

# Updating Public Value: How Journalists Understand Their Societal Role in the Context of Digital Platforms

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## ABSTRACT

Journalism's role transformation from gatekeeper to one of many communicating actors on digital platforms increasingly necessitates the profession to reflect on the societal value it can provide on digital platforms. Applying the concepts of 'public value' and 'platformization,' this case study examines *funk*, a unique content network from German public service media that produces content mainly for a young audience using social media platforms for distribution. Building on a newsroom observation that informed subsequent qualitative interviews with nine members of *funk*, the findings reveal that, while public value perceptions align with traditional understandings of public value, they are adapted to the digital environment. Furthermore, the *funk* members reflect on reaching the target group, interactivity, and technical features of digital platforms to enhance public value, while also stressing the boundaries mainly stemming from the commercially-oriented logic of digital platforms.

## KEYWORDS

Public value; digital platforms; social media; platformization; public service media; interviews

## Introduction

News consumption and information-seeking practices are increasingly shifting onto and fragmenting across various digital platforms (Newman et al. 2024, pp. 10, 21). In turn, digital platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, have assumed journalism's traditional role of gatekeeping information and curating public discourses (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). Research on the impact of digital platforms on journalism is frequently accompanied by growing concerns about the long-term consequences of "dealing with digital intermediaries" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018, p. 1461). Opportunities, dependencies, and fields of tension arise between media organizations and digital platforms regarding the production, distribution, and monetization of journalistic products (Poell et al. 2023). Depending on the degree and type of platform entanglement, media organizations have developed various coping strategies over time that range from "platform counterbalancing" (Chua & Westlund, 2019, p. 153) to calling for stronger platform regulation and envisioning alternative, non-commercial digital platforms (Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021).

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Digital platforms, however, are central not only to people's general media consumption habits but also to fulfilling their democratic and civic duties as citizens (van Dijck et al. 2019, p. 4; Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). Therefore, it becomes increasingly necessary for journalists—both from a practical and a normative perspective—to reflect on their transformed role and the value they *still* fulfill in a digitalized democratic society (Newman, 2023, p. 11). Such attempts can be found in the context of public service media (PSM), which are expected to legitimize their expansion to digital platforms in line with their public service mission and their overall 'public value,' generally meaning the value that an organization provides for society (van Dijck et al. 2018). While these concepts offer potential ways to define the societal value that journalists can provide on digital platforms, it remains unclear how journalists perceive public value and its realization on such platforms (van Dijck & Poell, 2015; van Es & Poell, 2020).

This study explores these questions with the case of the German PSM 'content network' *funk*. Regarded as a fundamental break with traditional German PSM's broadcasting law, production, and distribution logics, *funk* was founded in 2016 by ARD and ZDF with a distinct public service mission to provide audio-visual content for the younger audience of 14- to 29-year-olds not only on their respective website (funk.net) but mainly via third-party digital platforms. The content network produces about 60 social media formats for the general purposes of information, e.g., the YouTube format 'MrWissen2go' that provides background information to news events, orientation, e.g., the Instagram format 'Mädelsabende' dealing with topics relevant to younger women, and entertainment, e.g., the TikTok format 'EY JAMAL' on typical school situations. After a preliminary newsroom observation, we conducted nine semi-structured qualitative interviews with members of the content network and explored in-depth (1) their perceptions of public value on digital platforms and (2) the opportunities and risks in fulfilling public value on such platforms.

This study offers two main contributions: First, the study theoretically connects the concept of public value (Moore, 1995) that is predominantly used in the context of PSM (cf. BBC 2004; EBU, 2012) with current research on journalistic 'platformization' (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018; Poell et al. 2023). Second, it builds on and extends research on journalism fulfilling societal values on digital platforms (Neuberger, 2019; Rodríguez-Castro, 2024) by investigating a digital PSM content network that can be seen as a most likely case of dealing with public value fulfillment on digital platforms on a regular basis. In light of arising counterbalancing strategies of European PSM (Moe, 2024; Olsen et al. 2024), the exploration of *funk* provides insights into the journalistic perceptions of public value and how journalists deal with emergent tensions of fulfilling it on digital platforms.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Public Value on Digital Platforms*

Public value can be defined as the "value that an organization contributes to society to benefit the common good" (van Dijck et al. 2018, p. 22). The term originates from public management and deals with questions on how predominantly public

institutions can adapt their activities more effectively towards and in co-creation with the public (Moore, 1995). The BBC introduced this concept to journalism to define and evaluate common good-oriented goals in PSM (BBC 2004). This can be seen as a “pro-active attempt to curb private sector attacks on the BBC’s role in a digital media ecology” (Donders, 2019, p. 32). The resulting ‘public value tests’, i.e., ex-ante evaluations of predominantly digital PSM services, remain criticized for multiple reasons (Collins, 2007; Moe & Van den Bulck, 2014). Beyond softening Moore’s original terms (Collins, 2007, p. 181) and using public value rather for rhetorical legitimization (Lee et al. 2011; Moe & Van den Bulck, 2014), the central paradoxical critique lies in the concept’s overall vagueness as well as the attempts of quantifying journalistic public value fulfillment, which is mainly determined through democratic societal outcomes (Lee et al. 2011; Moe & Van den Bulck, 2014; Freedman, 2019).

A common application of public value was the development of public value lists for internal strategies and external communication. These lists typically included values such as universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation (EBU, 2012, 2014). A documentary analysis of grey literature from European PSM identified twelve individual components of PSM’s public value (Cañedo et al. 2022, p. 591). Notably, however, these components are not applied uniformly across European PSM and refer to different aspects of public value fulfillment, including organization-related aspects and stages of the journalistic production process.

Therefore, this study examines journalism’s public value from a societal perspective, as emphasized by legal and regulatory frameworks at the national level (Neuberger, 2018, 2019; van Dijck et al. 2018). These frameworks fundamentally underline the duty of PSM to contribute to a functioning public sphere (Neuberger, 2019, p. 434; Sehl, 2020, p. 359). In the context of German PSM regulation, Neuberger (2018, pp. 66–69) depicts the central normative expectations for PSM along a communication model with elements of the communication process (Stollfuß, 2024, pp. 191–192). Emergent societal expectations can be categorized into (1) characteristics of the media organization, e.g., the financial and legal framework, organizational structure, editorial offices, production routines, and journalistic actors, (2) the media products in terms of journalistic quality standards, (3) media usage, i.e., how users inform themselves, and (4) media effects on a societal and individual level (see also Urbániková & Smejkal, 2025).

In addition, digital platforms have fundamentally changed the “general preconditions of an informed society” (Stollfuß, 2019, p. 517; van Dijck et al. 2019) and expanded the conditions, under which media organizations fulfill public value and common good-oriented goals (Stollfuß, 2018; Neuberger, 2022). Steinmaurer and Wenzel (2015, pp. 73–75), for example, argue in the larger context of a networked public sphere for the necessity to further develop public value to a ‘public network value’ that incorporates the new interaction modes and focuses more on the possibilities of facilitating public discourse via interaction and participation. While these conceptualizations offer a theoretical framework to investigate public value perceptions and fulfillment both in general (Neuberger, 2018, 2019) and on digital platforms (Steinmaurer & Wenzel, 2015; Neuberger, 2022; Rodríguez-Castro, 2024; Stollfuß, 2024), little research has, yet, investigated empirically how media organizations and journalistic actors perceive and implement public value fulfillment on digital platforms (with the

exception of Eichler, 2022; Stark & Steiner, 2018). Some studies have investigated how PSM rationalize or adapt certain public values on digital platforms, such as universality (Hokka, 2019; Martin, 2021), equality, and diversity (van Dijck & Poell, 2015; van Es & Poell, 2020). PSM members, for example, justify the distribution of content on digital platforms as a necessary step to reach and maintain new audiences and, in doing so, fulfill their aim for universality better (Nikunen & Hokka, 2020; Olsen et al. 2024). A broader approach, however, is essential to understand the various applications, perspectives, and interpretations of societal values, as well as the impact of digital platforms on fulfilling them within media organizations better. Keeping the abstractness of public value, the various elements through which public value can be expressed from a normative, societal perspective, as well as its emergent context-dependent interpretations on digital platforms in mind, we pose the research question:

*RQ1: What do journalists perceive as public value and fulfilling it on digital platforms?*

### **Public Value-Driven Journalism and Digital Platforms**

How journalists perceive and understand fulfilling public value on digital platforms depends on the way they engage with these platforms, and the way that platforms, in turn, impact their institutional strategies, production and distribution practices, and content (van Dijck & Poell, 2015; Stollfuß, 2024). Here, the well-established concept of platformization defines such impact as the

“penetration of digital platforms’ economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around these platforms” (Poell et al. 2021, p. 5).

The dependencies of media organizations on or ‘entanglements’ with digital platforms vary between different types of organizations. PSM, for example, can produce content for digital platforms without commercial pressure in contrast to other media types (Poell et al. 2023, pp. 1401–1404). However, prior research has identified a different field of tension between PSM and digital platforms. Taking the alignment of journalistic decisions with algorithmic newsfeed curation driven by attention-oriented imperatives into account, PSM are expected to continuously fulfill their public service mission and distribute public value-oriented content on such platforms (cf. van Dijck & Poell, 2015). Studies on PSM have described this conflict between their public service mission and the optimization of content for reach in various ways (see Røssok-Dahl & Olsen, 2024). Some explain this tension with the differing distribution logics between linear broadcasting and digital platforms (van Dijck et al. 2018; Lowe & Maijanen, 2019; Stollfuß, 2019; Martin, 2021). Others focus on an emergent “platform paradox” (Olsen et al. 2024, p. 13), wherein PSM struggle with tensions rising from the dependency on digital platforms’ measures to prove their value, i.e., by maintaining reach and engaging with audiences, as well as the desire to shape their own impact and legitimacy independently. Nonetheless, the pressures of successfully gaining the attention of their target groups and consistently pushing content remain the same. Van Dijck and Poell (2015), therefore, conclude that it is “only through struggles with

guidelines and content experiments that channels may find out to what extent public values can be reconciled with the amenities of social media” (p. 158; Poell et al. 2023).

While this discussion shows how the adaptation of journalism to commercially-driven digital environments or architectures might be interpreted on a normative level in light of PSM’s obligation to fulfill a public service mission and offers nuances of understanding the fulfillment of public value, a current analysis of fields of tension in connection with fulfilling public value on digital platforms from journalists’ perspectives is lacking. In order to identify these fields of tension, while also maintaining that possible entanglements with digital platforms can be understood not only as a risk but also as an opportunity, we pose the research question:

*RQ2: What do journalists perceive as opportunities and risks in fulfilling public value on digital platforms?*

## Method

### Case Selection

We adopted an instrumental case study approach to answer our research questions about journalists’ perceptions of fulfilling public value on digital platforms in more depth (Stake, 1995, p. 3; Simons, 2009). For this purpose, we selected the unique case of *funk*, a content network launched in 2016 by the German PSM ARD and ZDF. Understood as a fundamental break with prior German PSM practices, *funk* was created with the specified goal of fulfilling the public service mission better by providing content for a younger audience (14- to 29-year-olds) primarily through social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (Feierabend et al. 2018; funk, 2022; Stollfuß, 2024):

“For us, this [the public service mission] means that our top priority is actually reaching our target audience, namely approximately 15 million people living in Germany between the age of 14 and 29 who have internet access. However, not only do we want to reach them, we also strive to be a consistent factor in their everyday lives.” (funk, 2017)

In 2024, 78% of the target audience in Germany has already used *funk* or one of its 60 formats covering *informational* content, including reportages, news backgrounds, and weekly summaries, *orientational* content discussing age-relevant topics, such as health, sexuality, and electronics, and *entertaining* content, e.g., comedy sketches, fictional series, and discussions about sports, cinema, or celebrities (funk, 2024). Altogether, *funk*’s formats were reported to have accumulated by September 2024 approx. 17.1 million YouTube subscribers, 8.1 million Instagram followers, 7.8 million TikTok subscribers, 1.1 million Snapchat subscribers, and 1.2 million on Spotify (funk, 2024).

*funk*’s uniqueness for this case study lies in multiple aspects: *funk*’s organizational design as a decentralized network (Drössler, 2021; Cheng et al. 2024) and legal framework emphasize the necessity of flexibility and innovation to adapt to the dynamics on digital platforms and evolving media consumption behavior of younger audiences (for a more in-depth discussion, see also Stollfuß, 2019, p. 517, Stollfuß, 2024). The

main office of *funk* consists of strategic and data analytical teams, as well as ‘partner managers’ who develop, manage, and communicate with external editorial offices. This means that *funk* does not necessarily produce the formats itself, but collaborates with external editorial teams. These teams range from other PSM-based journalists and production companies to established content creators and fresh faces. Furthermore, *funk* is explicitly permitted by the Interstate Media Treaty to operate beyond PSM digital presences and figure out how to fulfill the public service mission in a social media platform environment (Stollfuß, 2024). *funk*’s formats are also developed dynamically. They are created for certain age groups, adapted throughout the years to meet the audience’s needs, and ended or transferred to a different PSM, once the audience ages out of the target group. Beyond Lichtenstein et al. (2021), who partly interviewed external content producers of *funk* formats, previous research has focused on *funk*’s public value from either media consumption habits (cf. Feierabend et al. 2018; Bien, 2022; funk, 2022) or theoretical perspectives that view *funk* as an “embodiment of a form of convergence of PSM and SMP [social media platforms]” (Stollfuß, 2024, p. 189, 2019).

### **Design, Data Collection and Analysis**

Within the case study design, we conducted a newsroom observation as a preliminary study that informed subsequent qualitative semi-structured interviews with nine members of the *funk* network. The interviews form the basis of this study’s findings.

The preliminary study consisted of a four-day newsroom observation of *funk*’s main office by the author. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and *funk*’s unique organizational structure, this step was necessary to gain an impression of the role that public value played in the everyday routines of the different teams and to identify potential interview candidates. The observation yielded about 20h of field notes and memos from meetings, interactions with *funk* members, and access to internal documents and organizational tools. The observation resulted in the rough categorization of the *funk* teams and members into three groups that varied in the frequency of and level of abstraction in discussing public value on digital platforms throughout their daily work: The strategically-oriented teams, including members from program and portfolio management, dealt with *funk*’s public value fulfillment on a more abstract level, considering the formats and digital platforms, potential portfolio gaps, and *funk*’s public value contribution in the larger context of German PSM. They also broke down the abstract term into practical recommendations and measurable goals. The partner managers dealt with public value in a more concrete manner. For example, they regularly evaluated and adapted the public value-oriented goals of the formats with the external editorial teams. The external editorial teams who produced most formats had a more focused approach to fulfilling public value, i.e., on the format- or content piece-level.

Based on the theoretical background and observation findings, an interview guide was developed. The guide covered various topics, like the perception of public value, negotiation practices related to fulfilling public value, and the roles of the audience and metrics in assessing public value fulfillment on digital platforms. We approached the abstract nature of public value through various contexts, i.e., individual members’

understandings of public value, *funk's* public value, and dealing with public value in daily work (see [Appendix A](#) for the interview guide). The semi-structured interviews with *funk* members took place between June and December 2023 via an online video conference tool, lasting an average of 62 min. The interview guide and interviews were conducted in German, with the author translating quotations for this article into English.

The final sample consisted of nine interviewees, including three members from strategic teams, three partner managers, and three external journalists working for specific formats within the *funk* network. The interviewees were strategically selected to cover a diverse range of roles and formats among the three groups. Eight interviewees had a journalistic background, with education or experience in journalistic organizations, primarily PSM. The formats supervised by the partner managers and produced by the external journalists covered all three content categories defined by the network (information, orientation, and entertainment) and major social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and podcasts.

We transcribed the interviews and used the software MAXQDA for qualitative coding. The coding was based on a loose category system derived from the theoretical concepts of this study and inductively augmented with the interview material. The goal of the qualitative coding was to bundle similar answers and, thus, explore in-depth (1) the perceived public value of *funk* members and (2) the opportunities and risks in dealing with fulfilling public value on digital platforms, while considering the interviewees' positions within the *funk* network. We also highlighted and analyzed emergent and overarching themes throughout the interviews that corresponded with the core theoretical concepts (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

## Findings

### *Perceptions of Public Value on Digital Platforms*

The interviews revealed multiple perceptions of understanding public value and its fulfillment on digital platforms that can be described along the communication process (Neuberger, 2018), i.e., characteristics of media organizations, media products, media usage, and media effects. Thereby, *funk* members' perceptions were embedded within and adapted to the context of digital platforms.

First, the *funk* members' perception of public value and fulfilling it on digital platforms was strongly connected to general normative expectations of *media effects on a societal and individual level*. *funk's* contribution was related to the informational role of journalism that facilitates information-seeking and opinion-making processes in society on digital platforms. Interviewees explicitly referred to the orientational and informational values that *funk* provided to young audiences in the context of a complex and informationally overloaded environment on digital platforms. Beyond the 'mere' presence on digital platforms, *funk's* main and unique service was understood as becoming a central part of the informational habits of the young audience and providing an added value, by delivering content that was trustworthy and guided by journalistic standards. One of the strategic *funk* members described the effects of fulfilling public value on digital platforms as,

"I think that will become one of the most important challenges in our society, to be honest, because digital platforms, social media platforms, have such a big effect on our lives and our society."

Second, and coinciding with the desired *media effects* of public value as well as the *characteristics of the media products*, the interviewees also derived their perception of public value from their audience-oriented public service mission, i.e., producing content that depicts the realities of a younger audience (14- to 29-years-old). *funk* members resonated with the sentiment of wanting to prioritize the "representation of a target group that [...] does not feel represented in other media or does not find its topics reflected in the same way." The fulfillment of this kind of public value was answered in two ways: (1) By representing and (2) by strengthening social cohesion of the younger audience. Representation was ensured with the production of formats closely related to the younger audience's experiences, e.g., depicting current living situations, addressing concerns, worries, and questions, and covering topics emergent from and relevant to the target audience. Strengthening social cohesion was regarded on a content level as well as in the context of the technological capabilities of digital platforms. Here, the interviewees emphasized the various possibilities of creating sustainable communities and spaces, such as in the comment sections that provided room for discussions.

The third prevalent perception of public value on digital platforms related to the *media product* and its production. This perception encompassed general orientations and journalistic standards in content production and quality management. Key practices included incorporating multiple perspectives into content, as well as validating sources, and promoting transparency. Additionally, the interviewees described journalistic protocols behind the scenes and approval processes of content that partner managers and external editorial teams conducted to ensure quality. These journalistic standards were also adapted to digital platforms. For example, some interviewees described transparently communicating mistakes and pinning a comment with further explanations or background information post-publication.

A fourth perception of public value emerged from the structure of *funk* as a network flexible enough to adapt to the dynamics of social media platforms (*media organizational characteristics*) and its audience (14- to 29-year-olds). The importance of flexibility in fulfilling public value on digital platforms was described in the context of strategies for measuring and setting specific public value goals for various formats. *funk* members described how these goals and measurement methods were developed format-specifically, and were regularly reviewed and updated. For example, a format at the start of its runtime might focus on establishing a community and identifying relevant topics within the target audience, using platform-based metrics to analyze user demographics and determine which topics resonate with them best. After establishing a community, the goals might shift toward facilitating discourse and connecting users with more content from the *funk* network. Consistent adaptations to the changing needs of the audience and digital platforms were also an established part of the overall evaluative process of *funk's* portfolio.

## Opportunities and Risks in Fulfilling Public Value on Digital Platforms

The *funk* members mentioned a multitude of aspects concerning the opportunities and risks associated with fulfilling public value on digital platforms (RQ2).

*Successfully reaching the target group of 14- to 29-year-olds (at all)* was framed as the central opportunity on digital platforms:

“They first of all create the space for it [public value]. So, there is a lot of criticism of the fact that public broadcasters publish on social media channels. But what is the alternative? Well, this young target group, that’s where they live [German: Lebensraum]. That’s where they move, that’s where they discuss. And that’s why we’re there too.”

Interviewees did not view platform disentanglement as a viable option for ensuring long-term contact with the target audience. Reasons ranged from the fundamental functionality of digital platforms as ‘social’ media to observed difficulties in motivating the target audience to transition from a social media platform to other digital PSM presences, such as streaming sites.

Another opportunity to fulfill public value provided on digital platforms was described as the possibility of *getting direct feedback from the audience*. With examples of ‘direct’ and qualitative modes of feedback concerning the content, topic, and production process via comments, discussions, and direct messages, as well as indirect modes via quantitative metrics provided by the respective platforms, such as subscriptions, clicks, likes, and watch time, the interviewees highlighted the ease of use and availability of data to analyze public value fulfillment on digital platforms. For example, some interviewees portrayed analytics as a means of understanding editorial-based decisions on content and getting a feeling of how dramaturgy and thumbnail selection influenced click rates, watch time, and completion rates.

Similarly, the interviewees perceived digital platforms as *enabling direct interactions with the audience and facilitating constructive follow-up discussions*. Here, aspects of community management played a central role in the idea of directly reacting to or initiating discussions, posing questions in the comments, monitoring the debate climate, and occasionally stepping in to maintain a constructive discussion.

Within the complex informational environment of digital platforms, other opportunities were described concerning the *navigation* on these platforms that made *funk’s* content accessible and findable. Examples included directing user flows by using the possibility of linking content that dealt with similar topics across content types, e.g., from entertaining to informational content. Furthermore, having an information panel on YouTube to explicitly label *funk’s* formats as PSM was described as an additional opportunity by digital platforms to provide context on *funk’s* organizational background and offer demarcation for trustworthy content.

The main risks associated with fulfilling public value on third-party platforms can be collected under the term ‘commercially-oriented logic of platforms.’

Primarily, the interviewees perceived that the *lack of control in the distribution* of valuable and relevant content, caused by the platform’s content moderation and attentionally-driven algorithms, hindered the fulfillment of public value. This was mentioned concerning certain topics of relevance to the target audience, such as violence, war, and drugs for reportages and other informational formats, and the use of specific words that could lead to restricted algorithmic distribution.

Furthermore, the *limitations of platform-based metrics and audience feedback* on digital platforms were thematized within the interviews. With the example of TikTok, a relatively new platform for distribution at the time, issues arose in understanding the platform-provided metrics, which caused unclarity around the performance of formats and, consequently, their fulfillment of public value-oriented goals. The predominant nature of passive media consumption was also brought up in the interviews. While the clicks offered a quantitative impression of interest and reach, the qualitative analysis of comments or direct messages was seen to be inherently biased towards the 'loudest' users in the room—as an interview put it.

Closely connected to the direct feedback mechanisms on digital platforms, interviewees also highlighted certain *limitations in facilitating a constructive public discourse* on digital platforms. Here, a lack of community tools and resources to consistently monitor and deal with situationally overloaded comment sections and trolls was mentioned.

### ***Nuanced Negotiation of Public Value on Digital Platforms***

While discussing the opportunities and risks of fulfilling public value on digital platforms, three themes emerged that provide nuance in understanding how *funk* members perceived and dealt with the challenges on digital platforms.

First, interviewees consistently emphasized the financial and, thus, perceived editorial freedom that *funk*, as part of the German PSM system, was able to maintain on digital platforms. Keeping the attention-oriented logics of algorithmic environments in mind, interviewees described a reflexive process on whether to follow platform- or public value-oriented editorial goals:

“And these are problems where we always try to take a step back and say, okay, are we doing this because the algorithm would [...] promote it, or do we really like it? And I think that's something where we have to keep asking ourselves how far we can adapt to the logic of the platform and to what extent we can't, because we want certain content, values, that meet our journalistic standards, [and] that pay into our values.”

Second, while *funk* members acknowledged the unavoidability of, to a certain extent, following the digital platforms' “rules of the game” in content production or audience interactions, they mentioned various experiments and solutions to continuously fulfill their public service mission. Some interviewees brought up examples of ‘trade-offs,’ such as adapting content and words to avoid the potential restriction of distribution on digital platforms. Others described instances of pushing topics that were seen as relevant on a societal and target audience level, regardless of the potential risk of content suppression. An additional way of dealing with the risks mentioned in the interviews was contacting representatives of digital platforms to understand wrongful blockings or limited distributions of content.

Third, and taking the opportunities and limitations of platform-based feedback mechanisms into account, *funk* members elaborated on attempts to augment the data from digital platforms with information from more traditional forms of media research, e.g., by conducting focus groups with particular target groups of formats, visiting schools, and running representative surveys to investigate long-term shifts in

their needs and interests. The forms of additional media research differed between the interviewees' roles, with format-specific feedback rounds with (target) audience members being more relevant to the partner managers and external editorial journalists. The overarching representative surveys helped the strategic-oriented teams, for example, identify gaps and potentials in *funk's* overall portfolio management.

## Discussion and Conclusion

With news consumption shifting to digital platforms and journalism becoming one of many communicating actors on digital platforms with the potential of informing the audience, the societal value that journalistic actors can provide on digital platforms has become a relevant point of discussion—not only in academia but also journalistic practice (cf. Newman, 2023). While research has explored how to conceptually grasp public value-oriented journalism in the context of digital platforms and how to adapt existing frameworks to the digital information ecology (Neuberger, 2019; Rodríguez-Castro, 2024; Stollfuß, 2024), studies on the entanglements of PSM and digital platforms emphasize a core tension between reaching the (younger) audience and fulfilling the public service mission. Yet, few of these informative approaches deal with the perspective of journalistic actors producing, distributing, and supervising formats on digital platforms, and how they understand and implement these values. Based on the in-depth case study of a German PSM content network, this study illustrates how *funk*—as a media organization operating outside of the financial constraints of digital platforms and dynamically innovating within the regulatory framework of PSM—adapts public value to the digital environment and how *funk's* members deal with the challenges of fulfilling public value amid platform entanglements.

When looking at *funk* members' perceptions of public value and its fulfillment on digital platforms, the study shows that their perceptions reflected the digital media landscape on which *funk* distributes its content (RQ1). This was done by contextualizing their content as valuable in providing trustworthy, verified information in orientation to journalistic standards and in contrast to the other content on digital platforms. Thereby, they focused on the representation and strengthening of social cohesion for a younger audience through the application of the digital interactive infrastructure of social media platforms to listen and foster discussions. Furthermore, they aimed at being flexible enough as an organization to react to dynamic shifts of social media platforms and target audiences both structurally- and content-wise.

While the *funk* members had a general, yet abstract, understanding of public value, most seemed to deal with the concept—beyond their fundamental journalistic role perception as PSM journalists—by applying more concrete terms from daily work life, e.g., the needs of the audience, inclusion, or internal documents on *funk's* values. This suggests that journalistic perceptions of public value convey both an underlying journalistic-oriented practical dimension, e.g., ensuring journalistic standards in the production of content and using the provided architecture of digital platforms to facilitate public value-oriented goals, such as representation or social cohesion, as well as a public value-oriented normative dimension, e.g., by understanding and reflecting their practices consistently with regard to the public service mission and *funk's* public value. While such a conclusion might be understood as the result of the problematized

abstractness of the term ‘public value’ (Moe & van den Bulck, 2014), it also shows how journalists’ perceptions and practices of fulfilling public value seem to be more strongly related to dimensions of the communication process and embedded in certain journalistic routines (Neuberger, 2019), rather than general values.

However, the general values and reflection of *funk*’s practices in the context of PSM and their public service mission come stronger into play, when regarding the emergent fields of tension of fulfilling public value on digital platforms (RQ2): *algorithmic gatekeeping*, *reliability of user data*, and *constructive discourse facilitation*. The traditional field of tension from prior research on PSM and digital platforms related to ‘actually’ (see *funk*, 2017) reaching the target audience and the lack of control in the *algorithmic distribution or ‘gatekeeping’* of PSM content was confirmed in the interviews with *funk* members (Røsok-Dahl & Olsen, 2024). With *funk*’s specific public service mission of providing content where their target audience is (i.e., on digital platforms) in mind, the interviewee’s hesitance towards strategies of platform disentanglement—as the alternative to remaining on digital platforms—is unsurprising. Nonetheless, while notions of platform disentanglement have been observed for other media types (Chua & Westlund, 2019) and are gaining ground in the context of certain European PSM (Moe, 2024), *funk*’s reasons to this hesitancy shed light on an underlying dilemma of journalistic outlets of potentially ‘losing’ the relevant connection (and—in the case of PSM—their legitimation) to their target audience again—especially in the case of younger age groups with stronger information-seeking practices and media consumption habits on social media. The other two fields of tension that emerged were related to the capabilities of platforms to *provide reliable user data* (detailed public value fulfillment measurement vs. metric obscurity and limitations of audience feedback) and to *enable constructive discourse facilitation* (facilitation and moderation of public discourses vs. lack of management tools and resources). While these tensions are not necessarily *funk*-specific and have been addressed in the overall context of PSM’s paradoxical relationship with digital platforms (Olsen et al. 2024), they underscore the necessity of reflecting public value fulfillment on digital platforms throughout the entire journalistic production process, as well as in subsequent facilitations of discourse and community building.

This study’s findings on *funk*’s nuanced ways of dealing with these fields of tension in fulfilling public value on digital platforms and that these possibilities of negotiation were mainly reasoned in the financial independence of *funk* also highlight—at least from the journalists’ perceptions—the importance of funding models in the relationship between media organizations and platforms (Poell et al. 2023). While the practical strategies of dealing with algorithmic gatekeeping (e.g., altering words, using reliable methods of user data collection, and still posting content that is societally relevant) are not necessarily *funk*-specific, the emphasis of the interviewees on consistent reflections throughout the editorial decision-making processes points towards a strong awareness of the consequences of dealing with digital platforms (see similarly Eichler, 2022). Furthermore, the study’s findings regarding the possibilities of contacting platform representatives in the case of unclear algorithmic gatekeeping practices, as well as platforms enabling *funk* to have an additional information panel to demarcate their content, also highlight the relational aspect of platform power (Poell et al. 2023).

## Limitations and Future Research

The findings need to be reviewed in light of the study's limitations. First, this study looked at one particular digital-only German PSM network, with most interviewees having a background in PSM. While *funk* can be understood as exemplary for a larger movement of digital innovation as well as social media platform-oriented movements within the PSM environment (Hendrickx, 2023; Zaragoza Fuster & García Avilés, 2024) and was selected as a most likely case to further our understanding of fulfilling public value on digital platforms, it remains to be explored as to whether these updated perceptions of public value resemble those of traditional PSM editorial offices also transitioning to digital platforms and with more heterogeneous audiences. Comparatively, the perceptions of peripheral journalistic actors, such as political social media influencers, could also be investigated. While we tentatively can assume that the underlying dimensions of public value fulfillment along the communication process and the emergent tensions are not necessarily *funk*-specific, but can also be found for other media types that produce content for digital platforms, the findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the potentials and risks that journalists perceive in fulfilling public value, nonetheless, on digital platforms. In this sense, a comparison with a digital-only commercial media outlet—as a counterexample—could also provide the necessary contrast in investigating fields of tension between media organizations and digital platforms, especially concerning their different funding models.

Second, the study's results provide a first step in understanding public value fulfillment on digital platforms and the ways how an innovative PSM content network navigates through various tensions emerging on digital platforms. Taking the centrality of the audience's perspective and feedback mechanisms in the concept of public value but also in the interviews of the *funk* members into account, future research that measures the actual fulfillment of public value, e.g., the positive effects on users on an individual (e.g., experiments and focus groups with audience members) and societal level (e.g., user comments and surveys), is required to complement and evaluate *funk's* fulfillment of the self-perceived goals.

Nonetheless, this study offers a current and in-depth look into how public value-driven journalism is understood, fulfilled, and updated on digital platforms. Furthermore, it sheds light on how certain aspects of public value fulfillment are both supported and hindered by digital platforms and unveils the nuanced ways that *funk*—a PSM content network that distributes content predominantly on third-party platforms—deals with these emergent tensions.

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## Ethical Statement

The German Research Foundation (DFG) offers a set of basic guidelines for safeguarding good research practice in Germany (see <https://www.dfg.de/en/principles-dfg-funding/basics-and-principles-of-funding/good-scientific-practice>). We gathered informed consent of the interviewees, provided them with the right to discontinue their participation and the deletion of their data. Due to the nature of the chosen methodology not being deceptive or manipulative, the study did not seek formal IRB approval.

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## Appendix A

### Overview of the semi-structured interview questions

Topic	Specific questions
Ice-breaker introduction	To get started, I would like to ask you to briefly tell us about yourself—who you are, how old you are, and what your professional background is. Please briefly describe your role at funk.
Public value on digital platforms	Which societal values determine your journalistic work? This is a very open question, and I am interested in your spontaneous statements about the values that determine your work. Have you ever heard of public value? What do you associate with it? What does this term mean to you? *short definition of public value*
Fulfilling public value on digital platforms	Before we continue with public value on digital platforms, I would like to take a brief look at the digital environment of social media platforms. Well, funk is known as a content network that only operates on digital platforms such as social media or similar. This means that the fulfillment and measurement of public value can depend on the circumstances on digital platforms. If we now look at digital platforms in general: From your perspective, what opportunities do digital platforms in particular offer in principle to fulfill public value? What difficulties do digital platforms have in fulfilling public value?
funk's public value on digital platforms	When you say that funk as a content network, or your work at funk on digital platforms creates a certain value (i.e., public value) for society, what do you think is meant by that? Do you have any examples or experiences that you associate with this? Well—funk is not the only media outlet on digital platforms—several other media players produce similar content and formats and want to reach the same target group. So, in your opinion, how does funk's public value on digital platforms differ from... ... other public broadcasters on digital platforms? ... private broadcasters on digital platforms? ... influencers, NGOs, politicians, and other actors on digital platforms?
Role of public value in editorial work	What role does public value play in your day-to-day editorial work? In other words, when do you think about the social mission in your day-to-day business? In everyday editorial work, are there typical situations/moments where public value is discussed or thematized particularly frequently or strongly?

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Topic	Specific questions
Audience perspective	What public value do you think funk has for the audience? Moreover, how do you evaluate that this value is actually being delivered to your audience? What evidence do you use to track your audience's perception of the fulfillment of public value?
Digital platform metrics	What role do metrics from digital platforms generally play in your goal of measuring public value and its fulfillment on digital platforms? What are the chances? Are there any difficulties? Which metrics from digital platforms do you use in everyday journalism to measure public value and its fulfillment on digital platforms?
Summary and outlook	Looking back on our discussion: What does it mean for you to fulfill public value goals on digital platforms? Furthermore, if you look at the future of journalism or public service media on digital platforms, do you have any ideas on how to fulfill public value on digital platforms better? We have discussed public value, editorial processes, and funk. Is there anything important or interesting about this topic that you think I have forgotten?

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