MJRC
MEDIA&JOURNALISM RESEARCH CENTER

New Ideas in Media and Communication

The academic journal of the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC)
ISSN 3059-8028
Vol 1

Anchoring Reality: Journalism's Struggle for Authority and Societal Reference

Author: Marius Dragomir

Abstract

For much of the 20th century, journalism in liberal-democratic societies functioned as the primary *referential anchor*—a central authority validating facts, shaping issue agendas, and sustaining a shared horizon of reality. This role rested on professional norms such as objectivity, institutional protections like public service broadcasting, and structural gatekeeping power. In authoritarian and developmental states, journalism occupied a similar centrality, though subordinated to state narratives. Hybrid regimes exhibited fluctuating degrees of referential authority, contingent on political opening and policy change. The concept of *Referential Displacement* proposed in this paper captures the structural transformation whereby journalism's centrality has been eroded by competing reference systems—platform-mediated visibility, identity-driven communities, and strategic state or commercial communicators. Platformization, attention-based economies, and shifts in trust formation have fragmented the pathways through which publics orient to "facts," privileging narrative coherence and network endorsement over evidentiary grounding. Drawing on comparative media systems theory, agenda-setting and framing research, and studies of information disorder, the paper introduces the concept of referential displacement as a measurable shift in the locus of referential authority. It maps the drivers and consequences of this shift—loss of a shared factual base, de-institutionalization of trust, and the rise of "truth regimes" operating without a common arbiter. Finally, the paper outlines a *re-anchored referential model* built on multi-source verification networks, provenance transparency, cross-platform standards, and referential literacy. This proposed framework aims to stabilize public communication without reinstating a monolithic truth regime, positioning journalism as a critical node in a collaborative verification ecosystem suited to the realities of a networked public sphere.

Introduction

Before the emergence of the Internet, journalism in many democracies functioned as the primary referential anchor for public discourse. Institutional news organizations such as press agencies, newspapers of record, and national broadcasters operated as gatekeepers that validated facts, prioritized issues, and stabilized a shared horizon of reality for mass publics.

Classic agenda-setting research captured this structural role as the press's power to tell people *what to think about*, thereby organizing collective attention for democratic debate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In parallel, European public service broadcasting (PSB) regimes cast journalism as a civic institution with mandates of universality, impartiality, and editorial autonomy, normative expectations that underwrote journalism's referential centrality in the mass-media era (Scannell, 1990; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Together, these research and policy frames help explain why, in liberal-democratic contexts, journalism historically served as the default reference point to reality.

In the United States, journalism's referential status consolidated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as objectivity hardened into a professional norm, supported by routinized verification and sourcing practices (Schudson, 1978). The postwar national press and broadcast networks then acted as "interpreters" of reality for large, heterogeneous audiences. The agenda-setting effects demonstrated during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign are emblematic of how centralized media shaped a common issue agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Watergate-era investigative reporting further crystallized the watchdog ideal: claims about public wrongdoing were anchored in documentary evidence and multilayered sourcing, reinforcing the press's role as a primary validator of factual reality (Schudson, 1992).

In Western Europe, journalism's referential authority was institutionally embedded through PSB settlements and media policy. The BBC between the 1920s and 1930s was explicitly conceived as a national service "serving the nation," with editorial independence tied to a public remit and universality, providing a shared informational reference for citizens across classes and regions (Scannell & Cardiff, 1991). West Germany's post-1945 broadcasting architecture (ARD/ZDF) connected media to democratic reconstruction and pluralism, while retaining strong public mandates (Humphreys, 1996). Across the Nordics, generous press subsidies, strong PSB, and arm's-length governance produced what scholars dub a "media welfare state," wherein public institutions supplied high-trust, low-barrier reference points for citizens (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

Journalism's central referential function structured the conditions under which publics could imagine a shared world. This centrality, however, was never universal. Under authoritarian rule, the press functioned less as an independent validator of facts and more as an instrument of state control.

The classic comparative framework of Four Theories of the Press distinguishes authoritarian and Soviet-communist models, in which licensing, censorship, and party control align media with regime legitimation rather than independent reference to external reality (Siebert et al., 1956). In Singapore, a developmental state model has long subordinated journalistic autonomy to policy priorities through legal constraints, ownership, and political oversight (George, 2012). In China, the reform era introduced market competition and pockets of professionalization but within boundaries that ultimately reinforce regime stability—what Stockmann (2013) terms commercialization without autonomy—reshaping rather than restoring journalism's referential role.

Hybrid and democratizing contexts add further nuance. In Mexico during the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) era, private ownership coexisted with political clientelism; broadcast dominance (e.g., Televisa) and state–media bargains constrained watchdog reporting and conditioned access to advertising, compromising an independent referential role. Democratization in the 1990s–2000s catalyzed a freer press, but legacy structures and regulatory weakness persisted (Lawson, 2002). Building on Hallin and Mancini's comparative schema, Guerrero characterize much of Latin America as a "captured liberal" model: nominally liberal markets with persistent clientelism and political interference that attenuate journalistic autonomy and, by extension, the stability of referential claims (Guerrero, 2014).

Comparative media-systems research helps organize these patterns. Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose four core dimensions—media market development, political parallelism, journalistic professionalization, and state intervention—along which Western media systems vary. In polarized-pluralist contexts (e.g., parts of Southern Europe), strong political parallelism and clientelist traditions historically constrained autonomy and, with it, journalism's referential stability. Updates to this framework argue that digitalization and platformization are driving a process of deinstitutionalization, weakening legacy anchors (state, parties, PSB, news organizations) that once supported journalism's centrality (Mancini, 2020).

Summarizing the pre-Internet landscape, we can say: (1) in liberal-democratic settings, journalism's referential centrality was sustained by professional norms (objectivity), structural roles (agenda-setting and watchdog), and institutions (PSB, legal protections); (2) in authoritarian and developmental states, the referent was often subordinated to state narrative, with commercialization reshaping but not necessarily liberalizing the link between signs and reality; and (3) in hybrid regimes and democratizing contexts, the degree of referential authority fluctuated with political opening and policy change. This historical baseline is crucial: it establishes the counterfactual against which we can evaluate the contemporary erosion of journalism's centrality in a poly-referential communication order, saturated by influencers, strategic disinformation, and platform logics that reward narrative coherence over evidentiary grounding.

Accordingly, the remainder of the paper proposes a theory of *referential displacement*: a structural shift in which journalism's role as the default anchor to shared reality has been displaced by competing reference systems—platform-mediated visibility, identity-driven communities, and state/strategic communicators—requiring the construction of a new, distributed *reference layer* for public communication. The next sections formalize the concept, present comparative indicators of referential centrality across media systems and time, and sketch potential institutional and technical designs for re-anchoring referentiality, without reverting to a monolithic, hegemonic model of truth.

Formalizing the Concept of Referential Displacement

The historical overview presented in the previous section underscores that, for much of the 20th century, journalism in many democratic and semi-democratic contexts served as the central referential anchor in the communication ecosystem. This role combined the mediation between events and publics through verification and shared interpretive framing, the structuring of collective agendas through issue selection and prioritization, and the maintenance of institutional norms that emphasized autonomy from political and economic power. Even in authoritarian settings, where referentiality was subordinated to official narratives, journalism retained a central role—albeit as an instrument of state control—within the broader structure of public communication.

The concept of *referential displacement* seeks to capture the structural transformation that has altered this arrangement. In today's poly-referential environment, multiple and often competing actors, ranging from social media influencers and partisan commentators to state-sponsored propagandists and algorithmically amplified opinion leaders, compete with professional journalism for the authority to define what is real. The pathways through which publics orient themselves to facts are no longer channelled primarily through journalistic institutions but are distributed across a fragmented, platform-mediated field (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2017). This change is not merely a perceptual shift in trust but a structural reconfiguration of the mechanisms by which referential authority is produced, circulated, and legitimized.

Referential displacement can be defined as the systemic shift in the locus of referential authority from a relatively centralized journalistic field toward a fragmented environment in which narrative coherence, identity alignment, and algorithmic visibility frequently outweigh evidentiary grounding in determining what audiences accept as reality. It is a transformation driven by several interlinked processes.

The first is the reordering of communication infrastructures through platformization, which redistributes visibility and gatekeeping functions away from editors toward algorithmic systems.

The second concerns changes in economic incentives, particularly the dominance of attention-based advertising, which privileges engagement over verification. The third involves the political adaptation to this new environment, as political actors, advocacy groups, and interest networks develop direct-to-public channels that bypass professional journalism entirely. Finally, these structural and institutional shifts are accompanied by cultural changes in trust formation, with audiences increasingly relying on perceived authenticity, network endorsements, and ideological congruence as markers of credibility rather than on the procedural norms of verification, balance, and editorial independence (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Sunstein, 2018).

This concept draws upon, and extends, several influential strands of communication theory. Agenda-setting and framing research has demonstrated how journalism once shaped both the salience of issues and the interpretive frames through which they were understood (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). The hybrid media system framework has highlighted the integration of legacy and digital media logics in contemporary political communication (Chadwick, 2017). Studies of information disorder have analyzed the proliferation of false or misleading content across networks (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). *Referential displacement* synthesizes these insights but shifts the focus from individual phenomena to the structural erosion of journalism's role as a shared reference point. Its emphasis is not only on the loss of journalistic dominance in producing credible referents, but also on the emergence of parallel factual regimes that coexist without a common arbiter, facilitated by algorithmic curation that insulates audiences within ideologically homogeneous networks.

By bringing these elements together, the concept offers an integrative framework with broad comparative applicability. It can be operationalized across diverse media systems, from high-autonomy democracies to hybrid regimes, by examining variations in the degree to which professional journalism retains agenda-setting power, the share of public attention captured by non-journalistic actors, and the extent of factual consensus across networked communities. It also connects empirical observation with normative theory, particularly in relation to the public sphere. If, as Habermas (1989) suggests, democratic deliberation depends on the availability of shared and credible information, then the displacement of journalism from its referential position has direct implications for the quality of public discourse, the functioning of accountability mechanisms, and the ability of societies to engage in collective problem-solving.

The potential academic contribution of this concept lies in its capacity to reframe the discussion about journalism's changing role. Rather than framing current developments as a linear decline from a "golden age," *referential displacement* provides a more precise account of the mechanisms by which centrality is lost, the alternative systems that fill the referential gap, and the normative consequences of this shift. It offers a conceptual tool for integrating disparate literatures, facilitates comparative research by treating displacement as a spectrum, and opens space for prescriptive inquiry into how a distributed but authoritative reference layer might be constructed to stabilize public communication without reinstating a hegemonic monopoly on truth.

The Crisis: Proliferation of Narrative Sources and Consequences for the Communication Field

The displacement of journalism from its historical position as the primary referential anchor has been accelerated by a profound transformation in the ecology of information production and distribution. At the centre of this transformation is the unprecedented proliferation of narrative sources—an outcome of technological change, shifting political strategies, and evolving audience practices. Where 20th century mass communication systems concentrated agenda-setting and reality-defining functions within a relatively small number of professional institutions, the contemporary environment diffuses these functions across a vast and heterogeneous field of actors (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

This multiplication of voices has undeniable democratic potential, offering the promise of greater diversity in perspectives, more inclusive participation in public debate, and the capacity to challenge entrenched power structures (Benkler et al., 2018). Yet, as empirical research demonstrates, the same structural conditions that enable pluralism also facilitate the rise of actors whose commitments to verification, accuracy, and accountability are tenuous or absent (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The net result is not simply “more speech,” but a reorganization of the communicative environment in which the authority to define what counts as “fact” is up for continuous contestation.

From Scarcity to Abundance: Structural Drivers of Narrative Proliferation

The shift from information scarcity to abundance is rooted in the digitization and platformization of public communication. The technical barriers to publishing, once high due to the capital costs of printing presses, broadcasting infrastructure, and distribution networks, have all but collapsed in the networked age. Social media platforms and content-sharing services offer free or low-cost channels capable of reaching global audiences instantaneously (Napoli, 2019). This infrastructure not only enables traditional news outlets to distribute their content more widely but also allows non-institutional actors to circumvent professional journalism altogether (Chadwick, 2017).

Algorithmic curation compounds this shift by reordering the flow of information according to engagement metrics rather than editorial judgment (Gillespie, 2018). In doing so, it rewards the production of content designed to provoke emotional, identity-affirming, or sensational reactions, traits that correlate only loosely, if at all, with evidentiary quality (Myllylahti, 2018).

Research into the dynamics of viral content suggests that emotionally charged narratives, particularly those invoking moral outrage, spread more quickly and widely than neutral or factual reporting (Brady et al., 2017). The commercial logic of platforms, then, systematically elevates certain types of narratives irrespective of their factual grounding.

Political and Strategic Exploitation of the New Narrative Environment

The emergence of a fragmented, high-velocity information ecosystem has been rapidly assimilated into the repertoire of political communication strategies. Parties, candidates, state actors, and advocacy organizations have developed direct-to-public channels that bypass journalistic mediation (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). This strategy offers two advantages: control over messaging and insulation from the scrutiny of professional fact-checking.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, for example, both official campaigns and unofficial partisan networks deployed social media to seed and amplify narratives without relying on mainstream press coverage (Persily, 2017). Similar tactics have been documented in contexts as varied as the 2018 Brazilian elections (Arnaudo, 2017), the 2022 Philippine presidential race (Thompson, 2016), and the Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Western electorates (Howard et al., 2018).

In hybrid and authoritarian regimes, the same tools are adapted to maintain or extend state control over public discourse. Governments deploy coordinated online networks, often a mix of human operators and automated bots, to flood social media with pro-government narratives, attack opponents, and distract from critical reporting (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, “keyboard armies” were mobilized to shape perceptions of the administration’s drug war, undermining critical reporting by domestic and international outlets (Ong & Cabañes, 2019). In Russia, state-aligned media and online influencers have played central roles in sustaining official narratives about the war in Ukraine, both domestically and internationally (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

Erosion of Gatekeeping and the Weakening of Verification

One of the most direct consequences of narrative proliferation is the **erosion of traditional gatekeeping** functions. In the mass-media model, gatekeeping was largely exercised by professional editors and journalists who, despite political and commercial pressures, were institutionally bound by norms of verification and accountability (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the platform-mediated environment, these editorial filters are often absent or are replaced by distributed and opaque forms of moderation whose primary aim is to enforce platform policies, not to uphold journalistic standards (Gillespie, 2018).

This shift weakens the salience of verification as a necessary precursor to dissemination. False or misleading content can achieve viral reach before journalists or fact-checkers can assess it (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Moreover, by the time corrections are issued, the original narrative may have already solidified in the minds of its target audience, a phenomenon compounded by cognitive biases such as the "continued influence effect" (Lewandowsky et al., 2012) and motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990).

Consequences for the Communication Field

The proliferation of narrative sources in a context of weakened gatekeeping and altered incentive structures has far-reaching consequences for the communication field as a whole.

First, there is a **loss of a shared referential base**. Public discourse becomes fragmented into multiple, coexisting realities, each anchored in its own set of trusted sources and validated narratives (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). This fragmentation makes collective action more difficult, as deliberation on public issues requires some minimal agreement on the facts. In extreme cases, it encourages epistemic enclaves in which members not only disagree on interpretations but inhabit entirely separate factual universes.

Second, there is a **de-institutionalization of trust**. Trust in information is increasingly decoupled from institutional reputation and tied instead to interpersonal, networked, or identity-based relationships (Fletcher & Park, 2017). This can increase vulnerability to manipulation by charismatic individuals or tightly knit communities whose credibility rests on shared identity rather than demonstrated accuracy. The reorientation of trust also complicates the task of re-establishing shared referential anchors, as the legitimacy of traditional news institutions is no longer universally recognized.

Third, a climate of **referential relativism** emerges, in which truth claims are evaluated less on evidentiary grounds than on their congruence with pre-existing beliefs and group loyalties (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). In such contexts, fact-checking and correction efforts often have limited or counterproductive effects, and the very notion of an objective, verifiable reality becomes politically contested (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

These transformations also reshape professional journalism from within. News organizations find themselves competing for attention in the same algorithmically driven marketplace as entertainment content, political propaganda, and commercial advertising (Napoli, 2019). This can lead to the adoption of platform-friendly practices such as click-optimized headlines, rapid-fire publishing cycles or emphasis on emotionally engaging content that, while improving visibility, risk undermining the depth and reliability traditionally associated with the profession (Molyneux & McGregor, 2021).

Systemic Implications

The systemic implications of these shifts extend beyond the media field. In democratic contexts, the absence of a broadly accepted referential anchor threatens the viability of the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate. Without common points of reference, public discourse risks devolving into parallel monologues, each internally coherent but mutually unintelligible.

In conflict situations or in the governance of transnational crises, such as climate change or pandemics, the lack of a shared factual baseline undermines coordinated responses. Disputes over the existence or severity of problems consume political energy that might otherwise be directed toward solutions (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). The problem is not merely the presence of false information, but the absence of trusted, authoritative mechanisms for adjudicating factual disputes in a way that commands broad legitimacy.

In hybrid and authoritarian systems, the proliferation of narrative sources can paradoxically strengthen incumbents by overwhelming publics with contradictory claims, a tactic sometimes described as “flooding the zone” (Paul & Matthews, 2016). In such contexts, the aim is not to persuade audiences of a particular falsehood but to create a state of epistemic confusion in which all sources appear equally unreliable, thereby neutralizing critical voices.

Towards a Re-Anchored Referential Model

In the current communication environment, referential authority, the capacity to define and legitimize what is taken as factual reality, is no longer the near-exclusive domain of professional journalism. A broad array of actors is actively seeking to occupy this space, investing in the infrastructure, policies, and narratives necessary to position themselves as the definitive reference point for their audiences.

Large technology companies, particularly global platforms such as Google, Meta, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, have developed policies, technical tools, and governance arrangements that shape what users see, how they encounter information, and what is labelled as credible or misleading (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019). These corporations have, in effect, begun to build proprietary reference systems, incorporating fact-checking partnerships, misinformation labelling, and algorithmic downranking of disputed content. During major events, be they elections, pandemics or natural disasters, platforms implement targeted interventions, such as dedicated COVID-19 information hubs or voting information centers, which not only guide user attention but also implicitly signal which sources deserve trust. In doing so, they operate as de facto curators of reality for billions of users, exercising referential power that rivals, and in some cases eclipses, that of legacy news institutions (Moore & Tambini, 2021).

Governments also compete for referential authority, particularly in moments of crisis when the demand for authoritative information spikes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many states established official dashboards, daily briefings, and public health portals to centralize factual updates and combat misinformation (Nguyen et al., 2022). In wartime contexts, governments seek to dominate the information space not only to inform but to frame events in ways that support national strategy; Ukraine's daily digital briefings and Russia's tightly controlled wartime narratives both illustrate state efforts to claim the mantle of the definitive reference point (Paul & Matthews, 2016; Pomerantsev, 2019). These interventions can strengthen public resilience in emergencies but also risk collapsing the distinction between information provision and propaganda, particularly in regimes with low media freedom.

At the other end of the spectrum, small-scale and informal networks—from encrypted group chats on Telegram and WhatsApp to online hobbyist forums, religious congregations, or local sports clubs—often function as micro-referential systems for their members. Within these spaces, trusted peers become the default arbiters of reality, circulating links, images, and commentary that frame issues for the group. While the scale is limited, the bond of trust in such close-knit networks can make their narratives more persuasive than those from unfamiliar institutional sources (Krafft & Donovan, 2020). In some cases, these community-based references serve benign functions, such as coordinating local events; in others, they can incubate misinformation that spreads outward into the broader public sphere (Dragomir et al. 2025).

This competitive struggle over referential authority creates a highly fragmented landscape in which multiple actors—global platforms, states, and micro-communities—are simultaneously carving out domains of trust. In such an environment, audiences may receive conflicting referential cues from different layers of their information ecosystem. A person might, for example, see a fact-checked article in their Facebook feed, hear a contradictory government statement on television, and then discuss an alternative narrative with friends in a private messaging group. Each source, within its domain, asserts itself as **the** credible reference, contributing to the polycentric and often contradictory structure of today's public sphere.

This complex and contested arena underscores the urgency of developing a *re-anchored referential model*, one capable of providing a shared factual base across institutional, platform, and community boundaries without suppressing legitimate pluralism. The aim is not to re-establish a monopolistic or quasi-monopolistic truth regime, but to build a distributed yet authoritative reference system suited to the realities of networked communication.

The premise of this model is that credibility and legitimacy can no longer be vested exclusively in a narrow set of professional institutions. Instead, they must emerge from networks of actors–journalistic, civic, scientific, and technical– bound together by shared evidentiary standards, interoperable practices, and a commitment to transparency. Such a model recognizes that the centralized gatekeeping of the mass-media era is structurally irrecoverable in a platformized environment and that the stabilizing function of referentiality can only be re-engineered through coordinated, cross-domain collaboration.

At the core of this model is the development of multi-source verification networks—decentralized yet interconnected nodes of fact-production and validation. In practice, this means that professional newsrooms, independent fact-checking organizations, academic researchers, and credible civic actors contribute to a shared evidentiary infrastructure (Graves, 2018). The value of such networks lies in redundancy: no single source bears sole responsibility for establishing factual claims, but convergence across multiple independent nodes can serve as a robust signal of credibility. Existing collaborations, such as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), demonstrate the feasibility of cross-institutional verification, although their reach and integration into mainstream and platform distribution systems remain limited (Ruiz et al., 2020).

A second principle is transparent provenance—making the origins, transformations, and custodians of information traceable. Advances in digital watermarking and metadata standards can be deployed to embed verifiable provenance trails into journalistic outputs and other informational artefacts (Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017). Such systems allow audiences, intermediaries, and researchers to see not only the content itself but also its sourcing history, editorial transformations, and prior verifications. Provenance transparency directly addresses one of the core challenges of the current environment: the ease with which content can be stripped of context, repurposed, and recirculated without regard to original intent or evidentiary quality.

Given that most audiences encounter information within platform ecosystems, a re-anchored referential model must include cross-platform referential standards—interoperable protocols for fact-checking, sourcing, and evidence tagging that allow truth claims to be evaluated consistently across media. The current siloed approach, in which each platform develops its own content moderation and fact-checking arrangements, results in inconsistent application and gaps that can be exploited by disinformation actors (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019). A shared framework, potentially underpinned by industry consortia or multistakeholder governance bodies, could harmonize verification signals, making them portable between platforms and accessible to end users regardless of where the content is encountered.

But even the most sophisticated technical and institutional infrastructures will fail without public literacy in referential thinking. Audiences must be able to recognize, value, and seek out referentially grounded content, rather than privileging narrative resonance or in-group endorsement alone (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). This requires integrating media and information literacy into formal education, community programs, and platform interfaces, with a focus on the epistemic habits that sustain democratic discourse: checking multiple sources, understanding provenance, and distinguishing between fact-based claims and opinion. Evidence from civic education research suggests that such competencies can be cultivated, but they require sustained institutional support and alignment between educational, media, and platform actors (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

Finally, the model envisions institutional–civic hybrids: collaborative formations that blend the resources and reach of professional journalism with the specialized expertise of civic fact-checkers, scientists, and trusted domain experts. Such hybrids can address domain-specific misinformation (e.g., climate science, public health) more effectively than generalist newsrooms alone (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). They also have the potential to rebuild trust by demonstrating openness, responsiveness, and accountability to the publics they serve, countering the perception of journalistic institutions as closed or elitist. Successful prototypes include cross-newsroom investigative consortia, such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), and thematic verification hubs during crises, such as the COVID-19 Vaccine Safety Net coordinated by the World Health Organization.

While the principles outlined here are conceptually straightforward, their implementation is likely to face significant governance challenges. Multi-source verification requires both technical interoperability and agreement on evidentiary standards across culturally and politically diverse actors, a non-trivial task in a polarized environment. Provenance transparency depends on industry-wide adoption of metadata standards and the willingness of platforms to integrate provenance indicators into user interfaces. Cross-platform referential standards may confront resistance from platforms concerned about ceding control over moderation and from states wary of transnational governance arrangements.

Public literacy initiatives must navigate resource constraints, political contestation over curricula, and the challenge of reaching adults outside formal education systems. Institutional–civic hybrids, meanwhile, must balance the demands of speed, depth, and inclusivity, often in resource-limited settings.

In this redesigned referential architecture, journalism remains indispensable but must adapt to a more collaborative and networked role. Rather than serving as the sole or dominant gatekeeper, journalism can only become a node within a broader verification ecosystem, contributing its professional norms, investigative capacity, and agenda-setting expertise to multi-source verification networks. News organizations can provide the evidentiary depth and institutional accountability that smaller actors may lack, while benefiting from the reach, domain-specific knowledge, and community trust embedded in civic and expert partners. By embracing interoperability in sourcing, participating in transparent provenance systems, and aligning with cross-platform standards, journalism can help anchor the distributed reference layer in practices that are both credible and recognizable to diverse publics.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the formidable challenges charted in this study, the need to re-anchor referentiality within democratic communication is more urgent than ever. Without credible, visible, and collectively recognized reference points, the informational environment will remain structurally vulnerable to manipulation, and the public sphere will continue to fragment into competing factual enclaves. The re-anchored referential model proposed here offers a blueprint for restoring the stabilizing functions once performed by journalism alone, while adapting those functions to the decentralized, networked, and contested conditions of the contemporary communication landscape.

In this redesigned system, journalism's survival and relevance will depend on its capacity to operate as part of an interdependent network that acknowledges the multiplicity of reference points while asserting the enduring value of rigorous, accountable reporting. This requires not only the production of verified information but also the active cultivation of public literacies and participation in interoperable verification systems. Journalism must be both a supplier of high-quality factual content and a visible standard-bearer for the norms and procedures that sustain democratic discourse.

If journalism fails to defend its place within the newly emerging referential architecture, the consequences will be profound. Without a strong journalistic presence, the task of defining reality may increasingly fall to actors driven by commercial gain, ideological agendas, state control (or a combination of all three). In such a scenario, referential authority could be captured by global platforms optimized for engagement rather than accuracy, by governments seeking to monopolize crisis communication for political advantage, or by insular online communities reinforcing their own self-contained factual worlds. The result would not simply be a weaker press, but a diminished public sphere in which competing "truth regimes" operate without any widely recognized mechanism for adjudicating factual disputes.

Adding to this threat is journalism's structural unsustainability in many markets. Shrinking advertising revenues, the dominance of platform intermediaries in digital distribution, and the erosion of business models have placed immense financial strain on news organizations. In numerous regions, especially outside high-income democracies, these economic pressures are forcing closures, staff cuts, and the abandonment of resource-intensive investigative work. Even in well-resourced markets, consolidation into large conglomerates or dependence on philanthropic subsidies raises concerns about independence and diversity of voices. If journalism cannot secure a viable economic base, its ability to play a central role in any referential model will be undermined, regardless of its professional or ethical commitments.

Standardization efforts grounded in solid research, such as the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), which seeks to establish transparent criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of news sources, are important steps toward rebuilding public confidence. They provide a common framework for demonstrating adherence to professional norms and help audiences navigate an increasingly crowded information space. Yet such initiatives, while valuable, are not sufficient. People may still choose to place their trust in alternative "references" that align more closely with their identity or worldview, regardless of professional standards. Moreover, hijacked by authoritarian states or other rogue players (which is always possible), trust-labelling frameworks could be co-opted to legitimize state-controlled media and marginalize independent journalism, transforming a transparency tool into an instrument of censorship and control.

An increasingly influential factor in this landscape is the growing role of AI conversational agents and search-integrated bots as everyday reference points. From answering basic factual queries and offering cooking advice to explaining complex political ideologies or historical events, AI systems are becoming default "first stops" for information-seeking behaviour. Their design choices, ranging from training data selection to content filtering policies, thus carry significant referential implications. If trained and governed transparently, AI bots could become powerful allies in directing users toward verified, high-quality sources; if left opaque or commercially biased, they risk amplifying inaccuracies, privileging certain perspectives without disclosure, and subtly reshaping what entire populations regard as trustworthy knowledge.

The stakes, therefore, are high. A failure to integrate journalism effectively into the emerging distributed reference system risks cementing an environment where the loudest voices, rather than the most accurate, dominate public discourse. Such an outcome would further entrench polarization, erode the conditions for reasoned deliberation, and weaken the informational foundations upon which democratic governance depends. On the other hand, if journalism can secure its role as a central node in this network—collaborating with civic, scientific, and technical actors while maintaining its own distinct commitment to public accountability—it will not only preserve its relevance but also help shape a resilient referential infrastructure capable of supporting democratic societies in the decades ahead.

References

Arnaudo, D. (2017). Computational propaganda in Brazil: Social bots during elections. *Computational Propaganda Research Project*. Oxford Internet Institute.

Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.

Bennett, W. L., & Pfetsch, B. (2018). Rethinking political communication in a time of disrupted public spheres. *Journal of Communication, 68(2)*, 243–253. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx017

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). *The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. European Journal of Communication, 33(2)*, 122–139.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317

Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation. *Computational Propaganda Research Project*. Oxford Internet Institute.

Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114(28)*, 7313–7318.
https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114

Bulger, M., & Davison, P. (2018). The promises, challenges, and futures of media literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 10(1), 1–21.

Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Diakopoulos, N., & Koliska, M. (2017). Algorithmic transparency in the news media. *Digital Journalism, 5(7)*, 809–828.
https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2016.1208053

Dragomir, M., Anton, A., Bognar, E., Codău, A., Glowacki, M., Kiss, T., Manicki, J., Mikucki, J., Petre, R., Preoteasa, M., Radu, R., Solomon, N., Switkowski, F., Toro, T., Vanghelescu, V. (2025). Hooked on the Feed: An Analysis of How Facebook, TikTok, and X Shape Information Consumption in Eastern Europe. Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC): Tallinn/London/Santiago de Compostela and Thomson Foundation: London. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12154.81608

Dubois, E., & Blank, G. (2018). The echo chamber is overstated: The moderating effect of political interest and diverse media. Information, Communication & Society, 21(5), 729–745.
https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43(4)*, 51–58.
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Fletcher, R., & Park, S. (2017). The impact of trust in the news media on online news consumption and participation. *Digital Journalism, 5(10)*, 1281–1299.
https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1279979

George, C. (2012). *Freedom from the press: Journalism and state power in Singapore*. NUS Press.

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.

Graves, L. (2018). Boundaries not drawn: Mapping the institutional roots of the global fact-checking movement. *Journalism Studies, 19(5)*, 613–631.
https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1196602

Guerrero, M. A. (2014). The "captured liberal" model of media systems in Latin America. In M. A. Guerrero & M. Márquez-Ramírez (Eds.), *Media systems and communication policies in Latin America* (pp. 43–65). Palgrave Macmillan.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1962)

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Howard, P. N., Kollanyi, B., Bradshaw, S., & Neudert, L.-M. (2018). Social media, news and political information during the US election: Was polarizing content concentrated in swing states? *Oxford Internet Institute Data Memo.*

Humphreys, P. (1996). *Mass media and media policy in Western Europe (vol. 2)*. Manchester University Press.

Krafft, P. M., & Donovan, J. (2020). Disinformation by Design: The Use of Evidence Collages and Platform Filtering in a Media Manipulation Campaign. *Political Communication, 37(2)*, 194–214.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1686094

Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 US presidential cycle. *Political Communication, 35(2)*, 155–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1364814

Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin, 108(3)*, 480–498.
https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480

Lawson, C. (2002). *Building the fourth estate: Democratization and the rise of a free press in Mexico*. University of California Press.
https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520936201

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 6(4)*, 353–369.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008

Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 13(3)*, 106–131.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018

Mancini, P. (2020). Comparing media systems and the digital age. *International Journal of Communication, 14*, 5761–5774.

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 36(2)*, 176–187.

Mihailidis, P., & Viotty, S. (2017). Spreadable spectacle in digital culture: Civic expression, fake news, and the role of media literacies in "post-fact" society. *American Behavioral Scientist, 61(4)*, 441–454.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217701217

Molyneux, L., & McGregor, S. C. (2021). Legitimating a platform: evidence of journalists' role in transferring authority to Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society, 25(11)*, 1577–1595.
https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1874037

Moore, M., & Tambini, D. (Eds.). (2021). Regulating big tech: Policy responses to digital dominance. Oxford University Press.

Myllylahti, M. (2018). An attention economy trap? An empirical investigation into four news companies' Facebook traffic and social media revenue. *Journalism of Media Business Studies, 15*(4), 237–253.

Napoli, P. M. (2019). *Social media and the public interest: Media regulation in the disinformation age*. Columbia University Press.

Nguyen, T. T., Criss, S., Dwivedi, P., Huang, D., Keralis, J., Hsu, E., ... & Nguyen, Q. C. (2020). Exploring US shifts in anti-Asian sentiment with the emergence of COVID-19. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(19)*, 7032.

Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior, 32(2)*, 303–330.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2

Ong, J. C., & Cabañes, J. V. (2019). *Architects of networked disinformation: Behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake news production in the Philippines*. University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2010). *Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. Bloomsbury Press.

Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016). *The Russian "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model: Why it might work and options to counter it*. RAND Corporation, 2(7), 1-10.
https://doi.org/10.7249/PE198

Persily, N. (2017). The 2016 US election: Can democracy survive the internet? *Journal of Democracy, 28(2)*, 63–76.
https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0025

Pomerantsev, P. (2019). *This is not propaganda: Adventures in the war against reality*. Faber & Faber.

Ruiz, M. J. U., Anzera, G., & Verdú, F. J. M. (2020). Plataformas independientes de fact-checking en España e Italia: Características, organización y método. *Revista Mediterránea de Comunicación: Mediterranean Journal of Communication, 11(2)*, 23-39.

Scannell, P. (1990). Public service broadcasting: The history of a concept. In A. Goodwin & G. Whannel (Eds.), *Understanding television* (pp. 11–29). Routledge.

Scannell, P., & Cardiff, D. (1991). *A social history of British broadcasting, 1922–1939: Serving the nation*. Blackwell.

Scheufele, D. A., & Krause, N. M. (2019). Science audiences, misinformation, and fake news. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116(16)*, 7662–7669. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1805871115

Schudson, M. (1992). *Watergate in American memory: How we remember, forget, and reconstruct the past*. Basic Books.

Schudson, M. (1978). *Discovering the news: A social history of American newspapers*. Basic Books.

Shoemaker, P. J., & Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping theory*. Routledge.

Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. University of Illinois Press.

Stockmann, D. (2013). *Media commercialization and authoritarian rule in China*. Cambridge University Press.

Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

Syvertsen, T., Enli, G., Mjøs, O. J., & Moe, H. (2014). *The media welfare state: Nordic media in the digital era*. University of Michigan Press.
https://doi.org/10.3998/nmw.12367206.0001.001

Thompson, M. R. (2016). The early Duterte presidency in the Philippines. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 35(3*), 3-14.

Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & De Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359(6380)*, 1146–1151.
https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* (Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09). Council of Europe.

CITATION
Dragomir, M. (2025). Anchoring Reality: Journalism's Struggle for Authority and Societal Reference. *New Ideas in Media and Communication*, Vol 1, 16-35.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15696640

CORRESPONDENCE
Marius Dragomir
mdragomir@journalismresearch.org