


# The Impact of Digital Media on Urban Discourse: The Journalist Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Journalism plays a central role in providing public information. This applies especially to the urban environment where informing citizens on local decision-making processes is an indispensable component of urban discourse. However, the rapid development of digital media raises questions about the quality of information provided by journalists. This study investigates the quality of urban discourse in the media, drawing on interviews with 51 journalists in four countries (Poland, United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands) representing various media types (public and private, nationwide and local, traditional and online). The results show that local journalism has great potential in shaping the relationships between local authorities and citizens. Digital media has led to a proliferation in the supply of content to the public as well as challenges in the provision of reliable information to citizens. Several solutions are proposed to raise the quality of urban discourse with respect to political accountability and agenda setting.

## KEYWORDS

Journalism, Online Media, Political Accountability, Urban Discourse

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urban discourse is a social construction which can be considered as an interpretative framework that not only helps us to understand reality but also to develop ideas about the future of cities. There are various urban discourses related to professionals, on the one hand, and urban residents on the other hand. First, there are the well-known urban discourses constructed in the field of urban planning and communicated from a top-down perspective (such as attractive city, creative city, smart city,

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resilient city etc.). These discourses are globally constructed, sometimes with local specificities. Second, there are discourses of the city referred to by residents and communicated from the bottom-up. Residential discourses are discussed among residents themselves on a day-to-day local basis and sometimes exchanged with urban planners. However, they are fragmented, not well articulated and hard to grasp (Karsten 2009).

Short (2000) takes a different perspective distinguishing three fundamental discourses of the city: the authoritarian city, the cosmic city, and the collective city. These are the ideas of urban social relations, intellectual discussions, and political forces. The authoritarian city is a discourse related to social aggregation. It involves 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. The second concept – cosmic city discourse – views 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 last approach - 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. City is presented as a shared space, a place of joint projects and neighborhood effects (Short 2000).

In this article, a simplified definition of an ‘urban discourse’ is adopted. Generally speaking, it may be described as a discussion on urban affairs in speech or writing, producing particular meaning and involving various actors. A specific role in urban discourse is played by the media as the primary source of understanding of the world and a vital public forum (cf Talbot 2007). Reliable in-depth information provided by the journalists is the basis for deliberation and decision-making. Hence, the quality of the urban discourse strongly relies on the range of the information published by the media. In this paper we will focus on the digitalization effects in urban discourse, asking the following research questions:

1. What is the role of journalism in creating urban discourse?
2. What is the political accountability of journalists?
3. What is the impact of online media on the urban discourse?

The questions will be addressed from a journalists’ perspective, offering a unique insight into the functions of the media and their relations to their audience. As a result, urban discourse will be evaluated by its key actors, who are responsible for the quality of information and commentaries published in the media relating to cities.

The paper is organized as follows. The theoretical departure explains the role of media (and journalists specifically) in urban discourse and sets out the methodology and data sources used in the study. The next section provides the key findings. The final section concludes.

## **2. MEDIATED DELIBERATION**

Media participate in shaping urban policy, thereby fulfilling two specific tasks (Ossowicz, 2020). The first task relates to the transfer of information about the processes of spatial transformation; the second is to comment on these processes. Professional journalism should clearly separate these two aspects. A possibly objective presentation of facts and transmission of new information builds the core content of the public discourse, providing a basis for social interaction. Media framing occurs when journalists comment on this transmitted information from different points of view, which can impact people’s attitudes by changing the weights attached to issues already in memory (i.e., Leeper and Slothuus, 2019). Each of those situations alters the state of knowledge amongst the audience and can shape public opinion and promote societal change.

The phenomenon of “local news poverty” observed in Canada is a pertinent example here: it explores the extent to which local news media are meeting 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 they need to navigate daily life (Lindgren 2017).

Media create an impact on 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 participating 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 undertake mediation between actors – a process referred as mediated deliberation.

Mediated deliberation entails a form of discussion that is achieved through the media acting as a mediator between the mass public and elected officials. The communication professionals of the media relay information, values, and competing viewpoints to the public in order for effective deliberation to occur. Deliberation processes are a cornerstone of democracy (Page, 1996). The quality of deliberation is important, which requires assessment of whether media coverage is in-depth and well balanced – avoiding simplistic descriptions, distorting speculations, and partisan reporting (Pomatto, 2019).

Media are aware of this role in processes of deliberation, which becomes clear 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 agency/publicity model; the public information model; the two-way asymmetric model; and the two-way symmetric model.

In the press agent/publicity model, communications professionals use persuasion to shape the thoughts and opinions of their key audiences. It is a one-way form of communication where accuracy is not important, and no audience feedback is sought. The second public information model moves away from the manipulative tactics used in the first approach and presents more accurate information. However, the communication pattern is still one-way – no audience analysis is conducted. The third model is a two-way asymmetrical (imbalanced) model and presents a more persuasive way of communicating with key audiences. Here, content creators conduct research to better understand the audience’s attitudes and behaviors, but the organization still benefits more so than audiences. Finally, the two-way symmetrical model argues that the public relations practitioners should serve as a liaison or negotiators between the organization and key publics. All involved parties benefit through a mutually favourable situation. The two-way symmetrical model is deemed to be the most ethical model, which ought to be used by professionals in their everyday tactics and strategies.

The importance of public relations to public administration has also been stressed by Lee (1998, 2009). In his longitudinal studies, he 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 and communication channels that define this information age, public relations are again relevant for public managers (Lee 2009).

According to Valentini’s (2013) study of the relationship between public sector and public relations in the Italian context, most public communication officers are not involved at the strategic level 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. However, some of them contribute to strategic planning by identifying the goals and objectives for the organization and attracting various stakeholders, which indicates that public communication officers are sometimes strategically managing information for public policy-making processes.

Public relations built by the public administration form the background for the discussion on urban discourse presented in this article. Public relations influence and form the news content produced by the public administration and as such fuel the content provided by the media; the role of media outlets

is to frame urban development in different ways offering alternative interpretations of reality, which can trigger different evaluations among citizens. Thus, 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).

### 3. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

As a result of a “linguistic turn” in the social sciences (Howarth, Torfing 2005), language is no longer conceived to be neutral (as promoted by the positivist tradition) and is problematized as a system of signification through which actors do not only describe but also create the world (Hajer 1993, after Shirazi 2023). It is often argued that language has the capacity to make politics, to shift power balances, to create political conflict (Hajer & Versteeg 2005). Policies are developed, debated, negotiated, and discussed “in” language, and communicated and implemented “through” texts, which underlines the significance of the discursive approach to understand and analyse policy making.

The language in which policy discussions take place has a real impact on the policies that result. Deliberation vis-à-vis policy holds discursive meaning, which relates to the presumed linguistic-practical structure constituting classifications and objects shaping our day-to-day world. These are however unrecognized by individual agents (Wagenaar, 2015). Consequently, the unconscious use of terms has implications for the way social worlds are constructed. Some commonly accepted phrases in urban discourse are implicitly assumed to be “neutral”, but in reality, suppress alternative dimensions of their meaning. What is a “crisis” and what “normality” is to be restored, who is the “we” that is often called on to act, who or what is “a city” – these are the questions to be asked within urban discourse. More specific examples include “planning for growth” which assumes growth is always good; “the public interest” used as if it is one single thing, devoid of contradictory interests; “peace” exists if there is no war. All these examples represent a one-dimensional linguistic simplification that may close off examination of critical questions as to what is really going on in the world and obscure the underlying political dynamics (Marcuse 2015).

Urban scholars recognize the critical role of language in human affairs and widely acknowledge qualitative methods in analyzing and describing it (Fischer 2011, Shirazi 2023). The role of discourse as a component of urban processes and urban change is often highlighted in the literature (Hastings 1999), and researchers have tried 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 roles of language and particular actors who create it are significantly altered by the rise of online communication.

### 4. DIGITAL MEDIA

The power of media lies in the frequency and speed of transmission to a very wide audience (Ossowicz 2020). Providing current information (in both top-down and bottom-up directions) is a crucial factor in contemporary democratic processes. However, a significant increase in the frequency and speed of transmission of information in the last 20 years due to digitalization and online media development brings fundamental changes to urban discourse.

Digital media can facilitate interaction between public actors and citizens enabling dialogue on public issues. In 2009, The Knight Commission (2009) drew a vision of informed communities, which included maximizing the availability of relevant and credible information, strengthening the capacity of individuals to engage with information (and the ability to communicate one’s views to others), and promoting individual engagement with information and the public sphere (generating opportunities and motivation for involvement and sharing the responsibility for community self-governance). This

approach seems to be mostly valid until now, when online technologies are reshaping the way citizens communicate, socialise and deliberate with each other and with the public sector.

The growth in the online public sphere has also fuelled polarisation and misinformation in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. The phenomenon of ‘echo chambers’ illustrates this development, in which people only hear opinions that are similar to their own – e.g., social media users selectively engage with like-minded others and ideologically-aligned content. This process is believed to be exacerbated by social media platforms’ algorithmic curation of content based on users’ past activity, which limits the novelty and diversity of the content that users are exposed to, and which – instead of contributing to viewpoint diversity – 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 issue of digital shift in urban discourse.

The literature review presented above leads to a list of characteristic aspects of contemporary urban discourse, including the virtualization effects and mediation functions. These are: the ways in which facts are presented, responsibility for the quality of information, acknowledging the role of language in policy discussions, support in understanding the reality, developing ideas about the future, collectiveness, inclusiveness and diversity, building civic society, various digitalization effects (positive and negative), public relations and mediated deliberation. Altogether they provide a cognitive framework for further analysis and interpretation of journalists’ views on urban discourse.

## 5. DATA AND METHODS

This research was conducted in 2022 in Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. The list of countries was determined by the research project DEMOTEC (EC grant number 962553) and has not been intended to represent any wider area or areas. Most of the studied countries differ significantly in terms of geography (including urban settlement structures), political history, economic development or civic society patterns and the qualitative data produced in this research does not enable comparisons between them. Moreover, the respondents’ views on urban discourse are characterised by a high level of complementarity and do not present major differences, despite the diverse settings. Therefore, the approach adopted in this paper is to link perspectives and experiences of European journalists working in democratic political contexts to provide a comprehensive picture of urban discourse. In this study, 51 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with professional journalists, representing various types of media (including traditional and online – see Table 1).

The interviewees were recruited using various methods. Some of them were selected intentionally from different quality newspapers and digital media, including their focus on political issues. Others were invited using a snowball method – a process starting from the journalists recommended by the local authorities and home universities, who provided further contacts to their

Table 1. Number of interviews conducted in each country by media type

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

Source: Author’s own research

fellow professionals. As a result, only selected media have been included in the research sample in each country (Table 2) and the 51 respondents cannot be treated as random representative sample of their national media environments. Despite this limitation, the approach adopted in this study offers valuable insights into the role of the media in shaping urban discourse in Europe and enables drawing comparative conclusions on the impact of digital media on urban discourse.

The interviews were conducted by the members of the DEMOTEC research team from March through November 2022. The questionnaire covered various issues related to the journalists' profession as well as democratic challenges and innovations at the local level (see the appendix). Each interview lasted about 60 minutes, was audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymised, and the names of the interviewees were replaced by ID numbers. Thematic analysis was undertaken using the transcripts. Some of the interviewees' statements are cited directly while some others are generalized to show a common understanding of the issues discussed. The objective was not to employ a standard discourse quality analysis of speech acts (as defined by Steenbergen et al. 2003). Indeed, it uses qualitative data based on journalists' opinions and is embedded in a wider study on public discourse but it does not seek to quantify the quality of speech acts. The objective was to assess public discourse from the perspective of journalists, given their critical role in reflecting and reshaping public opinion.

## 6. RESULTS

### 6.1 The Role of Journalism in the Urban Discourse

The construction of urban discourse is dependent on access to reliable and understandable information. The results of the interviews point to the crucial role played by media in this process. According to most of the interviewees, the primary role of journalists is to inform the public by providing factual 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]*

Journalists are above all expected to do fact-checking and expose issues that are not accessible to the general public [Interviewees IR01 and IR04]. They should report, ask challenging questions, and seek a variety of viewpoints [Interviewees UK01, UK12 and UK13]. However, 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]. One of the interviewees explains this as follows:

**Table 2. Media represented in the studied countries. Data for Ireland and the United Kingdom have been deleted for privacy reasons.**

Country	Represented Media
Poland	Akademickie Radio LUZ, Gość Niedzielny, Doba.pl, Radio Wrocław, RMF Max, Radio ZET, Wrocław.pl, <a href="https://walbrzych.dlawas.info/">https://walbrzych.dlawas.info/</a> , Dziennik Łódzki, Express Ilustrowany, Gazeta Wrocławska, Naszemiasto.pl, freelance journalists
the Netherlands	NRC, RTV Rijnmond, Den Haag Centraal, Vers Beton, Algemeen Dagblad, Een Vandaag, Nieuwsuur, RTL Nieuws, Trouw, Erasmus Magazine, Studio Europa, De Volkskrant, NOS, freelance journalists

Source: Author's own research

*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]*

In this context it is important to maintain neutrality and support different voices rather than being the sole voice [Interviewees UK01, UK02, UK06 and UK10]. Journalists 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]*

Encouraging citizen engagement may be a side-effect of the informative function of journalism. As such, media have an indirect but significant role to play with journalists forming a bridge between society and politics. This is reflected in the following quotation:

*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]*

In terms of their societal role, some interviewees have a strong view 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 those differences, a genuine interest in ‘good journalism’ is visible:

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

From this it becomes clear that journalism has multiple functions in creating urban discourse: informing, explaining, showing various viewpoints, and ensuring transparency. Journalists perceive themselves as neutral reporters but sometimes also as advocates of the public interest. Let us now take a closer look at the political accountability function.

## **6.2 Political Accountability of Journalism**

Journalists play an important role in increasing accountability by putting pressure on politicians to account for their actions [Interviewees UK01 and UK10]. All the interviewees are clear about the need for controls on politicians; for some respondents [Interviewee NL04] “controlling power” is why journalism has come into existence:

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

Interviewee NL07 describes what political accountability entails:

*So, you check whether the policy that the government has devised actually does what it is supposed to do, for example. Whether it is true what someone has said, things like that. [Interviewee NL07]*

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]. Some interviewees try to justify this situation by pointing to the natural diversity of politicians:

*The level of accountability is very different. You cannot compare all the officials – these are hundreds of people and they are very different. [Interviewee PL08]*

Political accountability can also be hidden behind a “superficial inclusiveness” which is disrespectful towards citizens/readers [Interviewee UK01]. Moreover, the democratic political landscape exists in a complex network of interactions between various levels of administration (local, regional, national), where responsibilities are dispersed. 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]. According to the interviewees’ experience, local authorities do not actively cooperate with journalists in response to calls for more transparency in decision-making processes. Simultaneously, most of the respondents agree that journalists also play a role in the decline of democratic standards. The media is perceived to contribute to accountability deficits [Interviewees UK02, UK07, UK08 and UK13], especially media conglomerates [Interviewee UK02]. It can be exemplified with the following quotation:

*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]*

In the search for the remedy to the unsatisfactory level of political accountability some interviewees note that the funding sources of the mass media should not be linked to political parties [Interviewee IR07]. Accountability could also be improved through consistent and comparative reporting on local authorities’ performance [Interviewees IR01 and IR02] which should entail more cooperation among the journalists themselves [Interviewee IR07].

Interviewee NL04 also notes that the role of journalism in creating political accountability entails fostering transparency into decision-making processes: journalists should be physically present in the decision-making process. If the decisions are made behind closed doors, then it does not contribute to trust.

When the competences of the journalists are considered, the interviewees list the following factors of political accountability: critical approach, honesty, transparency, apolitical attitude. However, not all journalists hold onto those 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]*

To sum up, 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 common consensus that it is their duty to care about the transparency of decision-making processes and to look for solutions which make journalism independent, trustworthy and reliable.

### 6.3 Setting the News Agenda

Journalism has long been perceived as one of the professions characterized by a relatively high level of public trust. However, trust in the media varies across countries and has been declining in some cases in a context of growing pressure on the profession of journalism from a variety of sources. According to Interviewees UK03, UK04, UK07, UK10 and UK11 the downgrading of journalistic standards has led journalism to give greater attention to sensational stories to attract audiences.

To explore journalists' values informing the news agenda, the interviewed journalists were asked about how they select the news to be published in their media. The results show that most of the journalists pick up their topics from observation of the current stream of information. They do not look for particular issues but rather select the news which they want to present in their medium.

Specific decisions regarding topics are based on the nature of the media outlet, specialization of the journalist and the perceived popularity among the targeted audience. Finding the most interesting angle of coverage and ensuring readability is one of the crucial steps in preparing the news [Interviewees UK06, UK10, IR03, IR04, IR05, NL11 and NL03]. When applied to online media, this criterion is often referred to as: would it create traffic? [Interviewees IR01, IR02, IR03, IR05 and IR06].

Some respondents highlighted that they do not avoid controversial matters and they try to look for an exclusive story [Interviewees UK01 and UK14] or a story which wouldn't be addressed otherwise with a mission to "speak the truth" [Interviewee UK11].

For local journalists, the criterion is often whether it happens in the area covered. As such, interviewee NL06 states that:

*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]*

Among a whole range of approaches presented by the respondents in selecting their content some are strictly related to urban discourse: shaping citizenship skills [Interviewees UK05, UK10 and UK12], advocating for the community [Interviewees UK01 and UK09] and stimulating debate [Interviewee UK02]. Other criteria include 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]*

Lastly, some practical issues are also considered by the interviewees: the news material must be doable – with enough information available for a story [Interviewee IR04]. It is a good practice to support and promote particular news with a direct interaction with the involved people. Presenting human angles and emphatic approach builds trust at the local level and in the long run may enable solving particular problems [interviewees PL07, UK11, NL11].

The interviewed journalists try to be objective and not support a particular group or individual (especially in conflicting situations). Journalism must be fair and unbiased in presenting different angles and points of view [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]*

The main barrier mentioned by some interviewees concerns editorial decision-making, where their choices can be limited by what other members on the editorial are covering. Sometimes the proposed content needs to be approved by the publisher first:

*Topics . . . need to be approved by the publisher; they are discussed by the editorial board. [Interviewee PL08]*

Nevertheless, most of the interviewed journalists feel free to select their topics which reflects the high level of autonomy that they experience:

*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 picking particular topics are: is it interesting or attractive to the readers, is it current and local, is it useful or advisory. The interviewees focus on people's lives, stories and experiences, showing various viewpoints and trying to be as objective as possible. All of those approaches require particular knowledge and skills, which is addressed in the next section.

#### **6.4 Skills and Knowledge Needed for a Journalist**

There was agreement among the respondents about the need to be equipped with a range of skills specific for the journalist profession. The first and most important seems to be the ability to find sources and to process information in an accurate way [Interviewees IR01, IR03, IR04, IR05 and IR06]. An ability to filter through the noise and being selective is also critical requiring an understanding of what is important [Interviewee IR01] and newsworthy [Interviewees IR03 and IR05].

When addressing the question of competences many interviewees focus on the 'soft' skills the journalists should have. These are mainly interpersonal abilities: empathy, attentiveness, readiness to listen to people, being observant, a good listener, sensitivity, tolerance, understanding and patience [Interviewees IR01, IR02, IR03, IR04 and IR07, NL11]:

*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]*

Another group of characteristics is connected with practical skills, such as writing texts, synthesizing of knowledge and data processing. Journalists have to be good storytellers and smooth writers, able to express the ideas and present information in a conscious way [Interviewees IR02, IR04, IR05, IR06 and IR07]. Strong drafting skills are clearly important especially an ability to present complex issues succinctly and clearly [Interviewees UK07 and UK09]:

*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, synthesizing of thoughts. [interviewee PL06]*

*Verifying and fast processing of data. [interviewee PL05]*

Efficiency is another characteristic of a good journalist in terms of an ability to work in a fast-paced environment, with scarce resources and under time pressure [Interviewees IR04 and IR07, UK01, UK02, UK07, UK08 and UK09].

Another desirable attribute is curiosity [Interviewees UK02, UK05 and UK09] which should translate into the ability to listen, observe, and understand the broader picture [Interviewees UK05, UK06, UK10, UK12 and UK14]. A natural thirst for knowledge [Interviewees IR01, IR02, IR04, IR06 and IR07] and readiness to learn are important assets:

*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 about the topic of interest can be important in of itself but also to facilitates access to network of information sources and contacts [Interviewees UK05, UK06, UK10, and UK12]. As Ossowicz (2020) notes, local journalists should have some basic knowledge of urban planning, as well as the complexity of the urban development processes. One respondent went further by arguing 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]*

This involves a good orientation, being well-informed, staying up-to-date and interested in the broader context [Interviewees IR01 and IR07], including relevant legal aspects [Interviewees IR04, IR05 and IR07].

It is also important that journalists keep their integrity and accuracy, and in general a moral compass [Interviewees UK09 and UK11]. Their professional responsibility includes being honest, precise, and avoiding biases [Interviewees IR01 and IR07].

An increasingly desirable asset is to be knowledgeable about digital media technology. A core skill that journalists should possess in the current climate is the ability to work with the Internet and social media [Interviewees UK01, UK10 and UK13], including filtering noise for newsworthy content [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]*

To sum up, journalists agree on a set of qualities needed to fulfill their role in urban discourses. These qualities are personal characteristics, but also professional traits that allow journalists to take a critical and productive perspective towards events.

We now turn to the final core research question concerning the impact of digital media on urban discourse.

## 6.5 Impact of Digital Media on the Urban Discourse

Digital media emerged as a central and cross-cutting theme in the interviews, despite not being explicitly covered in the interview questionnaire. The digitalization of media and the public sphere more generally has increased the number of communication news and social channels and their reach. The growing importance of the internet and social media has also brought challenges in terms of increasing competition and lower reliability of information:

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

Moreover, the rise of online media and fake news provokes confusion and has impacted negatively on urban discourse and trust in journalists [Interviewees UK02, UK03, UK04, UK07, UK08 and UK10].

The rise of the Internet and social media have transformed journalism and the way citizens consume media and information. However, there is a lack of consensus in the interviewees' views: while some of them [Interviewees IR01, IR04, IR06, UK12] do not think that the role of journalism has changed significantly over time even if communication channels have changed dramatically, others [Interviewees IR02, IR03, IR05, IR07, UK14] stress significant shifts linked to the development of online media and commercial pressures that have reduced the capacity for in-depth coverage of topics. The second approach is more widely present and will be elaborated further below.

One of the positive effects of digitalization is the development of online citizen participation tools. Digital technologies are 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 encourages journalists and newspapers to focus on headlines and not necessarily on the content of the story, creating an environment of sensationalism and negatively impacting on citizens' engagement and trust in the government. This has been compounded by the use of mechanistic and automated 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 linked to commercial pressures aimed at maximising audience share [Interviewee IR01, IR02, IR05 and IR07]. Even if the interviewed journalists themselves are critical of the "popularity contests" fuelled by the internet and associated audience metrics [Interviewee UK14], they have 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 means that evidence and data are given less time, resulting in the spread of lower-quality news and disinformation [Interviewees UK02, UK03, UK04, UK07, UK08 and UK10]. The rise of fake news provokes confusion and disengagement among citizens.

There are also some contradictory views regarding the role of journalism in the online discourse. Some interviewees claim that digital media are now aiming towards providing more thorough information and ‘deep dives’ into topics by introducing reportages and long-form interviews supported by stronger visuals [interviewee PL01]; whereas others say that journalists are shortening and simplifying their message:

*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 value of journalism is also undermined by non-professionals entering the media realm. With the rise of social media many activists tend to be confused for journalists. This can lead to further misinformation, to people believing fake news and lower trust in institutions [Interviewees UK03, UK04 and UK05].

The problem of superficial (shallow) news content mentioned above is often raised by the respondents. Reporting with limited analysis provides a narrow and one-sided picture [Interviewees UK09, UK11 and UK13]. There is a visible trend to present very short information which makes it difficult to get into details:

*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 so-called digital exclusion is also observed by the interviewees. For example, in Ireland a common challenge in the digital media age is that audiences from older age groups and from rural areas prefer printed newspapers [Interviewees IR01 and IR02].

In the ever-changing news environment journalists are continuously adapting their approach to reach their audience. Some of them aim to provide more detailed and thorough information and some are simplifying and shortening their messages. However, the general principles of the journalist profession remain unchanged: providing reliable information, showing various perspectives, ordering and prioritizing the information.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The main contribution of this paper is the evaluation of urban discourse in the media from the perspective of ‘insiders’: journalists from various countries. These individuals shape urban discourse through processes of mediated deliberation. Previous research in this area (e.g., Short 2000, Karsten 2009) focused on structuring the discourse and dividing it into various subsections using multiple criteria. All of them however take an external researcher’s perspective which is useful from the cognitive point of view but does not involve any personal experience of the participants. This study offers a unique, deep insight into the approaches and opinions of one of the major actors of urban discourse: professional journalists. They are the integral actors in creating urban discourse, they have the agency, they know what ‘good’ journalism is. Hence, we shed light on how urban discourse is created, taking the journalists’ viewpoint. This kind of research is necessary to fill some important gaps in the knowledge, defined for example by Pomatto (2019), who pointed that mediated deliberation in the urban context is underdeveloped and needs more attention.

In this work the concept of the ‘collective city discourse’ proposed by Short (2000) has been adopted as a framework for analysing the journalists’ statements on urban discourse. It states that the city is (1)

a site of collective provision and consumption, (2) a way of building civic society, (3) a shared space of joint projects and neighborhood effects. Reflecting on the literature, we have outlined the most important aspects of the collective urban discourse, complemented them with digitalization and mediation effects, and juxtaposed them with the data collected through empirical research. Table 3 classifies the common themes addressed by the respondents including digitalization in line with the conceptual framework of the paper.

Such a structured discussion on the research results shows that journalism has a great potential to reveal and cover particular characteristics of urban discourse. However, journalists show more awareness of their influence on urban discourse through being information transmitters, than through their role as producing and reproducing discursive practices. The findings demonstrate that online media have a profound impact on public communication on urban affairs which is one of the unique and valuable contributions of this research to the state-of-the-art.

From the academic point of view this study has one main limitation. It takes a relatively narrow perspective on urban discourse: the whole research was conducted with journalists only. Future studies should be wider, involving also other actors: citizens, public authorities, entrepreneurs, NGOs and others. Further research is also needed to find the possible solutions and contingency plans to the reduction of the quality in urban discourse.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of the media in creating urban discourse, contributing to political accountability and the impact of digitalization, drawing on interviews with 51 journalists in four European countries (Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom). In terms of the role of journalism

**Table 3. Selected aspects of urban discourse addressed by the interviewed journalists. Source: author's own research.**

Aspect of Urban Discourse	Findings From the Interviews With Journalists
Responsibility for the quality of information	Fact-checking and objective informing is the primary role for journalists. Their professional responsibility includes being honest, precise and avoiding biases.
Constituting role of language in policy discussions	Journalists should possess good writing skills, including cautious synthesizing of knowledge and storytelling.
Support in understanding the reality	Journalists' mission is to explain the world in a way which is understandable for their audience. They ask challenging questions and expose issues that are not accessible to the general public. Journalists should have an ability to present complex issues succinctly and clearly.
Developing ideas about the future of the city	Journalists are cautious about promoting specific policy instruments or agendas. However, they should have a good orientation, staying up-to-date and interested in the broader context, including relevant legal aspects.
Collectiveness, inclusiveness and diversity	Journalism seeks a variety of viewpoints and aims at being pluralistic. Journalists need to be unbiased and not support anyone (especially in conflicting situations). Journalists should present particular interpersonal skills such as empathy, attentiveness, readiness to listen to people, being observant, a good listener, sensitivity, tolerance, understanding and patience.
Building civic society	Journalism is not activism, but it can help building civic attitudes by informing about the current participation opportunities offered by the local authorities. It can also play a controlling role for politicians.
Positive digitalization effects (facilitated interaction, open dialogue)	Digitalization increase the opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes.
Negative digitalization effects (polarization, misinformation)	The growing pace of the information stream results in a lower reliability of information; journalists and newspapers focus on headlines and not necessarily on the content of the story.
Public relations in public administration	Lower quality of information provided by the media can negatively impact on citizens' engagement and trust in the government.
Mediation between actors (mediated deliberation)	Journalism may take an advocacy role by asking questions on behalf of the public or holding the elected authorities to account.

in creating urban discourse, the journalists interviewed in this research are clear that their main duty is to provide the public with information and explain the world objectively. An advocacy role is also important in terms of asking challenging questions and controlling politicians. However, there was consensus that journalists should avoid activism and remain neutral and impartial by providing various viewpoints and leaving the assessment to the reader.

What is the political accountability role of journalists? The interviewed journalists have a strong sense of mission in creating public discourse and speaking truth to power. They feel responsible for the quality of information provided informed by ethical and professional standards and are aware of their contribution to holding power to account and to civic societal values. When building the news agenda, they consider the newsworthiness of information, whether it is timely and connects locally, as well as its usefulness or advisory role. These approaches require specific knowledge and skills, including empathy, attentiveness, sensitivity, and tolerance, but also accuracy, integrity and honesty.

However, in accomplishing their professional mission the interviewed journalists encounter several obstacles. One of them are some new phenomena related to the ICT development which may endanger the quality of urban discourse.

First of all, the impact of digital media is observable in a reduced reliability of information caused by the faster pace of the media production process. Second, digital media focus on headlines instead of in-depth and investigative contents. They want to maximize audience share which results in commercial pressures related to advertising revenue. Furthermore, reporting with limited analysis provides a narrow and one-sided picture to readers. The respondents agreed also that there should be more efforts to tackle fake news and to offer citizens succinct and filtered overviews of trusted content. Finally, a consequence of this changed media landscape is greater competition among media outlets, which can allow politicians to favour more supportive or ideologically aligned outlets or journalists, or indeed bypass journalists altogether by speaking to audiences directly through social media.

The general picture resulting from the interviews is overwhelmingly pessimistic: digital media bring reduced quality of information, undermines the authority and reliability of journalists and is continually eroding the quality of urban discourse. However, an alternative interpretation of this situation may also be considered. The deterioration in journalistic standards may be just one of the natural stages of public discourse development. In a future positive economic climate after the period of recession, political polarisation may be less salient and higher quality public communication may emerge. This scenario is possible if the postulates raised by the interviewed journalists (such as production of in-depth news and promoting higher political accountability of journalism) are implemented.

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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 political 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 internal 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?