ARE CANONICAL NEWS VALUES STILL RELEVANT IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON ROMANIAN GEN Z

Adina BAYA
West University of Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: The current study explores how Romanian Gen Zers define news values in the age of social media, testing the relevance of canonical frameworks in the context of a changing media ecosystem. As opposed to previous studies that used content analysis to asses news values, the current one employs audience reception methods, specifically focus group discussions with university students enrolled in Communication Science, thus observing how the generation of digital natives perceives newsworthiness. The findings demonstrate a mixture of core journalistic principles – such as impact, relevance, and timeliness – with emerging expectations connected to the digital platform environment, such as visual appeal, emotional resonance, and shareability. Most notably, respondents emphasize credibility, authenticity, and fact-checking, highlighting that misinformation has become a top concern in their media diet. The study points to the exploratory nature of understanding changing definitions of news values and the need to blend legacy media standards and audience-centered characteristics like engagement, interactivity, and accessibility in contemporary journalistic practice.

Keywords: news values, newsworthiness, Gen Z, digital natives, social media, journalism

1. Introduction

The digital era has fundamentally changed how news is produced, distributed and consumed, with social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram becoming primary sources of information, particularly for Generation Z. This transformation calls for a revising of canonical frameworks defining news values, such as the one proposed by Harcup & O'Neill (2017), which were designed for a media ecosystem that functioned according to a different dynamic. In the case of Romania, where 70% of the population has active accounts on at least one social media platform (MFB, 2024), understanding how young people perceive the definition of news values is essential for addressing evolving journalistic practices and combating misinformation. The current study aims to find the key terms that Romanian Gen Zers use to define news values in the social media era, using audience reception methods, which represent a departure from prior research focused on content analysis.

For this purpose, we organized two focus group discussions with Communication Science students from the West University of Timișoara. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the topic and testing the relevance of Harcup & O'Neill's established framework in the case of our targeted cohort. The paper will proceed with a brief literature review of how the definition of news values changed over time and

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consequently provide the methodological approach and findings from the focus group discussions, discussing their implications in the context of existing literature.

2. News values: changing definitions in the age of social media

News values are considered fundamental principles that media organizations use to decide what topics are worth covering, what should be ignored, and what prominence should be granted to each. They serve as guidelines for filtering and prioritizing the vast amount of information that newsrooms have access to permanently, shaping editorial decisions that ensure the audience is well-informed and engaged. They safeguard that news is relevant and impactful, serving the public interest and building credibility. News values are crucial to the journalistic profession because "they inform the mediated world that is presented to news audiences, providing a shared shorthand operational understanding of what working journalists are required to produce" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). The way they function in practice serves as professional principles for journalism students and trainees, and public relations professionals whose target is to get good news coverage for their events.

However, the definition of news values and newsworthiness has always been a subject for debate. While journalists generally agree upon universal criteria such as timeliness, proximity, conflict, and human interest, specific definitions for each and principles for their prioritization vary a lot across media institutions. The broader context that shapes the meaning of newsworthiness and news selection includes organizational, economic, and cultural factors. For example, newsroom routines and structure, commercial pressures determined by financing mechanisms, and priorities in catering for the needs of a specific niche community, as well as editorial style approaches, can be very different when comparing mainstream media organizations with alternative or independent journalistic projects (Baya, 2023).

Moreover, professional journalists often invoke intuition when required to define news values, typically responding with "I know it when I see it" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). The almost instinctual sense of newsworthiness that journalists develop throughout their career goes beyond a checklist of news values applied rationally, becoming equally influenced by experience and newsroom routines, and is described as "journalistic gut feeling" by Ida Schultz (2007). This concept includes both explicit or "orthodox" news values, i.e., that are dominant and undisputed, and "heterodox" news values, i.e., that are disagreed upon and misrecognized. Following ethnographic observation and interviews within the profession, Schultz emphasizes that the journalistic doxa – understood as the taken-for-granted beliefs and practices – is rarely discussed but deeply embedded in practice, and while journalists may describe their work as unpredictable and free, their professional decisions are actually shaped by these embedded values and routines. News selection is also influenced by arbitrary factors, such as access to a story or the necessity of meeting deadlines, competition for exclusivity, the interests of advertisers or owners in shaping editorial choices, the influence of public relations professionals, the journalists' own system of values and beliefs, as well as the impact of their peers (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

News values have also evolved over time to adapt to the requirements, technological affordances, and audience expectations of different media. While print media prioritized

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impact, timeliness, and the in-depth contextual analysis of an event, broadcast media favored its immediacy, visual potential, and emotional appeal. These latter priorities were also adopted by online media in general and social media in particular, and complemented with criteria such as shareability, interactivity, virality, and engagement potential. For example, a study on the connection between infographics and news values emphasizes that visual elements in a story enhance its newsworthiness and are increasingly prioritized by digital platforms, and "some visualization of information can work to challenge conventional news values" (Dick, 2013).

In the specific case of social media, news factors such as emotion and surprise tend to be prioritized more than in the case of regular online media channels, and news editing has become more user engagement driven, while editors "strive for a 'good mix' of news adhering to both the Facebook logic and professional journalistic standards", concludes a study by Lischka (2018). The author also states that Facebook audiences prefer entertaining news rather than stories focused on political or economic issues – an observation also confirmed by a study focusing on Instagram, where "audiences prefer to consume general news, human-interest stories and other stories that are mainly positive in nature, unlike news on politics and other topics on which traditional news organizations tend to focus" (Al-Rawi et al., 2021).

The impact of social media on news values is profound and drastically reshapes traditional journalistic priorities in order to align with platform algorithms and user engagement requirements. Following a large-scale study on both consumers and journalists, Shin et al. (2024) concluded that social media logic (prioritizing engagement metrics) dominates normative journalistic logic (factual accuracy, relevance) on platforms such as Facebook, with newsrooms prioritizing emotional hooks and simplified narratives, as well as shareability and visual storytelling. This implies an essential shift in journalism's core foundation, redefining newsworthiness in an era in which virality is privileged over veracity. Another evaluation of social media's impact on newsworthiness concludes that "news of most social value to citizens is at increased risk of being diminished and/or marginalized as news organizations frantically seek ways of surviving in a transformed communications ecosystem" (Harcup, 2023).

3. Canonical news values

One of the first attempts to establish a list of news values is from a 1965 study by Galtung & Ruge, focusing on how three international crises were reported in the Norwegian press, to identify why certain events dominated the headlines, while others were ignored, despite similar geopolitical significance. The authors established several news values that can be grouped in three categories, reflecting an event's characteristics (its impact, frequency, negativity, clarity in terms of causes, effects and narrative), how the audience perceives it (meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity) and pragmatic aspects connected to journalistic processes (editorial diversity and space-filling requirements, the presence of elite nations or persons, focus on people's emotions, actions or identities) (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

This initial list of news values was revised in the early 2000s by Harcup & O'Neill, to reflect the changing media landscape of the 21st century, as well as the shifting journalistic practices and audience expectations. Following an in-depth analysis of front-page stories from several British newspapers, the two researchers came up with a

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revised list of news values, out of which eligible stories should satisfy one or more. The list consisted of: the presence of power elites (influential individuals, organizations or institutions), celebrities, entertainment (stories concerning sex, showbusiness, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines), surprise, bad news (negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy), good news (e.g. rescues and cures), magnitude (significant stories, either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact), relevance, follow-up stories, and stories that are part of the news organization's own agenda (Harcup & O'Neill 2001). Compared to Galtung & Ruge (1965), this list included not just new additions (celebrities, entertainment, good news, newspaper agenda), but also updated definitions of key terms.

Harcup & O'Neill proceeded to a further revision of their list of news values over a decade and a half later, providing additional updates such as shareability and audio-visuals, that are in line with the digital media ecosystem (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017):

> "*Exclusivity*: Stories generated by, or available first to, the news organisation as a result of interviews, letters, investigations, surveys, polls, and so on.
>
> *Bad news*: Stories with particularly negative overtones such as death, injury, defeat and loss (of a job, for example).
>
> *Conflict*: Stories concerning conflict such as controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare.
>
> *Surprise*: Stories that have an element of surprise, contrast and/or the unusual about them.
>
> *Audio-visuals*: Stories that have arresting photographs, video, audio and/or which can be illustrated with infographics.
>
> *Shareability*: Stories that are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media.
>
> *Entertainment*: Soft stories concerning sex, showbusiness, sport, lighter human interest, animals, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, witty headlines or lists.
>
> *Drama*: Stories concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases.
>
> *Follow-up*: Stories about subjects already in the news.
>
> *The power elite*: Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations, institutions or corporations.
>
> *Relevance*: Stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience.
>
> *Magnitude*: Stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact, or involving a degree of extreme behaviour or extreme occurrence.
>
> *Celebrity*: Stories concerning people who are already famous.
>
> *Good news*: Stories with particularly positive overtones such as recoveries, breakthroughs, cures, wins and celebrations.
>
> *News organisation's agenda*: Stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda, whether ideological, commercial or as part of a specific campaign."

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4. Gen Z and their digital media consumption habits

Usually defined as the generation born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, Gen Z – also known as Zoomers, post-Millennials or digital natives – has a symbiotic relationship with media, as it came amid the age of smartphones, digital platforms, and on-demand content. Its members currently consume an average of over 6 hours of content daily, usually opting for short-form, interactive and socially conscious media, mixing entertainment, education and activism, primarily on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube (Statista, 2025). Social media is used with the double purpose of providing entertainment and mood regulation, blending news consumption with escapism, and prioritizing relatable digital creators and peers over institutional media, while valuing authenticity (Day One Agency & USC Annenberg, 2023).

Social media plays a significant role in daily life for many Romanians, with 13.3 million active users across multiple platforms in a country of 18.9 million people. While TikTok and Instagram maintain balanced popularity among 16-34-year-olds, Facebook has seen a decline over the past two years and is now primarily favored by the 45-54 age group (MFB, 2024). TikTok experienced remarkable global growth in 2023, a trend mirrored in Romania, where it has emerged – alongside Instagram – as a key platform for influencer marketing, as noted by Romania's Transmedia Audit Bureau (BRAT, cited in MFB, 2024).

5. Are canonical news values still relevant for Gen Z?

The current study aims to better understand how news values are defined in the social media era, with a particular focus on the case of Romanian Gen Zers. Unlike the studies presented in the literature review section of this paper, which explore the changing definitions of news values starting from the content analysis of published media articles, the current research uses audience reception methods to tackle the topic.

For this purpose, we conducted two focus group discussions with Communication Science students from the West University of Timisoara enrolled in the first and final year of study. Topics approached during the talks were centred on identifying the key terms that student respondents associate with defining news values in the social media era, thus testing the extent to which Harcup & O'Neill's most recent list is valid in the case of the targeted cohort. Preferred platforms, news outlets, and apps were also touched upon during the discussion, as well as their media consumption patterns.

Many of the key terms that student respondents brought up and explained during the discussion were identical or similar to the ones proposed by Harcup & O'Neill (2017). According to the respondents, impact and relevance for the targeted audience, timeliness, the presence of unusual or surprising details, and controversial aspects were among the elements that make a story newsworthy. They also included the presence of celebrities or public personas on the list, and the information being in the public interest. Moreover, respondents added elements typical to online or social media content: the presence of attractive images or videos, the dramatic aspects of the story or its strong emotional appeal, its viral potential and the fact that it is available fast and/or exclusively.

In addition to the list of Harcup & O'Neill (2017), student respondents proposed several other terms: credibility, truth, authenticity/truthfulness, well-researched/fact-checked data, and accuracy. "The information should be 'real'" was a phrase that came up several times during the discussion, with students pointing to the importance of transparent research and to the fact that journalists should clearly reveal their sources

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and, if possible, provide access to them via links. Additional aspects related to journalistic practice or editorial processes were also included on the list: balanced reporting, prioritizing stories that reflect diversity, fostering engagement and interactivity, and providing content that is coherent, story-driven, and easy to understand.

The findings show that while they generally align with canonical frameworks such as the one proposed by Harcup & O'Neill (2017), they also incorporate a mixture of core journalistic principles and emerging expectations that are typical of the digital era. Most notably, Gen Zers' concern with credibility, fact-checking, authenticity and the extent to which the information is "real" reflects their awareness of misinformation and the fact that distinguishing credible journalism from fake news has become a top concern for them. While the fact that they prioritize visual and emotional appeal, as well as virality, highlights the influence of characteristics that are typical to social media, the elements that are centred on the audience – such as engagement, interactivity and accessibility – point to an important shift toward participatory media content, where users expect transparency, coherence and diversity in storytelling.

6. Conclusions

The current exploratory study aimed to understand how Romanian Gen Zers perceive news values in the social media era and test the relevance of canonical news values frameworks. Its results point to a mixture of core journalistic principles, such as the ones proposed by Harcup & O'Neill (2017), and social media-driven priorities. While they recognize the relevance of canonical values such as impact, timeliness and controversy, respondents also integrate online platform imperatives, such as viral potential, audio-visual and emotional appeal. A prominent finding is their insistence on credibility and fact-checking, which, on the one hand, shows they mix news selection with news treatment, and on the other, reflects their acute preoccupation with the misinformation risks inherent to feeds curated through algorithms. The students' emphasis on the transparency of journalistic sources, balanced reporting and the need to reflect diversity suggests a demand for journalism that combines accuracy and quality reporting with accessibility. However, their prioritization of shareability and drama reveals the powerful influence of platform algorithms, which prefer sensationalism over in-depth analytical reporting.

Limitations of the study include the homogeneity of the sample group (Communication Science students) and the fact that it might overrepresent media literacy skills compared to the general Gen Z population. Further research could expand the diversity of respondents, including students from other professional fields and non-students, and use quantitative methods to assess news values. As Gen Zers' media consumption habits increasingly define global information norms, such research is vital for media researchers, educators, communication science professionals and activists in fostering well-informed and engaged digital citizens.

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