and concerns the relationship between media organizations and digital platforms. A substantial proportion of traffic to news websites originates from search engines and online social networks. This dependence is demonstrated by data from the Internet Audience and Traffic Study (SATI), conducted by BRAT during the first six months of 2025. Specifically, platform-referred traffic accounts for 62.6% of traffic to general news websites, 52.8% for news and analysis websites, and 71% for local news websites.

The findings thus indicate that the algorithms exerting the greatest influence on the Romanian media market are those of the Google search engine, followed by those of online social platforms, with Facebook having the largest user base in Romania. Overall, the analysis

reveals the structurally fragile position of Romania's information ecosystem, characterized by relatively high levels of digital news consumption, low levels of trust in the media, and one of the weakest capacities for resilience to disinformation in Europe. Although platform dependence contributes substantially to this fragility, as it may facilitate the spread of disinformation among the public, the phenomenon cannot be attributed exclusively to online social networks or search engines.

It is true that external digital infrastructures reduce editorial autonomy and control content distribution, thereby contributing to information disorder. However, the problem is considerably more complex. The academic literature suggests that even in the absence of online social networks, the ability of the press to combat disinformation would remain questionable, particularly given that trust in the Romanian media has been in continuous decline since the 1990s. This decline has been associated with factors such as the excessive politicization of the press, the movement of journalists into politics, the erosion of professional standards in newsrooms, and an editorial shift towards commercially oriented content at the expense of public-service journalism. Based on a survey conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Romanian Academy, Matei Gheboianu points out that public trust in the press had fallen to 42.24% by 1992 (Gheboianu, 2014) and continued to decline in subsequent years, as evidenced by the Reuters Institute reports published between 2020 and 2025.

In essence, the chapter demonstrates that Romania also exhibits conditions conducive to the platformization of news, within a context characterized by declining public resilience to disinformation and diminishing trust in the media. These findings highlight the need to examine platformization specifically within the Romanian context.

However, the empirical research presented in the thesis begins from a broader, macro-level perspective, which is addressed in **Chapter V**, devoted to statistical analysis. This chapter provides a comparative examination of the platformization of European media systems, based on a sample of 24 Western and Eastern European countries. The analysis is grounded in the assumption that the platformization of media systems is a multidimensional process that cannot be captured by a single indicator but requires the simultaneous examination of the technological, behavioral, and economic dimensions of the relationship between media organizations and digital platforms.

To assess and compare the degree of platformization across countries, the study adapted the analytical framework proposed by Nielsen and Fletcher (2023), which examines cross-national variations in the platformization of media systems. The original model included four main variables: (1) general use of online social networks, (2) use of online social networks for

news consumption, (3) direct access to news sources, and (4) the historical strength of print media markets, measured by newspaper circulation figures from 2002. In this study, I extended the original model through a multidimensional operationalization of the concept of platformization, based on nine indicators. The historical component concerning the strength of print media markets, used in the study by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Richard Fletcher (2023), was replaced with an indicator of the economic resilience of news media organizations, reflecting current market dynamics. This modification is based on the premise that the economic autonomy of news organizations, previously reflected in print circulation figures, is now better captured by their ability to sell digital content directly to audiences.

Thus, although the variables employed by Nielsen and Fletcher (2023) provide an important starting point for measuring platformization, I considered that their model primarily captures the behavioral dimension of the phenomenon, more specifically, how audiences consume information. The present study extends this approach by incorporating the structural conditions that facilitate news consumption through digital platforms, as well as the economic effects that platformization may have on media organizations.

The second line of inquiry in this chapter examines the relationship between the degree of platformization and societal resilience to disinformation. At this stage, the analysis focuses on how different forms of dependence on digital platforms are associated with European societies' capacity to withstand information-related vulnerabilities. The research does not seek to establish causal relationships between platformization and disinformation.

The analysis of platformization across European countries draws on secondary data aggregated at the national level, obtained from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2025). The variables were standardized to ensure comparability across the countries examined. The key concepts were operationalized through the following nine indicators:

1. Internet penetration (IP %) – the proportion of individuals with internet access, reflecting the level of development of digital infrastructure;
2. Online social network use (SM %) – the percentage of respondents who use social media platforms in general;
3. Online social network use for news (SMN %) – the proportion of respondents who access news primarily through social networks;
4. Online news consumption without social media intermediation (Online without SM %) – the proportion of users who access news directly through media organizations' websites or mobile applications, indicating a lower degree of dependence on platform intermediaries;

5. News consumption from any online source (Online %) – the proportion of individuals who use online sources to access news, including news websites and applications, social media and video platforms, news podcasts, and AI-powered chatbots;

6. Payment for online news (Pay %) – the percentage of respondents who financially support online journalism;

7. Print news consumption (Print %) – the proportion of respondents who continue to consume print editions, serving as an indicator of the persistence of traditional media consumption habits;

8. Ratio of online news users to paying users (Rat_Paying) – an indicator of market conversion efficiency, reflecting the extent to which online audiences are converted into revenue;

9. Platform penetration in news consumption (Perc_Penetra %) – the percentage of online social network users who use these platforms to access news (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Comparative indicators of factors that may lead to the platformization of journalism and resilience to disinformation in Europe, according to Newman et al. (2025) and Lessenski (2023)

Country	Internet penetration (%)	Use social media (%)	Use social media for news (%)	Any online (%)	Online (without social media) (%)	Pay for online news (%)	Print (%)	The ratio between online users and paying users	The share of social media platforms penetration in news (%)	Media index literacy
Austria	95	80.1	35	68	33	22	35	3.09	43.70	59
Belgium	95	76.4	37	75	38	16	18	4.69	48.43	61
Bulgaria	80	64.9	57	74	17	9	10	8.22	87.83	31
Croatia	83	69.4	46	77	31	6	21	12.83	66.28	45
Czech Republic	86	74.8	44	80	36	13	14	6.15	58.82	58
Denmark	100	78.3	44	82	38	19	14	4.32	56.19	73
Finland	94	78.1	44	89	45	21	25	4.24	56.34	74
France	87	75.7	37	64	27	11	13	5.82	48.88	57
Germany	94	77.6	33	66	33	13	19	5.08	42.53	61
Greece	85	73.5	64	84	20	7	11	12.00	87.07	38
Hungary	91	72.9	54	79	25	8	7	9.88	74.07	41
Ireland	97	77.8	47	79	32	20	22	3.95	60.41	70
Italy	87	71.2	39	68	29	9	12	7.56	54.78	47
Netherlands	97	80.9	35	75	40	17	24	4.41	43.26	64
Norway	99	77.5	41	87	46	42	17	2.07	52.90	72
Poland	86	75.6	54	77	23	13	10	5.92	71.43	53
Portugal	86	71.9	44	69	25	10	17	6.90	61.20	60
Romania	89	68.6	46	70	24	12	8	5.83	67.06	32
Serbia	85	72.1	67	85	18	7	15	12.14	92.93	33
Slovakia	90	72.4	47	68	21	12	9	5.67	64.92	48
Spain	95	82.9	46	69	23	10	21	6.90	55.49	58
Sweden	96	81.4	45	86	41	31	21	2.77	55.28	71
Switzerland	97	74.9	40	79	39	22	32	3.59	53.40	67
United Kingdom	96	79	39	73	34	10	12	7.30	49.37	60

Societal resilience to disinformation was operationalized through the Media Literacy Index (MIL), developed by the Open Society Institute in Sofia (2023), which aggregates indicators related to the quality of education, press freedom, interpersonal trust, and e-participation. Higher MIL scores indicate greater societal resilience to manipulative or false information (Lessenski, 2023).

The empirical analysis subsequently combines Pearson correlation coefficients with principal component analysis (PCA). Pearson correlations are used to examine the relationships between platformization indicators, information resilience, and the economic sustainability of media systems, while PCA enables the identification of latent data structures and cross-national patterns that differentiate the countries under examination. The visualization of results through biplot diagrams also facilitates the identification of similar national profiles in terms of platform dependence and information resilience.

The degree of platformization is not determined by a single indicator but emerges from the configuration of the three dimensions examined. A profile characterized by intensive use of digital platforms and online social networks for news consumption, combined with limited direct access to media organizations and a restricted capacity to monetize content directly, indicates a higher degree of platformization. Conversely, lower dependence on digital intermediaries, higher levels of direct access to journalistic sources, and a greater capacity to financially sustain journalism indicate a lower degree of platformization.

Regarding the first research question, the findings confirm the conclusions of the previous comparative study, which demonstrated that platformization does not develop uniformly across European media systems (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). These differences are reflected in audience news consumption patterns, the extent to which digital platforms are used to access information, and the economic relationship between audiences and news organizations. For example, Nordic countries combine high levels of internet access with lower dependence on online social platforms for news consumption and stronger relationships between audiences and journalistic organizations. The findings suggest that high levels of internet penetration and digitalization do not automatically lead to greater dependence on digital platforms for news consumption.

Platformization emerges as users change their news consumption practices and increasingly access news primarily through digital platforms rather than through direct relationships with media organizations (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). Thus, platformization is also influenced by other factors, including the characteristics of media systems, audience consumption habits, and the relationships audiences establish with journalistic organizations.

Table 5.2. Pearson correlation matrix

Variables	Internet penetration (%)	Use social media (%)	Use social media for news (%)	Any online (%)	Online (without social media) (%)	Pay for online news (%)	Print (%)	The ratio between online users and paying users	The percentage of platform penetration in news (%)	Media index literacy
Internet penetration (%)	1	0.788	-0.552	0.185	0.724	0.681	0.485	-0.724	-0.679	0.785
Use social media (%)		1	-0.460	0.126	0.579	0.499	0.520	-0.566	-0.657	0.769
Use social media for news (%)			1	0.445	-0.648	-0.366	-0.460	0.664	0.970	-0.624
Any online (%)				1	0.394	0.441	0.091	0.018	0.338	0.230
Online (without social media) (%)					1	0.751	0.550	-0.667	-0.708	0.836
Pay for online news (%)						1	0.450	-0.787	-0.442	0.700
Print (%)							1	-0.440	-0.519	0.570
The ratio between online users and paying users								1	0.711	-0.761
The percentage of platform penetration in news (%)									1	-0.743
Media index literacy										1

Values in bold are different from 0 with a significance level $\alpha=0.05$

The comparative analysis of the economic dimension indicates that higher levels of platformization are associated with weaker direct economic relationships between audiences and media organizations (Table 5.2.). This reflects the economic asymmetries between digital platforms and media organizations described in the academic literature, particularly the control exercised by platforms over distribution, audience access, and the monetization of journalistic content (Mansell et al., 2025). In highly platformized media systems, free access to news predominates, while audiences demonstrate a lower willingness to pay for journalistic content. However, this association does not imply that platformization causes a decline in willingness to pay for news.

In a study examining the relationship between following professional journalists on online social networks and users' intention to pay for online news, Goyanes and Háló (2025) demonstrate that following journalists on social media platforms increases interest in paywalled content and, consequently, the intention to pay for news. The authors show that this effect is more pronounced among users who are frequently exposed to restricted-access journalistic content. Therefore, the economic effects of platformization may also depend on how media organizations and journalists use these channels to establish direct, trust-based relationships with their audiences. Digital platforms may thus function both as factors that intensify media organizations' economic dependence and as tools that support the development of business models based on digital subscriptions (Goyanes & Háló, 2025).

Furthermore, the findings of the present study suggest the existence of a circular relationship between platform dependence, free news consumption, and the economic fragility of journalism. In highly platformized environments, users access news primarily through online social networks, automated recommendations, and aggregated content feeds, rather than by directly visiting news websites (Matthes et al., 2025; McNally & Bastos, 2025). Under these conditions, media organizations become increasingly dependent on the visibility provided by digital platforms, the traffic they generate, and algorithmically controlled content distribution (Hartley et al., 2023; Nieborg & Poell, 2018b).

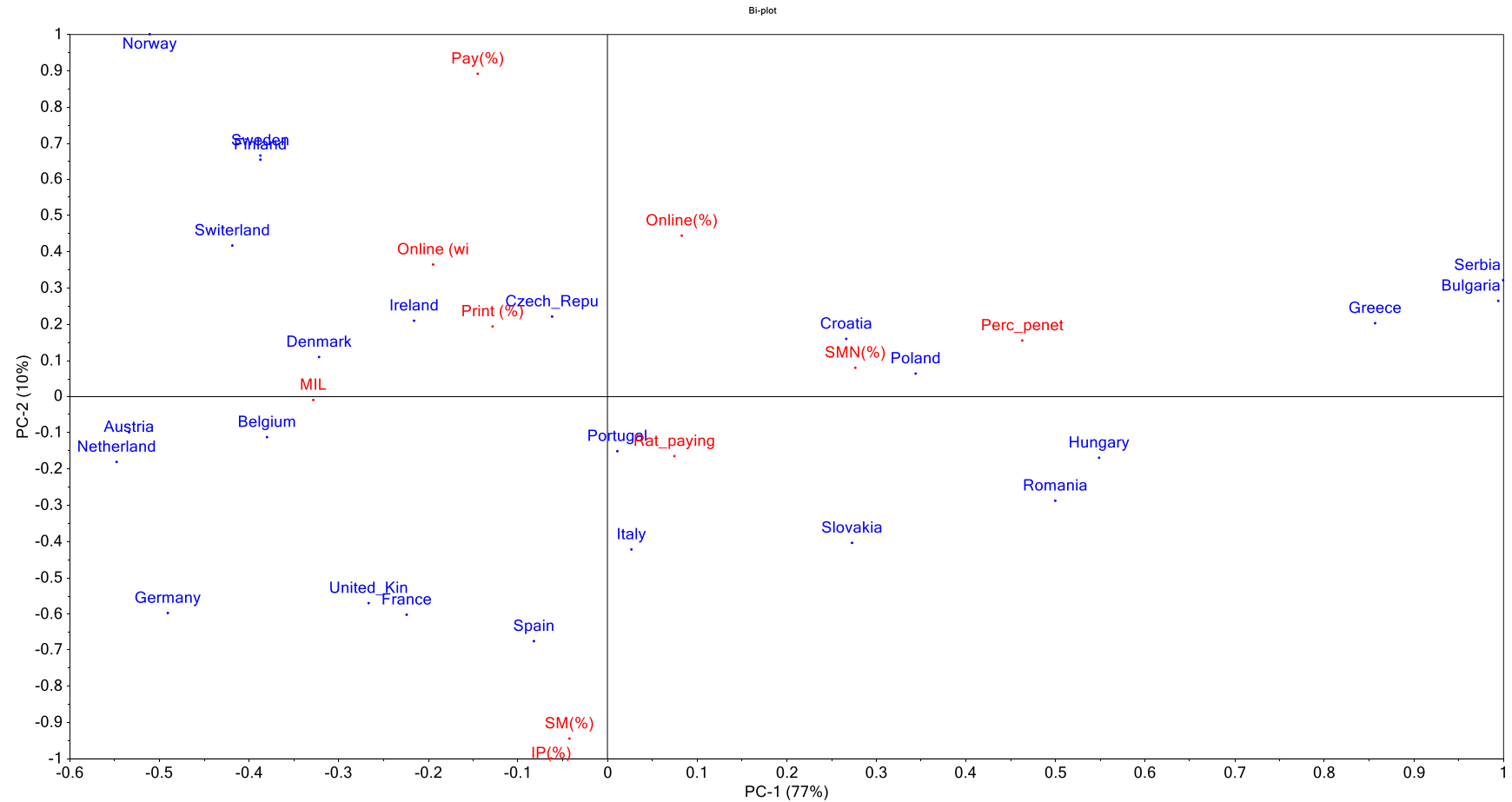


Fig 5.1. Principal component analysis: * scores – scores/countries (blue) and loadings (red): Internet penetration (IP %); use of social media (SM %); use of social media for news (SMN %); online news consumption without social media (Online without SM %); any online (online %); paying for online news (Pay %); print readership (Print %); ratio between online users and paying users (Rat_Paying); platform penetration in news (Perc_Penetra %); Media Literacy Index (MIL) - education quality, press freedom, interpersonal trust, and electronic participation.

The results of the principal component analysis (PCA) also reveal a clear distinction between Eastern and Western Europe. Eastern European countries cluster in an area characterized by high levels of platform dependence and lower levels of information and economic resilience (Figure 5.1). By contrast, Nordic and Western European countries are positioned in an area characterized by lower levels of platformization and stronger resilience indicators.

Although the study does not seek to explain the causes of this divide, the findings are consistent with research highlighting persistent historical, cultural, and institutional differences between European media systems (Hallin et al., 2023). Thus, digital transformation does not appear to lead to the convergence of media systems. Rather, its development is shaped by pre-existing differences between them.

Regarding the second research question, the findings indicate that countries with higher levels of platformization also tend to exhibit lower levels of information resilience. This relationship should be interpreted with caution, as the study does not seek to establish a direct causal link between platformization and vulnerability to disinformation. In this research, resilience to disinformation is measured through the Media Literacy Index (MIL), an indicator that reflects broader conditions of the information environment, including the quality of education, press freedom, interpersonal trust, and civic participation. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted at the level of media systems and information environments, rather than in terms of individuals' ability to identify false information.

Media literacy, the economic sustainability of journalism, the degree of editorial autonomy, and the structure of media markets collectively contribute to a society's capacity to withstand disinformation. From this perspective, vulnerability to disinformation depends not only on citizens' ability to identify false information but also on the existence of an information ecosystem capable of supporting the production and distribution of professional journalism (Mansell et al., 2025).

The analysis suggests that information resilience is associated with stronger relationships between audiences and professional journalism. Countries where people access news directly, without relying heavily on digital platforms, also tend to exhibit higher levels of financial support for journalism and more diversified patterns of news consumption. Under these conditions, media organizations benefit from greater editorial autonomy and are less exposed to the influence of digital platform algorithms (Hastuti et al., 2025). By contrast, several media systems in Eastern and Southeastern Europe are characterized by greater dependence on digital platforms. In these countries, news is accessed to a greater extent through

online social networks, while the direct relationship between audiences and journalistic organizations is weaker. At the same time, willingness to pay for news remains low. These characteristics may be associated with more fragile information environments and lower levels of resilience to disinformation.

These conclusions should be understood within the broader context of how digital platforms operate. Previous research shows that users are simultaneously exposed to professional journalism, opinion-based content, and misleading information. At the same time, platform algorithms tend to favor content that generates reactions and engagement, rather than necessarily prioritizing the most accurate or rigorously verified information (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Goel et al., 2025; Vosoughi et al., 2018). However, mere exposure to false information does not automatically mean that users will believe or share it. User behavior is also influenced by other factors, such as the speed at which information circulates, social recommendations, and the ease with which online content can be redistributed (Sirlin et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings suggest that platformization is relevant to vulnerability to disinformation because it forms part of the broader context in which information resilience may be strengthened or weakened. The study does not demonstrate that platformization directly causes vulnerability to disinformation. Rather, it shows that, across several European countries, greater dependence on digital platforms is accompanied by weaker relationships between audiences and media organizations, limited financial support for journalism, and lower scores on information resilience indicators. These trends are more pronounced in media systems with limited funding sources and where news is accessed predominantly through social media platforms.

The study contributes to the academic literature in three main ways. First, it proposes an approach to platformization as a multidimensional process encompassing technological, behavioral, and economic aspects. Second, it demonstrates that information resilience depends not only on individual competencies, such as media literacy, but also on the structural characteristics of media systems, including news consumption patterns, relationships between audiences and media organizations, and the economic sustainability of journalism. Third, the comparative analysis shows that platformization does not lead to the homogenization of European media systems but instead interacts with pre-existing differences between Northern and Western European countries and those in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

For media organizations, the findings suggest the importance of developing direct relationships with audiences, investing in their own journalistic products, and adopting

subscription-based business models. For researchers, the study highlights the need to examine platformization in relation to national contexts and the specific characteristics of individual European media systems.

The present study also has several limitations. First, it relies on secondary data, which means that the reliability of the findings depends on the validity of the instruments employed by the primary sources (Digital News Report and the Media Literacy Index), including question wording, sampling methodologies, and potential cultural biases. Second, the datasets cover different years (2023–2025), while some developments in the digital environment occur rapidly, which may affect the longitudinal consistency of the assessment. Finally, the variables used to operationalize economic dependence serve as proxy indicators, which may introduce a degree of imprecision into the measurement of platformization.

Chapter VI of the thesis presents the qualitative research conducted among Romanian journalists and focuses on three main areas: examining Romanian journalists' attitudes towards the integration of online social networks into their professional routines; analyzing how platformization influences Romanian journalists' criteria and reasoning in the selection and verification of sources; and assessing journalists' capacity to act as active agents in combating disinformation in the context of platformization.

To achieve these objectives, the research employed a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with 24 Romanian journalists. Participants were selected through snowball sampling, according to criteria related to their professional experience and the type of media environment in which they work. The sample included journalists with varying levels of experience, working in online, offline, and hybrid media environments. Methodological measures informed by the academic literature were adopted to diversify the sample and reduce the risk of referral bias (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Baltar & Brunet, 2012). The interviews were conducted by telephone between July 12 and August 7, 2024, and lasted approximately 50 minutes on average. The data collected were analyzed using NVivo software through inductive thematic analysis.

Regarding the first objective of the qualitative research, the findings reveal that, regardless of the media environment in which they work (online, offline, or hybrid), journalists exhibit ambivalent attitudes towards the professional use of online social networks. On the one hand, digital platforms are perceived as useful and even indispensable tools in professional practice. Their perceived usefulness stems from their relevance, their ability to simplify work processes, and their ease of use. Journalists regard the integration of online social networks as

a necessary adaptation to transformations in the communication ecosystem, reflected both in changing patterns of news consumption and in shifts in the behavior of information sources. They believe that digital platforms enable them to achieve professional objectives more easily, such as increasing the speed of their work. At the same time, these digital infrastructures simplify newsgathering and research processes by facilitating access to sources and potential news stories. However, this form of adaptation does not appear to contribute to improving the quality of journalism in terms of the diversity of sources used. Although online social networks facilitate access to a wider range of information sources, empirical research shows that journalists continue to rely primarily on institutional sources, elite representatives, and fellow journalists (X. Zhang & Li, 2020). Therefore, platformization changes the tools journalists use but does not appear to fundamentally alter the logic of newsgathering and research, which may contribute to the persistence of the phenomenon of pack journalism described in the academic literature.

At the same time, the avoidance of platforms such as TikTok, due to the perception that they do not provide an appropriate environment for contextualization and verification, has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, journalists still apply selection criteria when choosing which digital platforms to use, a finding consistent with previous studies showing that attitudes towards a platform can influence the decision to adopt and use it (X. Zhang & Li, 2020; Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). On the negative side, this selective approach may increase the risk of isolation within an information bubble, disconnected from the actual perceptions of a substantial segment of the public. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2026 highlights TikTok's increasingly established role as a platform for news consumption (Egan et al., 2026).

The research also reveals a stronger tendency to use digital platforms for information gathering, identifying potential news stories, and monitoring sources (competing media organizations and elites) than for verifying the information collected. This tendency is consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Picha Edwardsson and may be a consequence of insufficient technical skills in the professional use of digital platforms (Edwardsson et al., 2023).

On the other hand, although digital platforms are perceived as useful professional tools, journalists also identified several risks associated with their use. The risk identified almost unanimously was the amplification of disinformation, a well-documented concern in the academic literature. A second major risk identified was online harassment and threats, an issue frequently examined in international research but relatively underexplored in the Romanian

context. Respondents reported experiences of exposure to hostile messages, yet their responses to such incidents were generally individual rather than guided by a clear institutional framework. The strategies mentioned, such as blocking aggressors or ignoring the situation, reflect organizational shortcomings in managing digital risks and even a possible normalization of online aggression in everyday journalistic practice.

From the perspective of platformization, the findings highlight the increasingly important role of online social networks in journalistic practice, as well as journalists' efforts to adapt to changes in the information ecosystem. At the same time, they show that pressure to publish rapidly, competition for visibility, and dependence on digital platforms may affect information verification processes and adherence to professional standards. The tendency to prioritize publication speed over information accuracy provides clear evidence of this.

Regarding the second objective of the qualitative research, the findings indicate several transformations in source selection routines in the context of platformization. More specifically, a complex decision-making framework emerges, structured around objective factors, such as the relevance of a news story and verification results, and subjective factors, including the influence of digital algorithms and trust in digital sources. The tension between these factors represents a considerable challenge for journalists. The data indicate that digital algorithms may exert a substantial influence on other factors, shaping what becomes visible, affecting perceptions of credibility, and even influencing the order in which sources are verified. There is a clear tendency towards the platformization of journalistic source selection routines, particularly among journalists working in online and hybrid newsrooms. This is evident in the way they regard a source's number of followers as a selection criterion, with the expectation that the attention attracted by that source can be converted into engagement with their own news stories (Şlemco, 2025b). Popularity thus becomes a pragmatic criterion for source selection.

Nevertheless, the study as a whole suggests a more nuanced picture. Most journalists do not rely exclusively on popularity-based criteria but instead adopt a hybrid approach that combines adherence to editorial standards with audience expectations. Source verification remains a core practice to which journalists are committed, although its implementation depends on the context, particularly in breaking news situations, when time pressure is high. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of the study conducted by Marju Himma-Kadakas and Indrek Ojamets (2022). Under time pressure, journalists tend to avoid sources found on social media platforms and instead rely on familiar offline contacts, thereby reducing the risk of amplifying disinformation in digital environments prone to manipulation. Consistent

with previous research, journalists engage in hybrid, circular, and collaborative verification practices that combine offline confirmation and consultation with colleagues (de Haan et al., 2024; Shapiro et al., 2013). Although source and news story selection processes have incorporated certain digital practices, verification methods remain largely rooted in traditional journalistic routines, as demonstrated by previous studies (Baharo et al., 2023). Collaboration with fact-checking organizations is largely absent, while the use of specialized digital tools for visual content verification remains limited. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Yael de Haan et al. (2024). Technical expertise plays an important role in the verification process. Younger journalists with advanced digital skills consider a wider range of indicators.

Although these findings provide valuable insights into how platformization shapes journalistic routines, several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative research design and the focus on a national sample limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, journalists' self-reported accounts may not fully capture the implicit influence of platform algorithms on everyday newsroom practices. Future research could extend this investigation through comparative and mixed-methods designs that incorporate computational mapping of algorithmic visibility. As the current evidence suggests, contemporary journalism must uphold the principles of verification while navigating the algorithmic architectures that increasingly mediate news production.

Regarding the third objective of the qualitative research, the findings suggest that, within the contemporary communication ecosystem, journalists are unlikely to play a central role in the systematic detection and debunking of false narratives, beyond preventive efforts aimed at avoiding their amplification (Şlemco, 2025a). Although journalists are aware of the profoundly negative impact that disinformation can have on their profession and on democratic processes, as well as the increasing complexity of the phenomenon, they often face substantial constraints. These limitations can be divided into two categories. The first category concerns factors arising from the structural characteristics of online social networks, which have become dominant structures within the media landscape. From the perspective of platformization, the analysis reveals that dependence on digital algorithms transfers a degree of decision-making power to audiences, whose reactions influence the visibility and performance of content on online social networks. Tensions with audiences may lead to a decline in a news organization's audience. In this context, the fear of declining audience figures may discourage newsrooms and journalists from actively engaging in efforts to combat disinformation. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that journalists often avoid covering sensitive topics

to prevent negative audience reactions (Waisbord, 2020). Another factor within this category is information overload, which exceeds newsrooms' capacity to manage the flow of information and limits journalists' ability to effectively filter, verify, and contextualize selected content.

The second category of constraints concerns individual and organizational factors. Digital disinformation is complex, constantly evolving, and highly adapted to algorithmic systems, which requires those seeking to counter it to continuously update their techniques for detecting and verifying sources and content. However, the findings of this study indicate that journalists prefer traditional verification strategies. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by J. Samuelsen, Bente Kalsnes, and Steen Steensen (2025), which shows that journalists continue to favor traditional verification techniques.

On the other hand, combating disinformation cannot rely exclusively on fact-checking. The academic literature suggests that the effects of these practices are limited. Some studies indicate that fact-checking does not consistently produce substantial changes in how people consume news, revise their opinions, or avoid disinformation. News consumers tend to accept fact-checking results only when they trust the source presenting them (Kyriakidou et al., 2023). Other organizational constraints include heavy workloads, accelerated work routines, limited financial resources, and insufficient professional training among journalists. These findings reflect the conclusions of Picha Edwardsson et al. (2023), who observed that limited resources restrict journalists' ability to verify information effectively.

In light of these limitations, the findings suggest that strengthening resilience to disinformation requires interventions at multiple levels. At the level of media organizations, continuous professional training programs are needed to improve journalists' ability to use emerging verification tools and manage confrontational interactions with audiences.

At the societal level, media literacy remains important, but its effectiveness depends on the existence of an information ecosystem that supports independent journalism, media pluralism, and direct relationships between journalistic organizations and audiences. At the same time, responsibility for limiting disinformation must be shared among media organizations, digital platforms, public authorities, and civil society, as none of these actors can address the complexity of the phenomenon alone.

Contributions of the Thesis to the Academic Literature

At the theoretical level, the thesis contributes to the academic literature by proposing a definition of journalism adapted to the transformations brought about by the development of

digital technologies and the use of online social networks. The proposed definition emphasizes not only the tools used to produce and distribute information but also the relevance of information, its verification, and its orientation towards the public interest. In this way, the research contributes to a clearer distinction between journalism and other forms of content creation and distribution in the digital environment.

The quantitative research makes three main contributions. The first consists of conceptualizing platformization as a multidimensional process that can be examined through indicators of technological, behavioral, and economic dependence on digital platforms. This approach enables the concept of platformization to be used in comparative analyses of media systems across different countries.

The second contribution concerns information resilience. The findings demonstrate that information resilience depends not only on individual media literacy skills but also on the characteristics of the information environment, including news consumption patterns, the relationship between media organizations and audiences, and the economic sustainability of journalism.

The third contribution lies in highlighting differences between European media systems. The analysis shows that platformization does not produce uniform effects across countries but is shaped by the specific characteristics of each national and regional context.

Regarding the qualitative research, the thesis contributes to understanding how digital platforms influence the professional practices of Romanian journalists. The findings reveal that journalists' relationship with online social networks is ambivalent. On the one hand, these platforms serve as useful tools for the rapid identification of information, potential news stories, and sources. On the other hand, journalists associate them with risks such as the spread of disinformation, pressure to publish rapidly, and online harassment. The research also demonstrates that the use of digital platforms does not lead to a widespread abandonment of professional norms. Journalists continue to prioritize the public interest, information verification, and source credibility, while also taking into account criteria specific to the digital environment, such as source popularity and visibility. Another contribution of the thesis concerns the relationship between platformization, journalism, and disinformation. The findings indicate that media organizations' dependence on digital platforms may limit journalists' capacity to actively combat disinformation. The visibility of journalistic content depends partly on platform algorithms and audience reactions, while the fear of losing audience attention may influence certain editorial decisions.

Consequently, journalists' capacity to intervene against disinformation depends both on their professional training and the resources available within newsrooms, as well as on the constraints inherent in the digital environment. From this perspective, the thesis demonstrates that platformization may also influence how journalism fulfills its democratic role.

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This thesis also incorporates passages from articles published during the doctoral research period. More specifically, Chapters I and II contain excerpts previously published in the book chapter entitled "Platformization as a Problematic Form of Journalistic Adaptation to New Digital Technologies: What Journalists Gain and Lose. Risks and Solutions" (in the edited volume *Public Communication and Challenges in Today's Digital Environment*; Șlemco & Bârgăoanu, 2025).

Two substantial sections of Chapter VI, which presents the qualitative research, have been published in academic journals. A section examining journalists' perceptions of the effects of disinformation and strategies to counter the phenomenon was published in *Anadiss*, in the article entitled "Journalists on Disinformation: Effects and Counteracting Strategies" (Șlemco, 2025a).

The section addressing the impact of platformization on information selection and verification routines was published in the *Journal of Media Research*, in the article entitled "Journalists' Strategies for Selecting Digital Sources from Social Networks in the Context of Platformization: A Romanian Perspective" (Șlemco, 2025b).

The study presented in Chapter V of the thesis, which comparatively examines the degree of platformization of media systems across 24 European countries and the relationship between this phenomenon and societal resilience to disinformation, has been accepted for publication in the ISI-indexed *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations (RJCP)*. The article is entitled "Platformization and Vulnerability to Disinformation: Evidence from European Media Ecosystems."

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