

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF CROATIAN NEWSPAPERS: ANALYZING EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES OF READERS OVER A FIVE-YEAR PERIOD*

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ABSTRACT

The digital transformation has revolutionized the media industry, reshaping the way news is consumed and challenging the dominance of traditional printed publications. As technology continues to advance at an unprecedented pace, it is crucial to examine the evolving landscape of news publishing and understand the preferences and behaviors of readers in the context of digital and printed newspaper formats. This research article presents a comparative analysis of reader opinions on a significant Croatian e-publication over a five-year period, aiming to explore the impact of digital transformation on readers' perceptions, engagement, and preferences between online and traditional printed content. By delving into the advantages, challenges, and trends associated with e-publications and printed editions, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between readers and news publications in the digital era.

KEY WORDS

digital transformation, e-publication, newspaper, printed, readers

CLASSIFICATION

JEL: L82, L86

*In text, specific titles are suppressed with generic notation *Media and MediaGroup*.

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INTRODUCTION

In an era of rapidly advancing technology that has influenced our everyday life and shifting media consumption habits, the landscape of news publishing has undergone significant digital transformations. The complexity and diversity of today's media landscape provides many challenges for scholars studying online news consumption [1]. Traditional printed publications have long been a cornerstone of the industry, providing tangible and trusted sources of information. However, the rise of digital platforms and the advent of e-publications have revolutionized how readers access and engage with news content. This article examines and compares the dynamics between e-publications and traditional printed publications, focusing on a significant newspaper to understand the evolving preferences, advantages, and challenges associated with each format.

News media play a crucial role in providing people with diverse, informed, multifaceted perspectives on local regional and global political, economic, cultural, and other public issues [1]. The digital transformation has revolutionized the media industry, reshaping the way news is consumed and challenging the dominance of traditional printed publications [2-4]. With the proliferation of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of the internet, news consumption patterns have undergone a paradigm shift [1, 5]. The advent of online platforms and e-publications has enabled readers to access news content anytime, anywhere, and has introduced new possibilities for interactivity and engagement [6, 7].

In this new media landscape, traditional printed publications have faced significant challenges. The rise of digital platforms has resulted in declining readership and circulation numbers for print newspapers [8]. This shift can be attributed to the convenience, immediacy, and accessibility offered by digital news sources [9]. Furthermore, digital platforms provide opportunities for personalized content delivery and interactive features, enhancing the overall user experience [10, 11].

The digital transformation has also impacted the business models of organizations, that range from e-learning to news organizations [12]. As advertising revenue has shifted from print to online platforms, publishers have had to adapt and explore new monetization strategies, such as paywalls or subscription models [13, 14]. These changes reflect the evolving dynamics of the media industry and the necessity for publishers to find sustainable revenue streams in the digital age. In addition to the shifting revenue streams, the digital transformation has also brought about changes in the distribution and consumption of news content. With the rise of social media and mobile devices, news organizations have had to optimize their content for online platforms and adapt to shorter attention spans and on-the-go consumption habits of readers [15]. These platforms have become integral sources of news for many readers, offering real-time updates and fostering user-generated content [16]. Social media has an omnipresent impact and has become one of the main marketing tools [17]. This has led to the development of mobile apps and responsive web designs to enhance the user experience and ensure easy access to news content anytime, anywhere. Furthermore, the digital landscape has opened up opportunities for news organizations to engage directly with their audiences through interactive features, comments sections, and personalized content recommendations, fostering a more participatory and tailored news experience. The interactive nature of social media allows for greater audience engagement, as readers can actively participate in discussions and share news articles with their networks [18-20]. The rise of social media has changed the paradigm of information production and consumption, as they are now the preferred means of staying up to date with news and current affairs [20]. Ultimately, these transformations in business models, distribution, and consumption reflect the ongoing adjustments and innovations required to thrive in the digital era.

The digital transformation has brought about significant changes in the media industry, challenging the dominance of traditional printed publications. The convenience, interactivity, and personalized nature of digital news sources have reshaped news consumption patterns, resulting in declining readership for print newspapers. News organizations have had to adapt their business models to sustain profitability in the digital era. Moreover, the emergence of social media and mobile applications has further transformed the way news is disseminated and consumed, emphasizing the need for media organizations to adapt to these evolving platforms.

The increasingly intensive consumption of online news in recent decades has persistently endangered print media, as shown by several partial studies, such as Filistrucchi [21] who showed that the Internet had a negative financial impact on the largest Italian daily newspapers, or Mesquita [22] who showed that French newspapers cannot solve “the dilemma between free and paid content”. World statistics show that in 2014 media content was used on average for 455 minutes a day [23], but only 16 minutes were devoted to reading daily newspapers (a decrease of 25,6 % in the period from 2010 to 2014), while magazines were read for 23 minutes a day (a decrease of 19 % in the period from 2010 to 2014). It is interesting to notice that global consumption of media content in 2023, dropped for 30 minutes to 455 minutes per day [24]. Legacy media like newspapers, “are becoming relatively less important as distributors of news even as they remain very important producers of news”; they seek a way out of financial difficulties by developing “new digital business models as their existing sources of revenue decline or stagnate” [25]. According to the latest EU statistics [26], 72 % of Internet users in the European Union now read their news online, and increasingly through social media instead of news websites. At the same time, interest in news was found to have fallen sharply worldwide, from 63 % of respondents in 2017 to 51 % in 2022 [27]. However, one has to take into account that there are significant differences between countries related to their level of development [28].

The goals of the article are twofold. First, the tables show the ten most read news websites according to Gemius for 2018 and 2023, to get a broad media picture of the popularity of e-publications in Croatia. Second, the results of the focus group discussion with readers of *Media-1*, as an example of e-publication that has introduced paywall, are presented.

The visiting rates of news websites in Croatia in 2018 were compared, and the results were compared with the visits in 2023. Two focus groups were created for the purpose of this research. The first focus group included readers of *Media-1* e-publication, and was held on April 23rd, 2018, in Zagreb, lasting 90 minutes. The second focus group, again with readers of *Media-1* e-publication, was held on February 2nd, 2023, via the Zoom application, lasting 90 minutes.

The participants of the focus groups were asked questions about the advantages of the e-publication compared to the printed edition and the reasons why some readers remained loyal to the paper edition. In particular, the aspects of price, speed, practicality and credibility of online content and the printed edition were investigated.

This article shows the differences in opinions of the users of *Media-1* e-publication towards free content and paywall, as well as the quality and reliability of newspaper articles in the period of five years (2018-2023). At the end of the 20th century, before the emergence of the first e-publications, *Media-1* was the most widely circulated newspaper in Croatia. The online edition of *Media-1* was launched on February 8, 1999 as one of the first e-publications of national daily newspapers in Croatia. In terms of timing, it was not an overly important event; until August 1999, there were only 6 % of Internet users in Croatia [29].

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION AND THE IMPACT ON PRINT MEDIA

The rise of digital platforms has not only replaced traditional intermediaries but also revolutionized business models. These platforms have become superpowers, encompassing omnichannel marketplaces that connect online and offline readers [30]. Moreover, they have transformed the linear supply chain pipeline into a dynamic network of interconnected producers and users within a complex ecosystem [31].

Bradshaw [32] lists the following characteristics of online journalism: people can consume it on any internet-connected device; it contains hyperlinks, multimedia and occurs in real time; the news is short and concise and can be read by skimming. Such characteristics of online content, as well as its immaterial nature, make the process of news production transparent and, by implication, free of charge. This may seem contradictory for modern generations who grew up in the digital age and mostly have the habit of shopping online [33], but it is in line with the general democratization of society. Attali [34] believes that hyper democracy includes “the mastery of time and meaning, costlessness, brotherhood, universal intelligence, ‘good times’, the common good”. He expressly states that in the future “books and periodicals will be free”, as well as music files and movies. According to his expectations, payment will be required only for live entertainment. But experience shows that free content and clickbait headlines “might be perceived as less credible and lower quality by readers” [35].

While some traditional news values, such as proximity, timeliness and impact have remained important in the digital age, other values, such as conflict and novelty, have become more salient due to the competitive pressure of the 24-hour news cycle and the need to attract and retain audiences in all to a more crowded media landscape [36]. One of the ways to win over the audience is to spread clickbait that “lures the reader to worthless content” [37], and completely “problematic information” [38] characterized by propaganda and disinformation. Wardle and Derakhshan [39] calls it “information disorder” characterized by disinformation (information that is false and intentionally created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country) and misinformation (information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm). In such a situation, some readers remain loyal to print media, which they consider more reliable, and because of this, they are more willing to pay for online content.

Due to all that, it comes as no surprise that research reveals that trust in the media is at an all-time low. However, it is surprising that among younger adults between the ages of 18 and 25, traditional media channels are the most trusted, but at the same time the content from these channels is not considered problematic and journalists, as identifiable sources of news, are largely irrelevant in orienting the information behaviors of this user group with peers being more important influencers and providers of (links to) news [40].

TRENDS IN ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION IN CROATIA

This article compares news website visits in Croatia, focusing on data from two significant periods: May 2018 and May 2023. By examining these two timeframes, the study explores potential changes in user behaviour and engagement with online news sources over a five-year interval. The data used for the analysis is sourced from reputable web analytics platforms, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings.

In May 2018, Croatia’s media landscape might have been influenced by various factors, such as political events, social trends, and technological advancements. Comparing this with May 2023, which represents a more recent snapshot, will enable us to observe any shifts in news consumption patterns. By studying these variations, the research seeks to shed light on the evolution of the digital news ecosystem in the country.

PAYWALL IN CROATIA

Media-1 is the first news medium in Croatia to put up a paywall. The preparations for introducing the paywall, which was supposed to be a test model for the entire Croatian newspaper industry, took several months. The model was finally implemented on November 17th 2012 [41]. In the first phase, *Media-1* chose the paywall based on points. Each text had its own point value, which was subtracted from the initial, prepaid balance. The average value of the text was five points, while richer content, with more material or publications in the digital form, could have a higher value. In 2013, metered access was introduced. Namely, every subscriber of the printed edition of *Media-1* could contact the newsroom, which then activated a timed access service. After activating the subscription to the printed edition of *Media-1*, the subscriber could enjoy unlimited “Premium content” online. It should be said that *Media-1* was reluctant to publish the number of real users of the “Premium package” within the e-publication. Considering that all subscribers of the printed edition automatically had a subscription to the “Premium package”, it was almost impossible to know the number of real users of the “Premium package”. Editor-in-chief of the *Media-1* website, mentioned 10 000 subscribers of the “Premium package” in 2018, but this figure referred generally to “Premium package” users, not just to the people who were ready to pay, and who actually paid for access to the internet content [42].

Table 1. Introduction of paywall on the most visited news websites in Croatia.

Node	2018.	2023.	Payment type	Billing introduced
Media-2	No	No		
Media-3	No	Yes	Charging for certain content	2021
Media-4	No	Yes	Charging for certain content	2021
Media-1	Yes	Yes	Charging for certain content	2012-2019 and 2021
Media-5	No	Yes	Charging for certain content	2023
Media-6	No	No		
Media-7	No	No		
Media-8	No	No		
Media-9	No	No		
Media-10	No	Yes	Billing after 10 articles	2021

The other most read e-publications in 2018 did not charge for access to their online content. The paywall scheme began almost synchronously in 2021, after full free access to content was closed by *Media-1*, *Media-3*, *Media-4* and *Media-10*.

MEASURING THE VISITS TO E-PUBLICATIONS IN CROATIA IN 2018 AND 2023

This article provides data from the Gemius Audience agency (the Croatian branch of the company from Poland that has been operating since 2006). At the moment, these are the only relevant results, although e-publications and other online publications are under no obligation to participate in Gemius. Thus, for instance, *Media-15* permanently abandoned participation in the measurement within Gemius in 2015 [43]. The former MediaGroup-1 (today’s MediaGroup-2) also left the Gemius Audience measurement system on several occasions.

On June 1, 2015, after two years of development, Ipsos Puls launched DotMetrics in Croatia, a project of Internet audience measurement. This, however, created some paradoxical data, so for example MediaGroup-3 and MediaGroup-2 announced in 2017 that they each had the most read e-publications in Croatia during the same period. The measurement for *Media-3* [44] is based on DotMetrics research, while that for *Media-4* [45], owned by MediaGroup-3 is based on Gemius Audience research. Some publications are not included in the 2018 report (primarily

Media-15 and *Media-3*) while the 2023 report does not include *Media-15*. Moreover, *MediaGroup-2* publications have returned to the Gemius measurement.

Tables 2 and 3 show the most visited news websites in Croatian in May 2018 and 2023. The tables show the ten most read news websites according to Gemius for 2018 and 2023, to get a broad media picture of the popularity of e-publications in Croatia. The data for the years 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 is provided in the Appendix.

A comparison of the tables shows that in both 2018 and 2023 the same seven news websites are in the top ten e-publications, although there would be nine of them if *Media-3* and *Media-5* (*MediaGroup-2* publications) had been included in the Gemius measurement in 2018, Table 2. The changes therefore refer to *Media-11*, *Media-12* and *Media-14* websites, which were included in the ten most read news websites in 2018, but in 2023 they were no longer included in the top ten. However, when it comes to *Media-11*, it should be pointed out that *MediaGroup-4* television network stopped developing *Media-11* as a news website and directed its news content towards the television format and TV channel. In 2019, they took over *Media-6* from *MediaGroup-6* and at the same time started developing *Media-13* news website, as a counterpart to *Media-2* news website owned by the competitor *MediaGroup-5* television network. In the past five years, *Media-12* was merged to *Media-4* news website to achieve better results.

The top ten news websites in 2023 include the aforementioned *Media-3* (in the second place), *Media-5* (in the sixth place) and *Media-9* (in the eighth place).

In addition, there was an expected increase in the number of readers, that is, real users. Namely, there were 2 418 371 of them in 2018, and 2 855 756 in 2023, which is an increase of

Table 2. The most visited news websites in Croatia in May 2018.

News website	Real users	Page views	Visits
Media-4	1627 619	207 276 762	32 253 017
Media-2	1513 633	55 184 141	17 561 337
Media-1	1377 513	82 329 495	17 769 190
Media-7	1354 100	69 665 550	15 085 453
Media-11	1323 674	31 986 642	11 542 780
Media-6	1276 400	103 343 310	18 855 960
Media-12	830 767	6 335 585	3 418 475
Media-10	748 886	6 022 586	4 193 710
Media-14	731 799	4 673 825	2 509 646
Media-8	564 064	11 733 318	3 749 719

Table 3. The most visited news websites in Croatia in May 2023.

News website	Real users	Page views	Visits
Media-2	2 113 861	193 383 291	31 815 186
Media-3	1965 238	145 713 026	50 940 710
Media-4	1961 442	134 849 231	34 906 459
Media-1	1914 200	77 387 261	27 594 918
Media-6	1772 896	111 923 173	19 792 640
Media-5	1749 820	81 288 038	29 606 220
Media-7	1737 615	72 023 450	15 316 725
Media-9	1493 216	11 102 340	6 498 614
Media-10	1374 266	11 248 235	6 876 955
Media-8	1228 676	19 388 364	9 547 929

approximately 18 %. Perhaps a bigger increase could have been expected in that period because the Internet was by then fully affirmed as a relevant news medium in the world and in Croatia.

According to Gemius data, *Media-2* recorded a strong increase in the readers of e-publications, which went from 1 513 533 real users in 2018 to 2 113 861 real users in 2023, which is an increase of almost 40 %. *Media-2* is the only news website among the five most read ones that still does not charge for its content, which possibly helped it to position itself as the leading news website in May 2023 (according to Gemius research). One of the reasons for its success is also the connection with the TV platform, i.e., with the MediaGroup-5 News Program (i.e., the central news program), which is still, according to Ipsos research (using the peplemeter), the leading news program in Croatia. In May 2023, according to the same survey, *Media-3* was in the second place, but more detailed comparisons are not possible because that news website was not included in the 2018 measurement. It must also be taken into account that *Media-3* includes *Media-16* and *Media-17* websites, which means a bigger number of users. In 2021, *Media-3* introduced a partial paywall for its content – for research articles, comments and interviews, that is exclusive materials that are not available on other news websites. Informative articles and news remained freely accessible. *Media-3* does not publish data on the number of subscribers nor is it obligated to do so.

In 2018, the *Media-4* news website was in the first place, and in 2023 it fell to the third place of all most visited news websites. It should also be considered that in the meantime the *Media-12* website, which was in the top ten in 2018, was also added to it. Like most news websites that have decided to put up a paywall, *Media-4* also decided to partially disable free access to its content in 2021. During the five-year period, the number of visitors to the *Media-4* website grew by 20,5 %, slightly more than the average of internet users of media content in Croatia (18 %), but significantly less than the growth of the *Media-2* website (almost 40 %). The paywall scheme certainly played a big role in it, but there are obviously other factors as well (e.g., content) that led to the smaller increase in the number of readers compared to competing websites.

Only *Media-1* had a paywall scheme in both 2018 and 2023. Visits to *Media-1*, just like the visits to *Media-2*, increased in the five-year period by 39 %, which means that users obviously got used to the paywall on that platform.

Media-7, owned by MediaGroup-7, grew by 28 % in the five-year cycle. That internet website has no restrictions to accessing its content, but it was redesigned at the beginning of 2023. After such changes, there is usually a temporary drop in visits, so a certain time should pass to get a true picture of the readers' interest.

In 2021, the *Media-10* website recorded a significant increase in visits, as much as 84 % in five years. In the meantime, it also introduced a paywall, which could lead to the wrong conclusion that the paywall has no impact on visits. However, in this case, two factors influenced the positive results: in that period, the website profiled itself as distinctly 'journalistic', with many analyses and investigative reporting. Another factor in its popularity is the sale of another e-publication (*Media-6*) from the portfolio in that period, which means that the owner (MediaGroup-6) concentrated on the content and development of the *Media-10* news website.

Interestingly, *Media-8* website had the highest percentage growth in visits in the five-year period, as much as 117 %. It is important to say that *Media-8* does not have a paywall scheme.

CONCENTRATION ANALYSIS OF E-PUBLICATIONS IN CROATIA

Table 4 offers information regarding the concentration levels within the e-publication business in Croatia spanning the years 2018 to 2023. The measurement of concentration encompasses

various indicators, including the foremost e-publication, which is determined based on genuine users, page views, and visits. Additionally, the concentration is assessed by the market share of the leading entity, as well as the concentration ratios C2 and C4, and the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). The calculations have been conducted using the total of 10 most visited e-publications as the proxy of the total market size. This approach has been used since the data of the size of the full market of e-publications visitors is unknown, and we have followed the practice of several previous research that also used the limited information about the market size [46]. Between the years 2018 and 2021, the e-publication that held the top position across all three categories, namely real users, page views, and visitors, was *Media-4*. However, a notable shift occurred between the years 2022 and 2023. *Media-2* emerged as the frontrunner in terms of actual users and page views, whilst *Media-3* claimed the top position in terms of visitors.

The market share of the leader experienced a marginal decline across all categories during the specified period, indicating a potential rise in market rivalry or diversification. In the year 2018, the online platform *Media-4* accounted for a 14 % proportion of authentic users, however this figure declined to 12 % for *Media-2* in 2023.

Table 4. Concentration indicators of top 10 e-publications in Croatia (2018-2023).

Concentration indicator	Year	Real users	Page views	Visits
Leading e-publication	2018	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>
	2019	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>
	2020	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>
	2021	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-4</i>
	2022	<i>Media-2</i>	<i>Media-4</i>	<i>Media-3</i>
	2023	<i>Media-2</i>	<i>Media-2</i>	<i>Media-3</i>
Leader's market share, %	2018	14 %	36 %	25 %
	2019	13 %	31 %	22 %
	2020	13 %	37 %	25 %
	2021	13 %	27 %	23 %
	2022	13 %	19 %	18 %
	2023	12 %	23 %	22 %
Concentration ratio C2, %	2018	28 %	54 %	40 %
	2019	26 %	48 %	43 %
	2020	26 %	53 % ↑	42 %
	2021	26 %	46 %	42 %
	2022	24 %	37 %	35 %
	2023	24 %	40 %	37 %
Concentration ratio C4, %	2018	52 %	80 %	68 %
	2019	49 %	71 %	67 %
	2020	50 %	80 %	71 %
	2021	50 %	79 %	69 %
	2022	47 %	66 %	62 %
	2023	46 %	68 %	63 %
HHI	2018	1099,28	2078,72	1508,29
	2019	1060,86	1758,24	1479,87
	2020	1071,93	2086,99	1509,39
	2021	1059,82	1770,22	1460,10
	2022	1036,84	1416,29	1304,08
	2023	1024,24	1462,62	1340,44

The concentration ratio C2 quantifies the collective market share of the two leading firms, whereas the concentration ratio C4 quantifies the collective market share of the four leading firms. Both ratios exhibited a fall over the observed time frame, so signifying a decrease in market concentration and implying an enhancement in market competitiveness.

The HHI is widely recognized as a standard metric for assessing market concentration. The calculation involves the process of squaring the market share of each firm participating in the market, followed by the summation of these squared values. In the context of market analysis, it is often accepted that a HHI value below 1500 indicates a competitive marketplace. Conversely, a HHI ranging from 1500 to 2 500 is indicative of moderate concentration, while an HHI over 2 500 signifies a high level of concentration. Between the years 2018 and 2023, there was a decline observed in the HHI across all categories, indicating a transition from a state of moderate concentration to a more competitive market environment.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH THE READERS OF *MEDIA-1* E-PUBLICATION IN 2018 AND 2023

METHODOLOGY

A focus group is a special group technique of conversation that aims to gain a deeper understanding of the researched phenomenon. It is carried out in a small group of participants who discuss a certain topic, with the guidance of an expert – moderator [47]. According to Tkalac Verčić et al. [48], after the detailed preparation of the content of the focus interview, it is necessary to inform the participants about the date and expected duration of the group interview. According to the same source the group interview is conducted in artificially created conditions, usually in the researcher's premises, which must be arranged in an appropriate manner. The entire procedure is recorded with a video camera and subsequently analyzed.

Since the early 1980s, the focus group method has been applied more intensively in market research, bringing a refreshment in the way it combines concepts and research results from different disciplines. It is most often used in marketing research - from planning the launch of new products to evaluating the quality or interest in new television shows before they are broadcast. Public relations in politics gave new impetus to this method, which enables a deeper insight into certain social problems from the voters' point of view and which allows for prior testing of various initiatives and messages [49].

Goals of the Research

The appearance of e-publications raised a new important question: how to make money from Internet content? The answer was seemingly simple, to charge for content by putting up a paywall, so that “content that is behind a paywall is only accessible to the online user if they provide credit card details and subscribe to the publication online” [50; pp.26-27]. *Media-1* was the first e-publication in Croatia to introduce a soft paywall for accessing content, on November 17th, 2012. With that in mind, this research was conducted to analyze the content quality, speed, economic viability and credibility of two different platforms of the same publisher.

The goals of the research were to discuss the topics presented in the following parts of the article, covering the topics presented in Figure 1.

Selection of respondents

Respondents were selected in two ways. The first selection was made from the existing pool of respondents that the market research agency *Promocija plus* uses as part of its own internet research panel. This group includes approximately 10 000 respondents from all over Croatia,

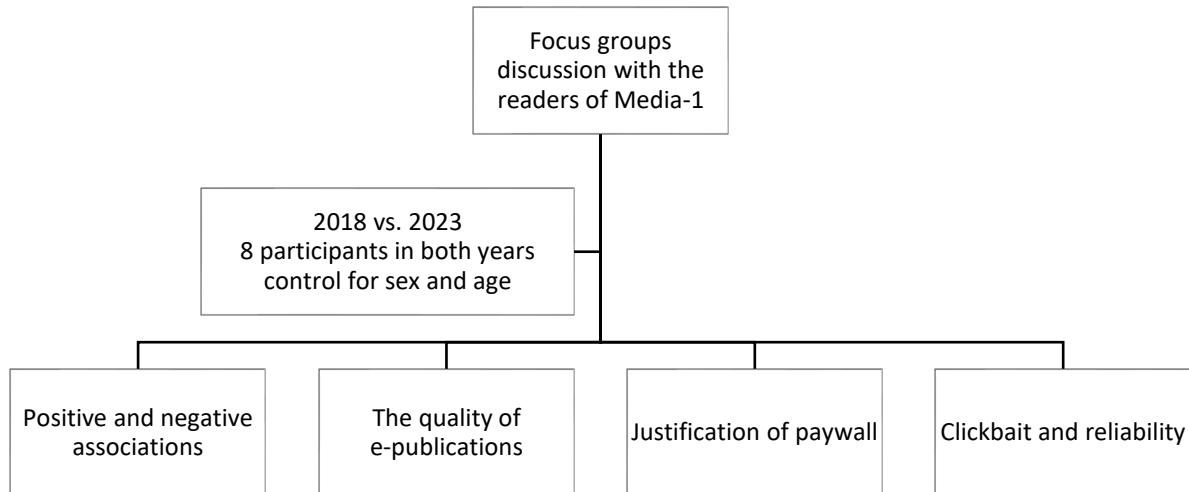


Figure 1. Overview of goals of the focus groups discussion with the readers of *Media-1*.

of different age and educational groups. The second focus group participants were selected from the pool of part-time external associates of the agency, which consists of approximately 2 100 people of different age and educational groups from all over Croatia.

In the first focus group consisting of eight readers of the *Media-1* e-publication, the primary selection criterion, and at the same time the basic principle of homogeneity of the group, was the fact that they were readers of the *Media-1* e-publication. For them, that publication was the primary channel of information considering all e-publications of daily newspapers in Croatia.

A similar criterion was used in the selection of the second focus group, with the only difference that it was held online, which also indicates the development of communication channels and the change in communication habits over five years.

The secondary selection criterion was an equal share of male and female respondents. Moreover, an effort was made to achieve a balance between younger respondents (from 18 to 39 years old) and older respondents (40 years old and older).

The structure of focus group participants in our research was as follows.

The first focus group (2018) included readers of the *Media-1* e-publication. It consisted of a total of eight people with the following demographic characteristics: all respondents were from Zagreb; there were four female and four male respondents; four respondents were aged 18 to 39 and four of them were aged 40 and over.

The second group was the online focus group (2023) which included readers of the *Media-1* e-publication. All respondents were from Zagreb; there were three female and five male respondents; four respondents were aged 18 to 39, and four of them were aged 40 and over.

Correct age representation is extremely important because the use of new technologies, in this case new media, is closely related to the age group of users.

The focus groups were analyzed separately. Below are the results of the focus group discussion with the readers of *Media-1* e-publication.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASSOCIATIONS OF NEWSPAPER E-PUBLICATIONS

The 2018 focus group had the following positive associations related to the newspaper e-publication: immediacy, free content, speed, convenience, large flow of information, better

information, constant availability of information and environmental friendliness (lesser use of paper). Positive associations mainly confirm the benefits that digital technologies generally bring to their users, not only when it comes to news and newspaper content. These positive associations highlighted by all group participants are speed, constant availability, and a large amount of information.

The following negative associations were highlighted: lack of trust, unreliable information, unverified information, fake news, excessive production of information, bombastic headlines, and empty texts, as well as utterly meaningless news. Two negative associations were singled out at the individual level: addiction to information and constant “copying” between news websites.

The 2023 focus group had the following positive associations related to the newspaper e-publication: easy availability, free content, timeliness, multimediality, possibility of feedback (i.e., leaving comments below articles), live news/breaking news, and a large amount of content in one place. The following negative associations were highlighted: frivolity, excess of yellow press content, paywalls, information that is less important than the information in the printed edition, a large number of orthographic mistakes (typos, grammatical and spelling mistakes, wrong noun cases), bombastic headlines and empty texts, the fact that news websites copy from each other, empty subtitles and clickbait headlines.

By comparing these two groups, it is clear that some characteristics of online content are constantly perceived positively, such as easy availability and timeliness, while hyperproduction and unreliability are perceived negatively. However, some new characteristics were also observed, such as an increase in the number of typos, copying articles from other news websites and clickbait headlines, all of which point to increased competition in which the lack of valuable news is compensated by increased production of ‘worthless’ content, which is then reflected in an increase in the number of errors.

THE QUALITY OF THE E-PUBLICATION AND THE PRINTED EDITION

In the 2018 focus group, respondents with the experience of reading the printed edition all agreed that the texts of the printed edition were of better quality. They are aware of the printed edition’s tradition and quality, but they still feel the impact of technology in their everyday lives. These are their representative opinions:

“Somehow, the texts are better, cleaner, and, as we have already said, longer. In addition to all that, while I’m reading the e-publication, I’m also reading the comments that greatly influence my experience of the text.”

“E-publications are guided by the motto ‘let’s publish fast and have as many news items as possible’ so there is no selectivity which is sometimes needed. However, a text which is to be printed, needs to be checked first and it therefore seems that only selected, better quality texts get to be printed.”

The 2023 focus group was given the task of comparing the texts of *Media-1* e-publication and printed publication. Participants who read the *Media-1* e-publication and the printed edition noticed significant differences in their content. They emphasize higher quality, more severe and longer texts as well as better sentence structure in the printed edition if compared to the texts in the e-publication.

“The printed texts seem more serious to me, and that’s why I actually buy printed copies several times a year, I am interested in something that isn’t in online editions. Specifically, you know, there is a text about something, and then I find it interesting to read.”

All this again points to a disproportion between the printed edition, which provides better texts but is not as timely, and the online edition which is faster and more interactive.

JUSTIFICATION OF PAYWALL IN E-PUBLICATIONS

The 2018 focus group seems reluctant to pay for access to online news content. The group does not seem to find any justification for the paywall in the e-publication because all news websites rely on advertising as a business model. As respondents say, many advertisers simply “bombard” readers with advertising and due to the existence of advertisements the paywall is not justified.

“For me, it’s a matter of principle. You bombard me with ads, ads pop up on all sides, and now you want to charge me for content.”

“I wouldn’t pay for it. Today everything is so accessible, I could certainly find the same content or some very similar content on the Internet easily.”

“If there was a paywall, regardless of its type, I don’t think I would use that platform anymore, I would find another one.”

The introduction of a paywall, according to respondents, would definitely affect their current reading behavior by directing them to free news websites. The respondents state that the paywall would only be realistically justified on those internet sites which have no advertising at all, and which live off their readers’ subscription.

“I know some news websites that are not well known and there are no advertisements there. If you want to read something there, you have to pay a monthly subscription. It’s not like this – ads everywhere and they still expect you to pay.”

The group participants need a clear idea about which contents should have a justifiable paywall. Almost all of the participants in the group have yet to purchase content from newspaper e-publications. Only one participant stated that he bought books or music online. As for the attitude towards the price of printed daily newspapers, most believe it is too high and should be between EUR 0,53 and EUR 0,80. In 2018, the respondents considered the price of EUR 1,06 high. In other words, they thought that was the price which made them question their decision to continue buying the printed edition.

“Even these 1,06 EUR are too much, except on weekends when the editions are of better quality.”

“I would give 1,33 EUR just for the weekend edition, and 0,66 EUR during the week.”

They consider the price of EUR 1,33 as the psychological limit, after which they would stop buying newspapers or significantly reduce their purchases. After all, they emphasize that the price increase is conducive to the trend of decreasing circulation of newspapers. In conclusion, the respondents do not feel they need to pay for quality at all.

The 2023 focus group bases its reasons for choosing an e-publication (instead of a printed newspaper) on the already mentioned positive associations about e-publications: easy availability, timeliness, convenience, price (articles in the e-publication are mostly free, and the printed edition of the newspaper is paid for), ease of use and environmental friendliness. The following are two descriptions by the participants that summarize the arguments for the easy availability and environmental friendliness of e-publications and the problem of the price charged for printed editions:

“They are easily available, convenient and you can immediately see what is happening at every moment, and I also think, the price. How much? Now everything has become more expensive. I know when I was little, the newspaper would cost, I don’t know, 0,53-0,66 EUR. Now there is no newspaper below

1,33 EUR, it now costs two euros, and if you buy it every day or a couple of times a week, I mean, it makes no sense, and what am I supposed to do with the old copies? I mean, throw them in the trash."

None of the focus group participants have paid for content so far, but they understand that it is someone's intellectual work, and that content has a price. One participant points out that she does not see a problem in paying for e-content, because if people can pay for a printed edition, they can also pay for articles in the e-publication.

"Well, I think, if you're already used to buying the printed edition, why not pay for the online edition as well, I mean, I don't see any difference, so if you want to buy the printed edition, you can afford it and pay for the online edition too, so maybe that's, if not cheaper, then it's more accessible, so yes. You have the option every day to browse the Internet instead of going to a newsstand and waste time, then you have to pay to buy it every day, and mostly there is old news in the printed newspaper, so ..."

Since none of the participants paid for the content in the *Media-1* e-publication, the participants cannot assess whether some content is worth buying and what the quality of the articles is. One of the participants bought a subscription for the *Media-4* newspaper (EUR 7,96 yearly) as part of the Black Friday campaign.

The participants do not consider the paywall justified because they claim that our tastes are different and that someone may find a free article more interesting than a paid one. One participant does not even consider it logical to charge for specific e-contents, but rather suggests charging for the entire newspaper.

"I, for one, if I may say so, I don't consider it justified, because sometimes the articles that are twice as interesting to me are free, and some pointless ones are paid for, so it all depends, we're all different, we all read different articles, and now, in my opinion it's not justified, you'd better not give us a single article at all, but I don't know, say how much it costs a month so someone may pay for it, and not like this, you start reading and then you can't finish it because you have to pay ..."

CLICKBAIT AND RELIABILITY OF E-PUBLICATIONS

In 2018, the focus group expressed lack of trust towards the Croatian media, mostly regarding the disconnection between headlines and texts, fake news, and covert advertising. The group was unanimous in this, but the participants were not feeling very strongly about this, because a certain degree of trust in the *Media-1* e-publication existed, nevertheless. They trust *Media 1* more than other newspapers, but even though there is trust, it exists only to a certain extent, especially when it comes to political topics. Here are the respondents' statements:

"If it is about political topics, unreserved acceptance of the articles is completely excluded. If the articles are about culture, cars or, for example, sports, then I believe them."

"In Croatia, no media outlet is completely objective. Everyone is influenced by certain interests, but it is perhaps a little more objective compared to others."

The trust in *Media-1* e-publication is based on the perception that *Media-1* is somewhat more objective and reliable than other news media. The reason for incomplete trust lies in the fact that the media are connected with power centers and advertisers.

As for clickbait headlines and accompanying texts that are loosely related to them or not related at all, everyone agrees that most headlines in the media are quite bombastic and that it is simply a strategy to lure readers. The respondents have experienced a bombastic headline coupled with

a text that has nothing to do with in the *Media-1* e-publication, but so far in a small number of cases. They believe that clickbait headlines do not describe what *Media-1* truly is as a news outlet; they believe that this practice is more common in other media outlets.

“It probably happens, I didn't notice anything that would be alarming.”

“This practice is not common in this newspaper.”

The attitudes of the group members about fake news are very similar, both in general and specifically regarding fake news in *Media-1*. They do not present specific examples, but state that fake news certainly exists, but it is not a frequent practice. One participant points out that *Media-1* does not have a problem with fake news, but rather with insufficiently reliable information that even the journalist is not 100 % sure about. Such a situation is most often recognized when there is no byline that accompanies an important news item, or the author's full name is hidden behind the initials or there is no information about the author of the newspaper article at all.

It is visible from the group participants' answers and the examples they cite that there is a certain lack of understanding of the difference between a sponsored article and fake news. Those who provide examples actually describe sponsored articles:

“I have recently read an article about allergies. So, I'm reading this article and it mentions some new research and institute this and that, and at the end of the text I see it's a paid ad.”

“A couple of years ago I read an article about bleeding gums and of course if offered a solution – [title removed intentionally – op.ed.] mouthwash, etc. So, nothing but buy our products.”

Covert advertising in general, at least in the way the participants perceive it, is not highlighted as a problem that appears often, including in the *Media-1* e-publication. Thematic areas in which covert advertising is mostly noticed include health, nutrition, and lifestyle. In addition, the participants have not noticed any content in e-publications that they would characterize as fake news. What bothers them most are misleading headlines which somehow hide the fact that the article is not neutral. All the participants of the focus group point out that in this case it is not a matter of trust in the texts published in e-publications and the printed edition of *Media-1*, because the texts are more or less the same, except that they vary in length; instead, it is a matter of greater seriousness perceived in the printed edition of the newspaper:

“I wouldn't say it's a matter of trust because the article is the same. It is a matter of seriousness of some kind. Unlike the printed edition, the online edition has ads which pop up around articles.”

“It's not a matter of trust, we just take it (the printed edition) more seriously. Information in the printed edition is more comprehensive and detailed.”

As for trust in the Croatian media, the focus group is unanimous in expressing reservations towards the Croatian media. The respondents do not automatically accept the texts they have read. Instead, they try to filter them.

“I also feel lack of trust, but there are media outlets that I trust more than others.”

“I don't trust Croatian media too much and I try to check certain information by comparison, what others write about the topic that I'm currently reading about.”

They trust *Media-1* more than other news media, but although trust exists, it is still expressed with a certain reserve, especially when it comes to Croatian politics. Some participants believe that lobby groups influence the content:

“When I compare it with other newspapers, I trust them the most.”

“Political texts are the most controversial.”

In the printed edition of *Media-1*, no one has perceived any news as fake news yet. However, most respondents do not perceive fake news in the competing media either, except for one respondent:

“It certainly doesn’t have that, unlike some other, which has had numerous mistakes so far.”

When it comes to the printed edition of *Media-1*, no one has perceived any news or article as covert advertising. On the other hand, the respondents point out that this is a frequent and common practice in e-publications.

“I come across that every now and then in online publications.”

“Sometimes I have the impression that the text tries to sway me in a certain direction, but by no means that it was written by order, so to speak.”

No one can recall a single case, in any Croatian print media, of a bombastic headline followed by a text which was not related to that headline. They believe that such attitude toward readers is present almost exclusively on the Internet. In terms of trust, both in the e-publication and in the printed edition of *Media-1*, the participants of the discussion emphasize that the same authors and editors work in both types of publications, but they still explicitly express greater trust in the information of the printed edition, which, in their opinion, is more detailed and comprehensive than in the e-publication. The opposite opinion is expressed by only one participant who points out that for him, the type of platform is not a factor of trust or lack of trust.

In the 2023 focus group, one participant explains the negative association with clickbait with the following description:

“In online editions, they often have a clickbait article, and you won't really see that in the printed edition. I don't know, just read what someone thought about this or that, and you'll never guess who said what.”

One of the participants of the focus group describes the frivolity of the content as follows:

“I mean, compared to the printed edition, the online edition looks frivolous because it highlights the news that is usually skipped in the printed edition, at least I would skip it.”

As for clickbait headlines, i.e., the experience of sensational headlines followed by the text that has nothing to do with it, the participants experienced it in the *Media-1* e-publication, but they believe that such practice is more common in other media outlets:

“Take me for example, I read all the headlines first and then I decide if I’m going to read something or not, so it’s the headline that will make me decide if I’m going to continue or not, so I mostly skim through everything that way, but I don’t read everything in detail.”

“As I have already said, of course there is that, even quite a lot of it, but this newspaper is not famous for that if you ask me, I would even say it’s the opposite.”

The participants noticed clickbait in the *Media-1* e-publication, but less often than in other e-publications. They did not notice bombastic headlines in the print edition.

“Well, honestly, in the printed edition, no ... I would just say that one of the good things about them is that there are not many texts or headlines that end with a question mark because as soon as I see a question mark in the headline, I know that the rest of the text is rubbish, and I won’t even start to read that.”

“I mean, look. I noticed it in the online edition now that you mention it. I remember, I remember at the time of the biggest Corona virus panic, I don’t know, in 2020, that

it was famous for that trash, that I had to check it out, I knew it was wrong really, I knew it was wrong, but I had to check it in detail when they wrote about ...”

One of the participants noticed that some authors publish texts on topics and areas for which they are not educated enough.

The attitudes of the members of the group are very similar when it comes to the experience of fake news in *Media-1*. Some participants cannot remember specific examples:

“Yes, I agree, I have to say quite often, I can’t remember the exact text and the headline, but I know sometimes that I read the headline and then I read the text and then ... What is that? Ha ha. It has nothing to do with anything, really. So yeah, quite often. Not really, I can’t say it only, but others do it more let’s say, so it’s better than others, more serious.”

It is clear from the answers of the group participants that they remember that there was covert advertising, but less than in other publishing houses. Only one participant remembered a weight loss product:

“Or a product for, for shopping. Yeah, weight loss, how to lose weight and suddenly the article ends, so you should buy this product to lose weight. I mean, really.”

The participants of the focus group point out that they trust the printed edition of *Media-1* more because the articles are verified by editors, the information reaches the readers more slowly, and there is less probability of error than with the articles in the e-publication:

“I trust print a lot more.”

“I mean, it’s logical, printed news is checked and verified a lot more, so it’s slower and therefore should be trusted more, right? Everything that is online, that is fast, leads to a greater possibility of error, right?”

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to conduct a longitudinal analysis of reader opinions concerning e-publications over five years. The research focused on comparing and contrasting the perspectives of two distinct cohorts of readers from *Media-1*, a prominent Croatian e-publication. The first cohort consisted of readers in 2018, while the second comprised readers from the same platform in 2023. Ultimately, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of online news consumption in Croatia and contribute to a deeper understanding of the ever-changing media landscape.

The comparative analysis revealed consistent positive perceptions among readers regarding specific online content attributes, such as accessibility and timeliness. Concurrently, negative perceptions persisted concerning attributes like hyperproduction and unreliability. The study also identified emergent characteristics over time, including increased typographical errors, textual duplications from other news websites, and the prevalence of clickbait headlines. These developments are influenced by heightened market competition, wherein the proliferation of trivial content compensates for the scarcity of valuable news. Consequently, the pressure to publish promptly contributes to a rise in errors.

Persistent disparities are observed between printed and online editions. While the printed version is perceived to offer superior text quality, it needs to catch up in terms of speed and interactivity. Interestingly, respondents resist accepting paywalls, believing that paywalls manipulate them, albeit without clear understanding. This lack of distinction between native advertising and clickbait fuels criticism towards paywalls. Paradoxically, despite perceiving paid content as higher quality, focus group participants reject the implementation of paywalls.

This dichotomy between opinions and actions could be attributed to users' positive association with free content in Internet editions. Nevertheless, this study reveals that users associate free content with negative phenomena like fake news and clickbait.

Analysis of news website visits in Croatia indicates that e-publications offering free content experience faster growth than those implementing paywalls to restrict full access.

Concentration analysis has been conducted using the data of visitors of e-publications in Croatia. In brief, an observable transition in market dominance within the e-publication sector in Croatia has been noted between 2018 and 2023. This movement has been accompanied by a general decline in market concentration, indicating a potential rise in competitive forces or a broader range of market offerings.

This study highlights the importance of increasing efforts to raise awareness among online media consumers regarding the critical analysis of news value and journalistic practices. Encouraging individuals to engage in thoughtful reflection on media content is crucial. Incorporating media literacy education can significantly enhance their understanding of how the media influence public discourse and cater to the general interest. The authors of this article aspire for it to be a significant step in that direction, fostering a culture of media literacy and prompting further research in similar domains to advance knowledge in this field.

When evaluating the results of this research, the following limitations should be considered. First, the results of the focus group cannot be generalized to the entire population and as such, they cannot offer a quantitative answer about the phenomenon which is analyzed. This method provides certain qualitative answers to the question “why”. Second, the research focused to a limited number of e-publications, namely, to the most visited news sites, while in the same time, general publication is using social media and messaging platforms increasingly as the main source of news and relevant information. These two limitations pose at the same time the directions for the future research, that should be focused on the survey research on the larger sample of participants, considering not only newspaper websites, but also alternative sources of news and information, such as social media and messaging platforms. Future research should also consider the regional component and could analyze the development of e-publications in a wider geographical environment. Additionally, new technologies, that are becoming increasingly present, such as augmented reality [51] and big data [52], will also have a significant impact on the ways that the news are consumed, which also poses the fruitful area of future research of the media, but also of other industries related to technology.

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APPENDIX

Table 5. The most visited news websites in Croatia (2019-2022).

Year	News website	Real users	Page views	Visits
2019	Media-4	1964967	271135389	41283161
	Media-2	1831896	84617144	19879108
	Media-1	1692989	94921676	23893568
	Media-7	1678879	73990446	16703737
	Media-11	1608956	56186011	15304021
	Media-15	1606985	145773196	41055058
	Media-6	1532155	105376853	20248013
	Media-10	1048355	19072955	4193710
	Media-14	952942	5772984	3246790
2020	Media-12	859159	6694045	3829195
	Media-4	2015259	258656179	44902252
	Media-2	1962174	93783767	23967693
	Media-1	1952258	99746914	29567717
	Media-6	1862730	117036044	31603146
	Media-7	1731879	63676424	16446495
	Media-11	1662789	24253493	10186865
	Media-10	1229712	19505441	9436623
	Media-14	1187098	9449312	5963747
2021	Media-8	1080007	17518741	7764141
	Media-9	791228	4969352	2715502
	Media-4	2012613	182111643	42320373
	Media-2	1999260	110959859	24925082
	Media-1	1957858	111797399	35585121
	Media-6	1758305	123469360	24866322
	Media-7	1716196	69785585	19198235
	Media-11	1534745	29793847	11760068
	Media-9	1193259	10964013	7046703
2022	Media-14	1165328	8435503	5387279
	Media-10	1109635	10905313	8011194
	Media-18	997916	11597961	5529294
	Media-2	2193333	147512674	32162893
	Media-4	2059723	162880219	44975481
	Media-1	2024093	109614828	37668592
	Media-6	1947975	130790579	32889784
	Media-3	1917499	116032618	46711589
	Media-7	1700814	63870207	17293979
2022	Media-5	1673458	67524856	27847742
	Media-11	1437986	21531551	8979261
	Media-10	1222765	11410240	7808266
	Media-9	1205744	9982581	6307554