Research Article

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Platform Configuration: A Longitudinal Study and Conceptualization of a Legacy News Publisher's Platform-Related Innovation Practices

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Abstract

Purpose: Publishers are innovating their practices in the face of global platform companies' growing dominance on journalism. This study examines how publishers innovate their editorially oriented activities vis-à-vis third-party platforms with respect to six stages of news production. In doing so, this article introduces and advances *platform configuration* as a conceptual framework.

Design/methodology/approach: This five-year longitudinal case study of a Singaporean legacy news publisher uses a mix-method qualitative approach. It includes in-depth interviews with 35 staff, newsroom observations and close monitoring of the publisher's website and apps.

Findings: This study offers three key findings about the publisher's platform configuration. First, *multidirectionality*: the publisher simultaneously leveraged on platforms' capacities (building platform presence), while also reducing dependence on them (platform counterbalancing). Second, *specificity*: the publisher added, removed and/or modified editorially oriented activities with respect to the six stages of news production. Third, *commitment*: the publisher calibrated its

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commitment to specific activities oriented towards either building platform presence and/or platform counterbalancing.

Practical implications: This article introduces a 2×2 platform configuration matrix that classifies and explains how and why publishers engage in platform configuration.

Theoretical and social implications: Scholars can draw on platform configuration to study and advance theorizing on the evolving publisher-platform interrelationship. Platform configuration is useful for understanding how publishers reconcile their innovation practices and strategize their commitment to news activities in relation to platforms with broader journalistic and financial objectives.

Originality/value: This is the first study that introduces and advances the concept of platform configuration with regard to publishers' innovation practices. Both the platform configuration concept and matrix allow researchers to classify and operationalize future longitudinal and short-term studies into the publisher-platform dynamic.

Keywords: digital journalism, innovation, platforms, practice theory, publishers, qualitative methods, Singapore, social media

1 Introduction

The rise of global platform companies throughout the 21st century, and especially in recent years, has an enormous impact on the practices of publishers. American platform companies such as Amazon, Apple, Google (Alphabet), Facebook (Meta), Microsoft, Snapchat, and Twitter, among others, have amassed tremendous power over digital news production and dissemination (e.g., Nieborg et al. 2019; Nielsen and Ganter 2018), and so have Chinese platform companies such as Tencent, Tik Tok, and Weibo (e.g., Wang et al. 2020; Zhang 2019). Facebook and Google, for instance, have taken huge chunks of the global advertising market away from publishers who now seek to stem their financial losses by diversifying income sources and relying on reader revenue (e.g., Myllylahti 2020; Olsen et al. 2021). The news industry is deeply involved in exchanging resources with third parties (e.g., Google and Apple), especially when it comes to data from mobile apps (Kammer 2021). News publishers have become data-driven, utilizing analytics and metrics to guide news work (e.g., Ekström et al. 2021), as well as using algorithms to facilitate digital news distribution to users (Hansen and Hartley 2021). Furthermore, research has shown that willingness to pay sufficiently for news is relatively low and there have been calls for a communal approach to sustainably fund journalism (O'Brien et al. 2020; Olsen et al. 2020). Overall, platforms have contributed to the

disruption of the traditional business model of commercial news media, which in some countries now rely more on reader revenues than advertising (Olsen et al. 2021). Toff and Mathews (2021) explicitly ask if social media kills newspapers? From their massive US-based study, they conclude that Facebook, alongside media ownership structures of local newspapers, may be preventing publishers from producing original and local news that serve civic needs.

In this study, platforms are defined as “digital infrastructures with affordances that offer diverse kinds of information and communication, and opportunities to produce, publish and engage with content” (Ekström and Westlund 2019, p. 259) that are non-proprietary to the publisher. These digital intermediaries provide an array of services and functionalities for citizens and organizations, and influence everyday life and work practices. Publishers are no exception, as they continue to innovate by configuring their news production, distribution, audience engagement, and monetization practices in light of the increasing platformization of news (Van Dijck et al. 2018). Earlier studies on how publishers are innovating their practices vis-à-vis platforms articulate two overarching themes. One theme involves building platform presence, which sees publishers leveraging social media and search engine platforms in news work. A second emerging theme spotlights platform counterbalancing—where publishers aim to reduce their dependence on platforms non-proprietary to them (Steensen and Westlund 2021). These research themes are discussed in greater detail in our article’s second section.

Amid these developments, it is theoretically and practically urgent to advance conceptual frameworks and empirical research, both longitudinal and short-term, into publishers’ innovation practices in relation to platforms (cf. Couldry and Van Dijck 2015; Hermida 2018). Hence, this article draws on practice theory (Ahva 2017; Couldry 2004) to conceptualize *innovation as practice* and introduce *platform configuration* as a conceptual advancement to longitudinally examine a Singapore-based legacy publisher’s innovation practices in relation to platforms. Specifically, this article analyzes the publisher’s platform configuration with respect to six editorially oriented activities from 2016 to 2021. This study is based on a mixed-method qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with 35 media professionals and augmented with newsroom observations, close monitoring of the publisher’s website and mobile app, and correspondence with the publisher’s staff via email and in-person over five-years.

This article is organized into seven sections. Section 2 presents our theoretical approach and key concepts, discussing also the applicable literature. Section 3 outlines our method and material, and Section 4 presents the findings. The last

three sections in this article respectively offer discussions, conclusions, and limitations and suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical Approach and Conceptual Advancements

This section discusses the following: innovation in relation to journalism studies; our overarching theoretical approach, where we are guided by practice theory; editorially oriented activities; the publisher-platform relationship; platform configuration; and our study's conceptual synthesis.

2.1 Journalism and Innovation

There is a wealth of scientific research on innovation in journalism studies, and innovation has by several scholars been heralded as critical for the survival of journalism (Pavlik 2013; Posetti 2018). Both academic research and the news industry is connected with a pro-innovation bias (Steensen and Westlund 2021). The concept of innovation, nonetheless, suffers from definitional challenges and determining how it is understood and practiced in journalism remains complicated (Hermida and Young 2021). A basic definition suggests there is an invention—something being developed and considered “new”—that is appropriated and implemented. Research reviews observe that scholars discuss innovation as either being disruptive, incremental or imitative, and characterized it as an idea, product, process, and service, among others (e.g., Belair-Gagnon and Steinke 2020; García-Avilés 2021; Storsul and Krumsvik 2013). Yet, only few innovations are entirely new and disruptive as many share traits with what is existing and are typically incremental and evolving (Krumsvik et al. 2019). This article approaches innovation as the two-fold practice of developing and adding something new into use, and also the practice of modifying or removing such innovations.

Much of the research that examines innovation processes in publishers focuses on the organizational context that shapes innovations (Belair-Gagnon and Steinke 2020; Paulussen 2016). Importantly, emerging scholarship in this area argues for reframing innovation within journalism as “a situated and contextual practice” (Bossio and Nelson 2021, p. 1378), taking into account how interrelationships between professional, social and cultural influences impact innovation practices in news organizations (e.g., Boyles 2016; Ekdale et al. 2015). This is further discussed in light of practice theory in the following sub-section.

2.2 Innovation as Practice

Practice theory has roots in sociology and anthropology (e.g., Giddens 1984; Ortner 2006). There are several versions of practice theory, but they commonly construe practices as routinized behavior or patterned doings and sayings (Schatzki 2001) that consists of forms of activities, materiality, and symbolic meaning (cf. Reckwitz 2002). One merit of practice theory is its integrative approach towards structure and individual agency (Spaargaren et al. 2016): dominant practices can reproduce structure, while deviations in practices alter structure (Ahva 2017). Practice theory also guides journalism research positioned at the intersection of innovation and journalism practices (e.g., Ahva 2019; Raetzsch 2015; Wagemans and Witschge 2019). Steensen (2013) argues that examining innovations from the perspective of practice theory avoids over-emphasizing either structural factors or individual agency as key constraints or enablers of innovation practices in newsrooms. Ryfe (2019) employs practice theory to characterize journalism as a social field of practices, and argues that transformations in practices are better understood by studying how traditional and new actors interact to reproduce certain practices and/or introduce new ones. Witschge and Harbers (2018) posit that practice theory facilitates an understanding of how actors' reflexivity towards particular practices in journalism contribute to their alteration and/or perpetuation.

For this study, we conceptualize innovation as practice based on three interconnected elements: (1) *activities* (or constellation of activities)—how actors behave, do things, or move about; (2) *materiality*—objects, tools, technologies, or geographies that are part of practices; and (3) *reflexivity*—symbolic meanings that actors give to their actions and the objects they use. For activities to become practices, they need to be connected to reflexivity and materiality (Ahva 2017). Conceptualizing innovation using these three elements allows us to pose a series of questions (cf. Ahva 2019): (1) What activities are involved in innovation practices and how are those activities configured? (2) What materiality is associated with innovation practices? (3) How are innovation practices articulated by social actors?

Ultimately, innovation as practice is the theoretical approach that guides our investigation of a publisher's innovation practices in relation to platforms by focusing on what actors do (activities), with which platforms (materiality), and how they make meaning (reflexivity) of both.

2.3 Editorially Oriented Activities

Publishers innovate in diverse ways. Some innovations are geared towards technology or business, while others are editorially oriented, insofar that they relate to

news production and dissemination, although the boundaries between editorial, business, and technological activities are increasingly blur (Cornia et al. 2020; Drew and Thomas 2018). Nonetheless, this study analyzes the innovation of editorially oriented activities, which we here refer to the six stages of news production. The first five-stages are based on a model proposed by Domingo et al. (2008): (1) access/observation: gaining access to and making observations of events and information; (2) selection/filtering: sifting and deciding relevant information to publish; (3) processing/editing—gathering and preparing information, including texts, photos, and videos, for publication; (4) distribution—disseminating published information; and (5) interpretation—engaging with audiences and influencing their interpretation of information. While this five-stage classification is useful for focusing on publishers' editorially oriented activities, we incorporate a sixth stage—analysis, which captures how journalistic work incorporates technologies for analyzing audience behaviors (Lewis and Westlund 2015). In this stage, we focus on the use of third-party analytics infrastructures in news work (e.g., Chartbeat, CrowdTangle, Google Analytics, etc.). For example, publishers have since the 2010s, gravitated towards using web and social media analytics for developing editorially oriented metrics (Carlson 2018; Tandoc 2019).

Furthermore, the ability to understand and meet audiences' news preferences on the plethora of platforms they are using has become vital for commercially driven publications as this impacts subscriptions and advertising (Myllylahti 2021; Olsen et al. 2021). In sum, our study analyzes how a publisher innovates its editorially oriented activities in relation to platforms with respect to each of the six stages of news production.

2.4 Publishers and Platforms: Building Platform Presence and Platform Counterbalancing

Previous studies examining news publishers' innovation practices in relation to third-party platforms funnel into two strands of general findings: building platform presence and platform counterbalancing. On building platform presence, the literature focuses on how publishers and journalists leverage platforms in their news work (Steensen and Westlund 2021). In both research and industry, building platform presence is characterized by the positive value platforms offer publishers. In essence, the scholarship focuses on how publishers take initiatives for and together with platforms, with much of the research concentrating on how publishers and journalists capitalize on the immediacy and reach of social media platforms for newsgathering, reporting, news dissemination, and audience engagement (Hermida 2016). Studies find that despite frequent tensions and

uncertainty, publishers continue to invest in distributing content on social media, especially on Facebook, because they believe platforms can generate short-term gains and offer a path to pursue their journalistic and commercial ambitions (e.g., Cornia et al. 2018; Sehl et al. 2021). Research also indicates publishers' increasing willingness to produce experiential journalism content for platforms. These digital intermediaries have offered financial inducements to stimulate interest among publishers and promised greater audience engagement for virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR) stories distributed on their platforms (Newman 2017; Pavlik 2019). Congruently, a study of German newsrooms argues that publishers are keen to use WhatsApp for news distribution and engagement because it offers publishers a chance to "win back users" (Boczek and Koppers 2020, p. 16) who otherwise cease to engage news providers via traditional channels. Another study of Greek news media finds that they have normalized search engine optimization (SEO) and traffic measurement metrics into their news practices as these digital tools become increasingly valuable for attracting more online readers (Giomelakis et al. 2019).

Ultimately, however useful and important, SEO and SMO (social media optimization) are activities that publishers engage in to optimize their contents for discoverability on platforms.

Nonetheless, some studies report mixed findings. A study of public and private news broadcasters and publishers in six European countries finds that platforms are perceived as 'frenemies' (simultaneously being both a friend and an enemy). This research argues that internal agency and strategic priorities among publishers are important considerations for how they approach platforms, yet structural factors such as power asymmetries and algorithmic incentives are also significant (Sehl et al. 2021). The perception of platforms as frenemies suggest that some publishers have developed a critical mindset and are not keen on merely building platform presence.

A second strand of research approaches the publisher-platform relationship with a more critical lens (e.g., Chua and Westlund 2019; Lewis and Molyneux 2018; Nielsen and Ganter 2018), highlighting how communicative power has transferred from publishers to platforms (Dwyer and Martin 2017; Ekström and Westlund 2019). This line of emerging research harmonizes with more critical scholarly discussions on the tremendous power platforms have as digital intermediaries between publishers and audiences, arguing that platforms must not be treated as substitutes for news and free speech (Helberger 2020; Martin 2021). Studies have underscored that throughout the 2010s, publishers have become dependent on platforms for distribution, exposure, and participation. Yet, the potential that platforms promise publishers has not materialized and publishers are increasingly engaging in platform counterbalancing to reduce their dependence on platforms.

Research in the US and Europe finds that publishers have become more skeptical towards platforms and are hesitant in building their businesses within platforms. Instead, they increasingly devote resources to developing their own proprietary platforms to reclaim control over audiences, data, and revenue (Nielsen and Ganter 2018; Rashidian et al. 2019). An Australian multi-site newsrooms study finds that after more than a decade of investing resources in building platform presence, publishers have diversified their online distribution strategies following Facebook's implementation of its meaningful social interaction algorithm in 2018, which had adversely impacted digital readership figures and engagement with online audiences (Meese and Hurcombe 2020).

2.5 Platform Configuration

In essence, building platform presence and platform counterbalancing represent two important strands of research capturing diverging approaches to the publisher-platform interrelationship (Steensen and Westlund 2021). It must be recognized that a publisher may build platform presence for some platforms, while simultaneously engaging in platform counterbalancing in other ways. Moreover, a publisher may change their approach towards platforms over time. As an extension of our review of these two diverging and co-existing approaches, we propose a conceptual framework that can be operationalized and used in empirical research, and which sits at a higher level of abstraction than building platform presence and platform counterbalancing. We introduce the concept, platform configuration, referring to how publishers continuously configure their editorially oriented activities in relation to third-party platforms by building platform presence and/or platform counterbalancing. Hence, *platform configuration refers to how publishers configure their editorially oriented activities in relation to specific platforms and their technological infrastructures (materiality), based on their ongoing individual and collective assessments (reflexivity) of their resources and intentions for achieving certain organizational goals.*

Importantly, our concept analyzes how publishers configure their activities vis-à-vis platforms with respect to the six stages of news production. This differs from congruent iterations of platform configuration that problematizes the publisher-platform relationship from a political economy perspective (cf. Nieborg et al. 2019). While we acknowledge that external factors such as market dynamics and governmental policy interact with and shape internal processes within publishers, our platform configuration concept focuses on publishers' innovation practices in relation to platforms.

Additionally, we posit that publishers' platform configuration can be systematically analyzed through three distinct approaches: *adding*, *modifying*, and *removing*. Adding refers to instances when publishers add new activities associated with platforms and is linked to building platform presence. Modifying refers to instances when publishers alter existing activities in relation to platforms: for instance, adjusting the frequency of distribution of news articles on certain platforms or becoming more purposive in producing content on specific platforms to target audience segments. Modifying entails both an increase and a decrease in activities. Modifying activities aimed at circulating more news on platforms is linked to building platform presence, while modifying activities aimed at reducing platform footprint are geared towards platform counterbalancing. Lastly, *removing* refers to the discontinuation of specific activities and leans towards platform counterbalancing. For example, when publishers decide to terminate their account(s) for specific platforms, or stop using a service that platforms offer. In sum, platform configuration encompasses two diverging practices, each associated with two distinct activities: (1) building platform presence—adding new activities and/or modifying activities by increasing existing ones and (2) platform counterbalancing—removing activities and/or modifying activities by decreasing existing activities.

2.6 Synthesis and Study Rationale

As discussed, publishers' innovation practices are fluid, and thus, longitudinal approaches are required to understand how they transform over time (Slappendel 1996). Yet, relatively few studies have done so. This study argues that publishers' innovation practices in relation to platforms sees them engaging in platform configuration, which entails adding, modifying and removing specific activities. Ultimately, this study examines, over time, a publisher's platform configuration with respect to each of the six stages of news production. Thus, we ask:

RQ1: Between 2016 and 2021, how did the publisher configure its activities and with which platforms (materiality)?

RQ2: Over time, how did the publisher's staff make meaning (reflexivity) about the activities and materiality associated with platform configuration?

3 Method and Material

Case study is an optimal method for examining contemporary phenomena in their real-life context (Yin 2018). The Singapore-based legacy publisher represents a theoretically informed case study that typifies the empirical phenomenon this study is interested in (Rule and John 2015). This for-profit publisher positions itself as a national news provider that employs about 300 staff. Over the last decade, its advertising revenues and circulation have gradually declined. To counter this, the publisher transformed itself from a print to a digital-focused news organization. This includes working with platforms to produce, distribute and gain exposure for its content, interact with its readers and exploit monetization potential.

3.1 Fieldwork

This case study adopts a mixed-method qualitative approach that emphasizes semi-structured interviews with the publisher's staff. The in-depth interviews are augmented with newsroom observation, monitoring of the publisher's website and app, and multiple instances of correspondence with staff via email and informally in-person. All data was gathered between end-2015 and mid-2021. This study's first author initiated research in end-2015, and following the first round of fieldwork, noted significant changes over time. After attracting funding, it was possible for the first author to continue to study developments over time. Importantly, longitudinal qualitative approaches are suitable for practice theory research because they "reveal the rich details of practices and the way they unfold" (Spaargaren et al. 2016, p. 17).

The interviews were conducted at four different points in time: From end-2015 to mid-2016 (dated as 2016), from end-2018 to early-2019 (dated as 2019), in early-2020, and in the first half of 2021. Interviews were done with 35 staff comprising editors, journalists, technologists, commercial executives, and product managers (Table 1). Each interview lasted between 35 and 70 min and several staff were interviewed multiple times. All interviews were digitally recorded and initially transcribed using digital transcription software. This study's first author listened to the full recordings and repeatedly verified them against the speech-to-text transcripts to ensure their accuracy.

In 2020, about 20 h of non-participant newsroom observation was done over a fortnight by the first author to ascertain how platforms featured in the publisher's editorial work. This involved sitting in for six editorial meetings, a meeting between digital journalists and technologists, and observing two digital journalists

Table 1: Sample.

Participant code	Job function
S1	Digital editor
S2	Social media editor
S3	Digital editor
S4	Digital journalist
S5	Journalist
S6	Editor
S7	Commercial manager
S8	Digital editor
S9	Digital editor
S10	Digital editor
S11	Technologist
S12	Journalist
S13	Journalist
S14	Digital journalist
S15	Journalist
S16	Journalist
S17	Journalist
S18	Journalist
S19	Digital editor
S20	Journalist
S21	Editor
S22	Audience engagement editor
S23	Journalist
S24	Editor
S25	Digital editor
S26	Journalist
S27	Editor
S28	Product manager
S29	Commercial manager
S30	Product manager
S31	Product manager
S32	Social media editor
S33	Technologist
S34	Journalist
S35	Social media editor

and a social media editor while they worked at their desks. During observations, he sat alongside the staff and asked questions based on his observations, which provided insights into the editorial staff’s activities related to platforms and their reflections about their activities. Each observation session lasted between 60 and 90 min and was done at different times of the day. Field notes and memos were

written during observations and at the end of each day respectively. These memos highlighted salient observations, potential patterns, and clarifications that needed to be made during subsequent interviews (cf. Charmaz 2006). Twenty hours of observation is a small number for a newsroom study. However, this study compensated for this limitation by repeatedly asking questions during the interviews to establish if the observations made were routine occurrences.

All interviews and observations were conducted in-person for all periods except 2021 when interviews were done online due to Covid-19 restrictions in Singapore. Also, interview and observation guides were jointly prepared by both authors prior to the fieldwork.

Additionally, this study's first author was a journalist who worked with the publisher before this study was initiated, and his familiarity with the publisher's practices informed the data. Nonetheless, all data was collected under conditions of anonymity as "a key principle is to respect the privacy of those you study" (Babbie 2011, p. 444) and the names of the publication and participants in this study have been withheld by request. Study participant numbers are used in the presentation of this article's findings and the job titles of staff are representative of what they do but do not allow for identification. The fieldwork for this study was carried out by one of its authors and the data analysis involved both.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis comprised four stages and involved a constant comparative approach where we assessed our data as it was being collected to iteratively make comparisons during every stage of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In stage one, we combined the data collected from 2016 to 2021 into one data set, read the transcripts and field notes multiple times, and categorized the data according to the six editorially oriented activities. In stage two, we coded the data from the first stage for instances where platforms (materiality) featured in each editorially oriented activity. Stage three entailed searching for recurring patterns regarding the publisher's configuration of editorially oriented activities in relation to platforms, paying attention to instances when activities were added, removed, or modified. Stage four involved identifying how the staff reflected on the publisher's platform configuration, and thereafter looking for patterns of change or stasis over time. The data presented in the findings are instances where both researchers agreed that a theme was evident. Certain interviewees provided quotes that were more relevant than others as exemplars of these themes, and hence, featured in this article.

4 Platform Configuration

This section presents findings in response to both RQs and is organized into six sub-sections according to editorially oriented activities. For each stage we systematically analyze how the publisher configured its editorially oriented activities in relation to specific platforms (materiality) between 2016 and 2021 (RQ1), followed by analysis of how social actors make meaning (reflexivity) of the configuration of activities in relation to platforms (RQ2).

4.1 Access and Observation

Here, the publisher configured activities by building platform presence. In doing so, the publisher *modified (increased)* its activities over time by employing a more systematic approach of monitoring and soliciting platforms for story ideas, sources and information. A social media editor (S2) in 2016 said monitoring platforms for story ideation, leads and competitors' breaking news coverage was limited largely due to resource constraints. By contrast, the publisher had by 2019 devoted more effort in monitoring platforms for access and observation, and developed a more systematic approach. This involved starting a social media unit consisting of six staff to spot potential news stories, follow-up on leads, and closely monitor the breaking news coverage of other publishers on platforms. In 2020, the publisher introduced a shift schedule to monitor platforms (mainly Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) and leveraged more on third-party technologies such as Facebook-owned CrowdTangle and Google Analytics to assess online trends (we further discuss the use of analytics tools in the sub-section "Analysis"). The social media editors were also responsible for communicating with the public who informed them of breaking news events on those platforms.

On the social actors' reflexivity, the staff positively characterized the publisher's activities that were geared towards building platform presence in three ways. First, the staff described platforms as improving the speed and geographical reach at which the publisher could spot developments on platforms and respond to them. The publisher's decision to implement a more systematic approach to monitoring platforms found support among staff. In 2016, a social media editor (S2) said he had missed things on social media or could not follow-up on story ideas and potential leads quickly due to resource constraints: he and another colleague were the only two people monitoring platforms frequently. In 2020, by comparison, the more systematic approach allowed the publisher to react more quickly to local and global events that "break on social media first, especially in spot news

situations when eyewitness accounts were needed quickly” (S9, digital editor). Journalists also perceived platforms as extending their reach when sourcing for leads and story ideas. In 2020, a digital journalist (S14) recounted she found overseas sources through Facebook when working on a story about drug abuse in Southeast Asia. Second, staff perceived the additional resources that had been devoted to building platform capabilities as a strategy to deal with the growing demands on accuracy brought on by the expanded range of information available on platforms. A digital editor (S2) in 2016 said verifying information on social media in breaking news situations was especially demanding and the limited resources the publisher had then contributed to a higher rate of errors. In 2021, by comparison, a social media editor (S35) said the social media unit was set up in part to assist the editors with authenticating information on platforms: “We’re like a crack team for verifying information [...] if we spot something, we’ll cross-check the information with multiple sources before alerting the editors.” Third, the staff depicted the greater scrutiny of competitors’ social media activities as allowing the publisher to better compete for online readership. A digital editor (S8) in 2016 added that the number of local online news sites had proliferated and there were instances when these sites picked up things that went unnoticed by the digital news team, which he attributed to a shortfall in resources. In 2019, this problem appeared to have been resolved. A digital journalist (S35) said there were occasions when the digital editors and social media team alerted her to a story that a competitor had published on social media, but she had overlooked, which eventually “turned out to be important news”.

In sum, the publisher continuously committed resources to using platforms for access and observation. While they consistently tuned into social media to identify potential leads and stories, we stress they did so largely as observers in this stage of news production.

Essentially, they neither showcased their platform presence nor struck formal partnerships with the platform companies, except when gaining access to technologies for monitoring social media activities (e.g., CrowdTangle).

4.2 Selection and Filtering

In this case, the publisher configured activities by building platform presence. Over time, the publisher *modified (increased)* the attention it gave to trending topics on platforms and produced stories based on their popularity. This activity was evident in 2016 and increased in the years that followed. In 2016, the publisher collaborated with Twitter to develop a microsite with articles and visualizations of trending tweets. In 2019, a digital journalist (S14) said social media played an

increasingly prominent role in influencing “how they choose stories, what stories to do, and which angles to use.” She cited an example of how a funny meme on a serious political issue trending on Facebook had influenced her editors to produce two separate stories: one about the meme and another on the issue. In 2020, a social media editor (S35) said his team was paying closer attention to the publication’s older posts that were “going viral again” on Facebook and Twitter, and using them to produce new content. In 2021, the publisher started a new section on its website featuring comments by readers on its Facebook page that were interesting and had garnered high engagement.

On the social actors’ reflexivity, the staff had diverging views towards the publisher’s activities. On the one hand, the staff acknowledged the value of paying more attention to trending issues on platforms. They highlighted four merits of using platforms to spot popular trends: Relevance—“reporting on stories that have gone viral on social media shows our readers that we’re in touch with the times” (S2, social media editor, 2019); relatability—“it’s even more important now [...] It’s a reflection of what they’re really interested in” and a way to “relate to their interests” (S8, digital editor, 2019); readership—“those stories usually get pretty good clicks, which is great for our pageviews (S9, digital editor, 2020); and inclusivity—the new section on the publisher’s website based on popular readers’ comments on Facebook was an attempt to “make readers feel like they’re more included” (S32, social media editor, 2021) in the publisher’s news decisions. On the other hand, some were apprehensive towards relying on platforms for story ideation. In 2016, a news editor (S6) said he preferred to rely on his “news instincts” rather than social media trends when making editorial decisions. A journalist (S26) in 2021 conveyed similar concerns: “Sometimes, when things trend on social media, all the information is already out there and there’s nothing newsworthy left. But my editors still want a story [...] maybe just for the clicks.”

In sum, the publisher increasingly incorporated platforms in its selection and filtering activities. Its presence on platforms was also growingly evident over time as it leveraged platforms for news decisions, audience preferences, and branding.

4.3 Processing and Editing

In this instance, the publisher configured activities by building platform presence and *added* activities over time. First, the publisher began producing different types of new content for platforms. In 2019, the publisher set up a TV studio to produce talkshow programs that were livestreamed on Facebook and YouTube. The publisher also worked with Google in 2019 to produce VR stories, but discontinued the project after a year as the platform did not avail the VR headsets in Singapore.

Reporters were also increasingly tasked to shoot videos to accompany their articles that were promoted on Instagram (S26, journalist, 2020). In 2021, the publisher began producing short video clips that were expected to “do well on Facebook” (S35, social media editor) and used them to promote stories on the platform. Second, the publisher became more specific when promoting existing content on platforms, which entailed two approaches. One, there was greater customization when processing content for publication on various platforms: “It could be exactly the same story, but we highlight different parts when posting it on different platforms” (S9, digital editor, 2020). This selectivity also manifested during a meeting this study observed in 2020, when the editors had a lengthy discussion about how parts of a multimedia story could be edited differently for posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Two, social media blurbs were written differently for specific platforms: “For Twitter, it’s straightforward to the news point [...] For Facebook, we massage the blurb a bit to give some context to the story [...] For Instagram, we tend to push less serious stuff there, so the tone of the blurbs is more light-hearted” (S35, social media editor, 2021). In 2021, the publisher started producing video clips for Tik Tok. These *added* activities, however, contrasted with 2016, when the publisher paid less consideration to customizing content for platforms and would “just ‘whack’ whatever content” (S8, digital editor) they had on various platforms.

About the social actor’s reflexivity, the staff were diminutive about the publisher’s activities, with many of them describing it as a game: “social media engagement is the name of the game (S4, digital journalist, 2016); funneling readers platforms to its website was described as “a numbers game” (S2, social media editor, 2019); “everyone is playing the Facebook game” (S15, journalist, 2019); “if you keep flooding Facebook, you sort of kill your own game, harm your own algorithm” (S35, social media editor, 2021). This suggests that although the staff recognized the potential of platforms for “winning” audiences, they were also wary about platforms’ encroaching influence on their news work.

For processing and editing, like the previous two editorially oriented activities, the publisher committed more effort when configuring its activities to building platform presence. Over time, the publisher’s intentions to garner greater visibility when promoting its news content saw it directly collaborate with platforms to produce original content, and become more selective and sensitive in editing content and writing blurbs for different platforms.

4.4 Distribution

On this account, the publisher's configuration of activities involved both building platform presence and platform counterbalancing. In relation to building platform presence, the publisher *added* new platforms to its repertoire of channels for distributing content over time. In 2016, the publisher began disseminating selected articles and its digital newsletters via Telegram. It also distributed selected articles on WhatsApp but stopped this activity in 2019 when the platform discontinued bulk messaging. In 2020, the publisher started producing podcasts that were hosted on its website but distributed them via podcasting apps on Apple and Android mobile devices and smart speakers.

Concurrently, the publisher also engaged in platform counterbalancing, and *modified (decreased)* its activities in three ways. First, the publisher lowered the rate at which it distributed content on platforms. In 2016, the publisher posted an average of six posts per hour on Facebook and 12 tweets per hour on Twitter. In 2019, it decreased the rate of posts on Facebook and Twitter by 50%, in line with an altered strategy to stop flooding social media. Second, the publisher was more purposive in curating the types of articles it distributed across various platforms: Facebook and Twitter “carried more serious stuff” (S35, social media editor, 2019) such as breaking news, long-form commentaries, while Instagram was used to disseminate stories that resonated with younger audiences. Third, the publisher improved distribution on its proprietary platforms to reduce dependence on non-proprietary platforms for news dissemination. By 2019, the publisher distributed topical email newsletters that audiences could subscribe to and implemented news recommendation algorithms on its website and mobile app.

On the social actors' reflexivity, the staff exhibited mixed reflections. On the one hand, they were cognizant that distributing news via platforms could help “get as much reach as possible for [their] stuff” (S2, social media editor, 2016). Platforms were described as “very effective” in helping reach an international audience: “I get emails from so and so from the US, UK who said they read my article on Facebook (S23, journalist, 2020). Likewise, a digital editor (S9) in 2020 emphasized the need to diversify its distribution across multiple platforms “to bring content to readers rather than wait for them to come to us”. On the other hand, the staff were skeptical about relying on platforms for distribution and called for more measured approaches because although platforms may improve a publisher's reach, it may not necessarily translate into commercial viability:

I can understand the fact that people say you put your content where the audience is, but I think a lot of publishers have been suckered into that line of thinking [...] Platforms drive traffic to our website, yes, we make some money, but it's not a whole lot. (S8, digital editor, 2019)

Furthermore, a digital editor (S25) in 2020 added that the publisher's attempts at improving its proprietary platforms indicated a growing "awareness that we're sitting on somebody else's platform" and a need to have "more control" over distribution, before adding, "I feel we have not thought hard enough about a long-term solution."

All in all, the publisher moderated its approach in relation to distribution. This involved increasing its platform footprint by expanding the repertoire of platforms it committed to as frequently used distribution channels, but simultaneously being more purposive in its dissemination of content on platforms. Concurrently, the publisher lowered its commitment to using platforms for distribution by establishing a direct relationship with its audience via proprietary channels.

4.5 Interpretation

In this case, the publisher configured activities by both building platform presence and platform counterbalancing. On building platform presence, the publisher *added* new activities to engage audiences on platforms in two ways. First, it explored new ways of engaging with audiences on platforms they already used. For example, the publisher in 2019 started a private Facebook group for audiences to encourage engagement with social media editors and "foster a sense of community among loyal readers" (S6, social media editor). It also used opinion polls on Telegram and Instagram quizzes to interact with different segments of audiences on different platforms. The publisher also began live streaming public events where its journalists interacted with audiences in-person or were invited as guest speakers. Second, the publisher started in 2021 to experiment with Clubhouse.

Simultaneously, the publisher engaged in platform counterbalancing by tempering its reliance on platforms for audience engagement in two ways. First, the publisher *removed* the activity of designating journalists to engage with readers on Twitter and Facebook. In 2016, journalists who were considered "topic experts" and "household names" (S6, news editor) were tasked to engage with readers on company-sanctioned Twitter and Facebook accounts. This activity was *removed* by 2019: "Only a handful of journalists were good at engaging audiences on social media, but many were not so savvy. But by and large, most felt it was additional and unnecessary work" (S2, social media editor). Second, the publisher innovated its proprietary platform by developing more digital newsletters that readers could subscribe to as a way of "building direct relationships with audiences" (S7, social media editor) independently of platforms.

Regarding the social actors' reflexivity, the staff expressed both endorsement and resistance. Those who were positive noted that platforms were important for

brand building in two ways. First, platforms facilitated the “strengthening” (S2, digital editor, 2016) of the publisher’s brand by allowing it to interact with more and different segments of audiences online. The live streaming of events on platforms were also depicted as effective for showcasing the publisher’s journalists as “thought-leaders in the community” (S9, digital editor, 2019). Second, platforms also allowed journalists to build their own personal brands by gaining recognition from the public and co-workers: “Some [journalists] really push hard to highlight their stories and engage with readers on their own social media accounts because they get public exposure and internal recognition when their stories do well on the charts” (S2, social media editor, 2019). Yet, some staff resisted using platforms for engaging audiences, even though they recognized its merits. For instance, a news editor (S6) who was designated to engage audiences on social media ambivalently said in 2019: “I suppose we should, but I’m not very proactive. My accounts were stagnant [...] I feel there’s already quite a lot on my plate so I’m quite grateful that I’m not forced to juggle that additional responsibility of engaging readers on social media.”

Essentially, the publisher adopted a measured approach in its commitment to platforms for interpretation. In one sense, the publisher increased its commitment to platforms by using them to engage audiences; in another, it lowered its presence by discontinuing the use of certain platforms for interacting with audiences, largely due to resistance from journalists.

4.6 Analysis

In this aspect, the publisher configured its activities by building platform presence and diachronically *modified (increased)* activities. Importantly, our findings suggest that third-party analytics tools were increasingly incorporated into the other five editorially oriented activities discussed above.

Regarding access and observation, analytics was progressively used to monitor trends online and get access to interviews. A journalist (S15) in 2019 said she convinced a public relations executive to give her access to interview a celebrity because an earlier story she had written on the personality was one of the top performing articles on the publisher’s social media accounts and website. A social media editor (S35) in 2021 explained that CrowdTangle was integral to the monitoring of trending content on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit: “We have alerts set up for a whole bunch of topics [...] to see what’s trending in real-time on these platforms.”

Regarding selection and filtering, analytics progressively influenced the publisher’s news decisions, both digitally and in the newspaper. This was

observed in 2020, when the publisher's Chartbeat data showed that a breaking news article had unexpectedly become the top performing story a day after it was published. This prompted the editors to position the story more prominently on its website and assign a journalist to follow-up. When the original article continued to perform well online the subsequent day, the editors used the article's online popularity to guide their decision to publish it on the newspaper's front page the following day. Later, both a digital editor (S8) and an editor (S6) confirmed that such occurrences had become more common in the past few years.

Regarding processing and editing, analytics was increasingly employed for optimizing content for social media and search engines. For instance, blurbs and photos for social media were optimized based on multiple and longitudinal data provided by Chartbeat, Google Analytics, and CrowdTangle: "When we look at years of these data, we sort of know what types of posts on which platforms will get people's attention and make them click through to our site [...] so we try to tweak our posts accordingly" (S32, social media editor, 2020).

Additionally, analytics were also used to develop metrics which in turn guided how articles were presented (optimized) online: "We look at the data to see which stories attract people to stay longer. Then, we look for patterns in those stories [...] how headlines are written, what photos or videos were used. Then, we run experiments to see if we can recreate the same effect in other stories" (S8, digital editor, 2020).

Regarding distribution, analytics influenced the publisher's activities in three ways. First, it affected the time the publisher disseminated stories online. The publisher in 2016 moved its morning editorial meeting earlier by 4 h based on analytics: "I used analytics to back up my argument for proposing the change, both social media and our website data. I said people would wake up in the morning and read our stories, and that would affect our traffic" (S8, digital editor). In 2020, a digital journalist (S14) said she uses data to convince her editors to alter the publication times of stories:

There was an interactive infographic story and the editor wanted to publish it on a long weekend. I told her no one reads us on weekends. The data shows that Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings are good for these types of stories, so let's publish it then.

Second, analytics impacted the curation of stories for platforms. Here, referral traffic data ("clickthroughs") was an increasingly important metric for the publisher when considering types of news to distribute on specific platforms: "Different types of news do better on different social media to bring readers to our site [...] So, we treat social media as different distribution platforms to surface different types of stories" (S9, social media editor, 2020). Third, analytics

motivated the publisher's paywall decisions. In this instance, a digital editor (S9) said referral traffic numbers from social media to the publisher's website and conversions were considered when lifting or implementing the paywall for specific articles or for certain groups of readers.

Regarding interpretation, analytics impacted activities in two ways. First, social media engagement metrics were considered when amplifying certain posts: "If we see that there's quite a bit of engagement on certain posts, then we'll think about boosting them" (S8, digital editor, 2020). Second, data on online story performance guided decisions on which articles should be recirculated on platforms: "If the Chartbeat data tells us a story is doing well, and if we have not pushed it out on Facebook or Instagram, we will. It's to alert people that this is an interesting story and people are genuinely interested in reading it" (S32, social media editor, 2021). Third, an audience engagement unit, consisting of staff who possessed competencies in analytics and journalism, was started in 2020 to analyze audience data and explore innovations in engaging audiences on platforms: "A key part of my job is to exploit third-party products to the best of our ability [...] that includes really looking at the numbers and thinking about ways to improve how we engage our audiences (S22, audience engagement editor, 2020).

On the social actors' reflexivity, the publisher's activities garnered disparate reactions from its staff. In one sense, leveraging on analytics had been characterized in terms of three advantages: functionality—a journalist (S15) in 2019 reported using the performance of her online stories as leverage to gain access to interviews; validation—a journalist (S13) in 2019 said her competence was judged by these analytics; commerciality—"the more pageviews we have, the higher the probability of getting subscribers; and the more eyeballs and subscribers we have, the more attractive we'll be to advertisers" (S31, product manager, 2021).

Contrarily, the staff also expressed concerns over the influence of analytics on the social value of its journalism. A news editor (S6) in 2016 opined that analytics is "only useful to get a sense of what people are interested in [...] it cannot replace your own judgment about impact, and how important a story is." A digital journalist (S14) in 2020 claimed there was a mismatch between the anecdotes she had heard from audiences about what they were interested in, and what the data showed: "The audiences sometimes blame us for not giving more focus to important stories. But the data shows they're more interested in the Kardashians or the latest crazy homicide."

Additionally, the staff demonstrated increasing skepticism towards platforms and expressed the need to take back control of data from them. In 2016, despite having collaborated with Twitter to produce content, a social media editor (S2) implied caution about his meeting with the platform: "I met some of the Twitter

folk [...] So, one of my responsibilities, sort of, is also a bit of partnership with the tech and social media companies”.

His mentions of “one of”, “sort of,” and “a bit” suggest hesitance and prudence. In 2019, the staff’s ire with platform companies were more unequivocal. A social media editor (S2) described platforms as “unreliable”, after Facebook implemented its meaningful social interaction algorithm in 2018, which had “badly affected” the publisher’s referral traffic from the platforms, adding: “We now want to grow our readers outside these platforms.” A digital editor (S8) said: “[Platforms] collect all sorts of data about our readers and stuff like that and we get little in return. That relationship is not that valuable,” before adding that the “imbalance” must be addressed. Platforms were also characterized as “one of the biggest threats to [the publisher’s] business model” (S21, product manager, 2020) as they have “eaten into the value of the product” (S8, digital editor, 2020). Another digital editor (S9) cited an example of how taking control of data allowed the publisher to more granularly segment “the more active and loyal users” on its proprietary platforms and focus its efforts on engaging and growing those readers.

By and large, the publisher had increased its commitment to using third-party analytics for generating metrics, which saw it incorporate platform-related analytics tools in all five editorially oriented activities. Yet, this was tempered with some effort to bypass platforms for data by attempting to build its own data infrastructure, invest in-house expertise, and collaborate with other news organizations to set up data exchange consortiums.

5 Discussion: Multidirectionality, Specificity, and Commitment

This article examines, analyzes, and conceptualizes how a publisher innovated its editorially oriented activities in relation to platforms over time. It draws on practice theory to conceptualize innovation as practice (Ahva 2019), which provided us with a theoretical springboard to offer conceptual advancements and empirical analyses that contribute to the emerging scholarship on the publisher-platform interrelationship. In our synthesis of the literature, we introduce the concept platform configuration to understand publishers’ innovation practices in relation to platforms, taking into account that publishers are building platform presence and/or platform counterbalancing. We also chart an operationalization involving three distinct approaches: adding, modifying, and removing. Platform configuration enables scholars to systematically analyze and classify *what* publishers do when innovating each of their editorially oriented activities vis-à-vis specific platforms (materiality) over time, and *how* they achieve those ends. Next, we

discuss three conclusions that we have singled out from our analysis of the findings, each named by their key characteristics: (1) *multidirectionality*, (2) *specificity*, and (3) *commitment*.

Overall, our findings show that the publisher, in their ongoing platform configuration (here studied 2016–2021), simultaneously engaged in building platform presence and platform counterbalancing. Thus, a first key conclusion is that publishers' approaches to and practices with platforms are *multidirectional*. Importantly, the longitudinal study shows multidirectionality not only takes place over time, but also at any given time.

Amid the multidirectionality, scholars should aim to clear the fog and go beyond scratching the surface. Another key finding in our study is that the publisher has developed rather specific ways for configuring different types of activities. Our second key conclusion thus focuses on *specificity*: a close exploration and unpacking of the wider range of specific publisher's practices is essential to understand the complex nature of their approach to platforms. This conclusion strengthens the introduction and further advancement of platform configuration as a concept that can be put into use, enabling scholars to capture and classify critical nuances in publisher's specific practices. For instance, while efforts towards building platform presence were indeed identified across all the six stages of news production that we analyzed, we foreground the nuances in the publisher's approaches to building platform presence by highlighting how it either added and/or modified (increased) its presence on platforms. This incorporation of platforms into its news processes is aligned with studies that show how publishers turn to platforms for story ideation, sourcing, verification, news selection, dissemination and engagement, and data (e.g., Boczek and Koppers 2019; Duffy et al. 2018; Giomelakis et al. 2019). Importantly, the publisher also removed and/or modified (decreased) activities associated with distribution, interpretation, and analysis. Thus, they adopted a multidirectional approach involving platform counterbalancing for these three activities. These findings harmonize with research that observe that some publishers are gradually implementing strategic countermeasures to wrangle back control of their audiences, data and revenues from platforms, which includes the development of their proprietary platforms and data capabilities (e.g., Ekström et al. 2021; Myllylahti 2020, 2021; Nielsen and Ganter 2018; Sehl et al. 2021). A recent study of American publishers found a sort of multidirectionality in terms of publishers on the one hand embracing platforms and social media logics, while on the other defending their journalistic values and prioritizing their proprietary news sites and monetization (Walters 2021). Furthermore, other advantages publishers gain by focusing innovation efforts on their proprietary platforms include greater supervision over ecologically sustainable practices, such as ensuring that environmentally friendly servers are used and exploitative labour is not involved. Turning back to our study, when reflecting on the publisher's activities and materiality, the staff's

responses were underscored by distinct tension between acknowledging that platforms contributed to some of its journalistic and commercial ambitions (Cornia et al. 2018), and being cognizant of a need to reduce dependence on platforms, especially in activities related to distribution (Meese and Hurcombe 2020), interpretation and analysis (Nielsen and Ganter 2018; Rashidian et al. 2019).

When it comes to *how* the publisher configures (RQ1) and makes meaning (RQ2) of its editorially oriented activities in relation to platforms, our first and second conclusions have highlighted the importance of studying multi-directionality and specificity. Additionally, our second RQ on reflexivity allows us not only to classify how they acted, but also to explore *why* they did so. This leads us to our third conclusion from the findings: the practice of platform configuration was marked by the publisher moderating its *commitment* to certain activities that were geared towards building platform presence and/or platform counterbalancing.

6 Conclusion: Advancing the Platform Configuration Concept

As a further development of our platform configuration concept, this article posits a 2×2 platform configuration matrix that can be used to classify how and explain why publishers engage in platform configuration. Our platform configuration matrix presents two interrelated continuums: (1) The horizontal continuum

Figure 1: Platform configuration matrix.

specifies activities that are either *internally* or *externally oriented*; and (2) the vertical continuum indicates *low* versus *high* degrees of commitment to specific activities. Nonetheless, situating the internal vis-a-vis external context for a publisher obviously is a daunting task when considering that boundaries between the two converge in multiple ways.

The two continuums of this classification form a model with four quadrants (Figure 1).

The top two quadrants reflect activities to which publishers devote a high degree of commitment and may indicate a publisher's high proclivity for building platform presence. The upper-left quadrant indicates internally oriented activities that are more resource-intensive. Examples of activities found in this quadrant include devoting resources to producing original content for platforms and creating new roles within the newsroom to capitalize on platforms (e.g., social media and audience engagement editors). Moving to the upper-right quadrant, this dimension denotes a high level of commitment by publishers to externally oriented activities, such as working directly with platforms on projects that are visible to audiences or directly relying on platforms for advertising, readership and audience engagement. The bottom two quadrants demonstrate low degrees of commitment to activities, which may indicate a publisher's relatively lower penchant for building platform presence and a disposition towards platform counterbalancing. The lower-left entails low commitment to internally oriented activities and may include actions such as sporadically using platforms for access and observation or publishing the same article across several platforms without making significant changes to its content or the presentation of its content. The lower-right quadrant describes externally oriented activities that publishers give a low level of commitment to: for instance, maintaining an account with a platform but leaving it stagnant, or discontinuing the use of certain platform services.

7 Practical Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

In extension of this study, we offer two practical implications. First, this longitudinal study makes salient the otherwise obscure consequences that platforms as powerful digital intermediaries have on journalism, paying particular attention to how platforms shape the curation, production, and distribution of media content in society. This is in line with calls among researchers to urgently devote greater scrutiny to the power of platforms in influencing social and cultural practices in everyday life and public domains including journalism (Couldry and Van Dijck

2015; Hutchinson 2021). Second, although our 2×2 matrix is derived from the analysis of a publisher's innovation practices in relation to platforms, its broad conceptualization offers an analytical framework for mapping the platform configuration of other publishers. Media managers and publishers would thus consider this matrix—i.e., their degree of commitment to specific internally or externally oriented activities—as they reconcile their innovation practices in relation to platforms with broader journalistic and financial objectives.

One limitation of this study is that although this study applied a mix-method qualitative approach, it places greater emphasis on interviews. Nonetheless, the rich interview data was triangulated with multiple data sources garnered from 20 h of newsroom observations, close monitoring of the publisher's website and digital news app, and other instances of correspondence with the publisher's staff. Furthermore, this article's first author, having worked with the publisher as an ex-journalist, possesses a familiarity with the publisher's practices that informs this study.

We offer three concise suggestions for further work in this area. First, we encourage cross-cultural research into platform configuration, both longitudinal and short-term studies. Researchers could examine interrelationships between platform configuration and country and/or market contexts, business models (e.g., for-profit, public service, foundation-funded, etc.), and types of media companies (e.g., legacy media organizations, digital news-startups, etc.). Second, the evidence in our study suggests tensions in the staff's reflexivity towards the publishers' commitment to specific activities. Future research could extend upon this by making salient how different professional communities in news organizations—journalists, commercial managers, and technologists (Westlund and Lewis 2014)—interplay to shape the commitment publishers give to certain activities vis-à-vis non-proprietary platforms. Third, research could pay more attention to how publishers balance their commitment to third-party platforms while paying attention to the normative ideals of journalism (cf. Lewis and Molyneux 2018; Hermida and Mellado 2020; Walters 2021). Importantly, our concepts and study contribute to the field as it allows researchers to classify and operationalize future investigations into the publisher-platform dynamic.

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