Formerly Twitter, Formerly Functional?

A Qualitative Study Measuring the Impact of Musk's Takeover of X on Journalistic Practices, Evolving Workflows, and the Fulfilment of Professional Needs Three Years On

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Elon Musk's takeover of X (formerly Twitter) has affected the working practices of journalists, taking the Irish media context as a case study. Over the past decade, X has played a central role in journalism, serving as a key space and resource for newsgathering, information dissemination, professional visibility, and audience engagement. However, since Musk's acquisition in 2022 and subsequent governance changes, many journalists have reported a deterioration in the platform's functionality, safety, and credibility. This research examines how these changes shaped journalists' responses, adaptations, and perceptions of their professional needs related to their use of X. The central research question guiding this study is: How has the takeover of X affected the work of journalists? It also explores the key factors influencing these responses, including personal circumstances, professional constraints, and platform dependency. A second question examines: What factors and motives, including journalists' individual needs and circumstances, shape and interact with their responses to these changes in working practices? The study's findings are derived from a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with nine Irish journalists representing a variety of organisations, roles and career stages.

Findings show that while all journalists acknowledged X's previous centrality to their work, the platform's takeover has reduced its professional utility and prompted varied responses, including full disengagement and continued use with significant adaptations. Some journalists noted benefits to staying on X, particularly for real-time access and network visibility, while others cited increased abuse, reduced trust in information credibility, and dissatisfaction with platform governance.

Emerging themes include shifts in platform affordances, ethical and practical dilemmas around staying or leaving, differentiated impacts and adaptation strategies. Journalist's responses were shaped not only by personal preferences but also by professional needs. For example, younger journalists and those with high visibility or sourcing demands found disengaging with X harder, while established or freelance journalists with strong offline networks had more flexibility. Career stage, journalistic specialisation and role, gender, and political views were also predictors of these choices.

Overall, this study illustrates how journalists navigate changes in platform governance and affordances through strategies such as platform migration and swinging, disengagement, symbolic resistance, or behavioural adaptations while remaining on the platform, all of which are shaped by several key factors. Moreover, this research adds to growing literature by showing how ever-evolving platform governance changes expose journalists to risks like abuse and disinformation, reshaping professional practices in a volatile, platform-centric media environment.

KEYWORDS: *Journalism, Social Media Platforms, Digital Affordances, Needs and Gratifications*

Contents

1. Introduction and Context

Over the past decade, X (formerly Twitter)[1] became an integrated and normalised tool in the working routines of journalists (Claesson, 2024, p. 2604). Media and journalistic accounts made up a significant share (25%) of its verified users (Baftiu & Dodds, 2023, p. 1295), and many U.S. journalists ranked it as their most or second-most used social media platform, surpassing Facebook (Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022, para. 2). Numerous studies have documented how journalists instrumentalised X for its real-time dissemination, networking, and audience engagement affordances (Claesson, 2024, p. 2607). Journalists have long leveraged social media platforms like X for breaking news, public discourse, and self-presentation (Robertson, 2023, para. 7; Baftiu & Dodds, 2023, p. 1295).

The 2022 takeover of X by Elon Musk introduced significant changes to platform governance and functionality, including the monetisation of previously free tools, reductions in content moderation, and major algorithmic shifts. These changes have had far-reaching professional consequences, particularly for journalists, who were among the platform's most active user groups. As the takeover unfolded, several measures viewed as unfavourable to journalism were implemented, placing the media industry in a difficult position (Claesson, 2024, p. 2604). Notably, this included removed features such as automatically generated headlines for linked news articles, a move described as an "attack on journalism" (Zhang, 2023, para. 1). As Professor Karin Wahl-Jorgensen observed, these changes made the platform harder for news outlets to use, possibly reducing click-through rates by removing key context (Sands, 2023, para. 6).

Another controversial change was the monetisation of verification badges, previously used by journalists to establish credibility (Hedman, 2020, p. 672). In the Netherlands, for example, organisations must now pay approximately €1,149.50 for a verified badge, with possible extra fees for affiliates (X Help Centre, 2025). X also removed badges from outlets that refused to pay (Sands, 2023, p. 9), which disproportionately affected freelance journalists. The International Journalist's Network stated this policy was fuelling disinformation and complicating journalists' work as what was once a marker of legitimacy and credibility for journalists can now be acquired by anyone with financial means (Ijioma, 2023, para. 1).

Research shows X's transformation and such a culture of disinformation (Fishman et al., 2023, p. 1) ethically complicates journalists' use of the platform. It undermines their role in providing credible information to the public, especially as trust in the media declines across different markets

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1 After Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in 2022, the platform was rebranded as 'X'. This term is used throughout the thesis; however, some cited sources refer to it as Twitter, as they were published prior to the rebranding. In addition, references to Twitter in interviewee quotes have been left unchanged to preserve the authenticity of their original statements.

(Reuters Institute, 2023, p. 24). Reports also suggest X's algorithm amplifies certain voices, including Musk's own (Graham & Andrejevic, 2024, p. 1). The dissolution of the Trust and Safety Council and shift to automated moderation have further weakened protections against harmful content and harmful treatment that journalists may be exposed to (Paul & Dang, 2022, para. 1).

Musk has also directly targeted journalists and media outlets. In August 2023, The Washington Post reported that he slowed traffic to sites such as the NY Times, Reuters, and Substack, as well as rivals like Bluesky and Instagram (Sands, 2023, para. 1). He also banned several journalists who were critical of him, including those who made to reference the 'ElonJet' account, which tracked his private jet usage (Euractiv, 2022, para. 1).

Recent commentary highlights how Musk's leadership has reduced the platform's value for journalists, creating a culture of "allowed harassment" (Claesson, 2024, p. 2613). Henry (2025, p. 16) echoes this view, noting that neither Musk nor Zuckerberg aim to make their platforms supportive or useful spaces for journalists.

This study contributes to emerging research on X's takeover by examining how the platform's usefulness to journalists has shifted and how these changes affect journalistic practices and experiences. It offers insights into digital journalism, platform governance, and user adaptation, advancing understandings of how journalists navigate constantly evolving social media platforms. Moreover, it highlights the role of individual factors and professional needs in shaping journalistic responses, addressing a current gap in the literature on differentiated impacts.

1.2 Research Questions

To address these issues, the following two research questions (RQs) are posed:

1. *How has the takeover of X (formerly Twitter) affected the work of journalists?*

2. *What factors and motives, including journalists' individual needs and circumstances, shape and interact with their responses to these changes in working practices?*

1.3 Societal and Academic Relevance

At a societal level, Musk's changes prompted major journalistic organisations such as The Guardian and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) to disengage from the platform. Ricardo Gutiérrez, EFJ's Secretary, stated that the organisation was withdrawing from X for ethical reasons, citing concerns over increased disinformation and propaganda, and urged media affiliates to migrate to other platforms (EFJ, 2025, para. 6). This decision reflects recent research indicating that Musk's

changes sparked a period of institutional reassessment, leading to discussions about whether X usage continues to align with journalistic ethical standards (Claesson, 2024, p. 2606).

Some journalists have turned to Bluesky, a newer decentralised alternative, though even its CEO, Jay Graber, admitted the platform was facing 'growing pains' (NYT, 2024, para. 5). Bluesky remains less widely adopted compared to X, which continues to be seen as the leading platform for delivering immediate news updates (Reuters, 2024, para. 9). Despite talk of a mass journalist exodus, most have not fully deactivated their accounts (Claesson, 2024, p. 2605). For example, following a high-profile helicopter crash on January 30, 2025, in Washington, D.C., which killed 67 people, journalists were forced to rely on X for updates after the National Transportation Safety Board announced that it would provide information exclusively there (Roth, 2025, para. 1). This demonstrates X's continued dominance in real-time news and highlights the difficulty of moving away from it, despite declining conditions.

As this landscape is still emerging, research into its effects on journalists remains limited. Most studies have examined platform migration from the perspective of general users (Jeong et al., 2023, p. 239) or focused on specific cases, such as the failed migration of academics from X to Mastodon (Wang et al., 2024, p. 1). These often use static methods such as temporal data analysis, which can show general trends but fail to capture the motivations and lived needs of users. This depth is especially important for understanding how journalists perceive and respond to changing platform dynamics.

Some research has captured journalists' initial reactions to X's takeover, such as Claesson's (2024, p. 2604) study of French journalists' resistance strategies. This thesis builds on those insights by offering a more time-relevant examination of how journalists' diverse roles and professional needs interact with the platform's evolving features, directly responding to the above article's call for a more detailed understanding of the factors influencing journalists' varied responses (p. 2619).

Beyond journalism, this study holds broader societal relevance. As social media platforms like X continue to serve as major news gateways for the public, especially younger audiences, changes in journalist engagement affect both professional routines and public access to reliable information. If journalists reduce their presence or leave entirely, these spaces may be filled by less credible actors, polarised voices, or misinformation. This raises important concerns about how news is consumed, who gets visibility in digital environments, and the consequences of trusted voices becoming less prominent.

In this way, the changing features of X affect not only journalistic work but also the quality of public discourse and the democratic role of the media. These findings contribute to current debates on platform accountability, media governance, and the need for alternative systems that can better support journalism and the public interest. This thesis offers insights that are relevant to both

researchers and media policymakers and contributes to a deeper understanding of journalism's evolving role in digital societies.

1.4 Structure of Thesis

Following an introduction and presentation of the research focus in Chapter 1, this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework and reviews relevant literature. Chapter 3 outlines the study's methodological approach and sample relating to the nine interviews conducted with journalists. Chapter 4 presents the research findings of the thematic analysis conducted on the collected data. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of these results considering the theoretical framework, and concludes with reflections on the study's limitations, relevance, and implications for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

To understand the takeover's impact on journalistic working practices, this study draws on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 509-523), which explains how journalists' needs shape their behaviours on platforms and Digital Affordance Theory (DAT), which explains how platform features enable or constrain user behaviour. This is particularly relevant in this context, as changes to X's affordances have directly affected what journalists can do and which needs they can satisfy on the platform. In addition to these theoretical perspectives, this study also engages with prior research that considers other relevant factors such as journalistic role, specialisation, and career stage to better understand why some journalists continue to use X while others disengage.

2.1 Journalistic Usage of Social Media

The digitalisation of journalism over the past decade has meant that social media have become a largely normalised feature of news media, shaping how journalists interact with sources, reach audiences, and monitor unfolding events (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019, p. 193). In response, journalists have not only adapted how they distribute content, but also increasingly use social media to source stories, follow developments in real time, and build professional visibility (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, pp. 1504–1509). Further, research suggests that more people now get their news from social media than from news websites or newspapers (Pew Research Centre, 2024, para. 1).

Studies show that journalists use various social media platforms in distinct ways depending on their goals. Humayun and Ferrucci (2022, p. 1502) identify significant differences in platform use however propose a typology that categorises journalists' primary uses into three areas: news construction, news dissemination, and branding. Journalists use social media for news construction by finding stories, monitoring public discussion as well as seeking and verifying sources, whereas dissemination involves sharing news updates and articles with the public, often guided by newsroom policies to drive engagement (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, p. 1504). Humayun and Ferrucci (2022, p. 1502) differentiate branding from the other practices as being separate from the organisation, emphasising its use for self-promotion or "using social media for themselves" to build identity and engage with audiences. This has become increasingly important as journalism grows more precarious, helping journalists gain visibility, establish credibility, and set boundaries from non-professional actors online (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, pp. 1509).

Building on branding practices, Molyneux and Holton (2015, p. 199) define the concept of 'brand journalism' as a "set of activities that create an identity for an individual journalist and then promote that identity by building relationships". Molyneux et al. (2019, p. 842) later developed a typology showing how journalistic branding reflects individual motives (e.g., growing a following), organisational motives (e.g., driving traffic to their news articles), and institutional motives (e.g.,

upholding journalistic norms). They found that independent journalists often seek personal recognition, while staff journalists focus on promoting their organisation. This distinction is an important consideration to this study, as the extent to which journalists have been affected by X's takeover in terms of branding practices may vary depending on whether they are independent or employed by a news organisation.

2.2 The 'Twitterization' of Journalism

Understanding X's influence in journalism is essential for grasping the significance of the takeover and its impact on journalistic practices. Of all social media platforms, X gained unique status as *the* social media platform for news, becoming a hub where journalists, news consumers, and key voices converged (Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane, 2018, p. 75). Since its launch in 2006, X's public and flexible structure, as well as its unique design features such as its 140-character limit, which promoted brevity and enabled real-time news following, breaking, and engagement, made it appealing to journalists. Unlike Facebook, most X accounts are primarily public, allowing journalists to monitor events and easily engage with both elite and ordinary users. This openness helped create a "new generation of networked journalists," enabling them to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as editors and official spokespeople and access a broader range of sources and perspectives (Arjomand & Ghazinejad, 2021, p. 5). As a result, X became a "cornerstone of modern journalism" and a key tool for news gathering, networking, audience engagement, self-branding, and story sourcing (Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane, 2018, pp. 77–78).

Humayun and Ferrucci (2022, p. 1512) outlined that journalists use social media for news construction, dissemination, and branding. X served all three particularly well. For news construction, it became the preferred platform for story sourcing. Von Nordheim et al. (2018, p. 807) found it was used more frequently than Facebook, offering real-time "on-the-ground news sources" during major events (Lotan et al., 2011, p. 1400). This became known as 'The Twitter Effect,' where mainstream media could provide live coverage without being physically present, by accessing user-generated content (Bruno, 2011, p. 8). Lotan et al. (2011, p. 1375) demonstrated this with the Arab Spring, showing that Twitter was crucial for rapidly amplifying and disseminating important information. Hermida (2010, p. 301) coined such practice as 'ambient journalism,' whereby journalists remain active and informed through a constant stream of updates from communications technologies.

X also became a valuable space to track public conversation. Von Nordheim et al. (2018, p. 822) noted it functioned as a channel for professional voices like politicians and celebrities. Its trending hashtag feature helped journalists monitor discussion and source stories quickly. Moon and Hadley (2014, p. 289) found many newsrooms used X as their primary sourcing platform. Researchers have also documented interdependencies between journalists and X, as tweets often serve as flexible components that journalists incorporate into their news stories (Molyneux & McGregor, 2021, p.

1578). The platform's design encouraged interaction, which Gehrke and Benetti (2020, p. 11) saw as a space where the public and journalists engaged. Heinrich (2012, p. 772) summed this up, describing how a journalist on X could access a stage of global perspectives with only a smartphone and internet connection.

In terms of dissemination, X was favoured for its immediacy and broad reach, allowing journalists to share news quickly and widely. This led to a 'Tweet First, Verify Later' approach, where information was often published before full verification, raising concerns about the spread of misinformation (Bruno, 2011, p. 1). At the same time, X's open-access nature provided journalists and audiences with freer and faster access to news compared to traditional media channels. X's design lowered barriers, enabling both journalists and the public to share and access news instantly, while tools like hashtags and retweets helped amplify stories quickly across diverse audiences. Journalists also valued the "instant gratification" of engaging with a global audience in real time, which enhanced their ability to connect and interact beyond conventional limitations (Swasy, 2016, p. 643).

Branding was another key use of X. Journalists treated their profiles as "digital business cards" to stand out and establish credibility (Hedman, 2020, p. 674). Molyneux et al. (2017, p. 9) found that 95% of journalist profiles and 58% of their tweets included branding elements, showing how common this practice had become. Such elements included stating their employer, adding disclaimers like "Opinions my own," or sharing personal details (Molyneux et al., 2015, p. 202). These practices reflect how X encouraged journalists to blend personal and professional identities (Molyneux et al., 2017, p. 1). This is relevant when considering how recent platform changes may make journalists more hesitant to share content in an increasingly hostile environment.

2.3 Understanding Journalistic Motivations for Social Media Usage Through UGT

As discussed above, journalists use X in different ways to meet professional needs such as visibility, sourcing, and branding. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), a widely applied theory in media research (Katz & Blumler, 1974, pp. 509-523), helps explain these behaviours by focusing on why and how people use media to fulfil specific needs (Weiyan, 2015, p. 71). UGT is based on five core premises: media use is goal-directed, audiences actively select media, media competes with other sources to satisfy needs, individuals are aware of their motivations, and only they can evaluate the value of media content and whether it satisfies those needs (Falgoust et al., 2022, p. 2). Applied to this study, this means that journalists use platforms like X with intention, choosing it over other platforms because it offers specific gratifications for needs previously mentioned. Whether they continue using it, reduce their activity, or leave altogether depends on how well the platform continues to meet those needs in a changing media environment.

UGT initially identified broad categories of affective, cognitive, personal, integrative, and tension-free needs (Katz et al., 1973, p. 513) but this has since evolved into more nuanced analyses of

individual motivations and media behaviours (Sichach, 2023, p. 7). UGT has been frequently applied to journalism, recognising that journalists have distinct motivations for using platforms like X that differ from those of the general public (Kim et al., 2016, p. 506). These include professional gratifications previously mentioned such as audience engagement, work promotion, networking, and news sourcing and dissemination (Wang et al., 2024, p. 3). Kim et al. (2016, p. 505) consider UGT especially useful for examining how professional journalists interact with social media platforms.

Kim et al.'s (2016, p. 514) study of pre-Musk X identified four key needs journalists fulfilled on the platform: information sourcing, self-fulfilment, influence, and work efficiency. These needs align closely with Humayun and Ferrucci (2022, p. 1502)'s previously discussed typology which categorises journalistic social media use into three main functions: news construction, dissemination, and branding. Kim et al. (2016, p. 503) also found that journalists who actively used X for work tasks like sharing news and interacting with audiences were better able to meet their professional needs, which helped them feel more connected and satisfied with their relationship with the public. This thesis examines how Musk's takeover of the platform may have changed these gratifications for journalists and how they adapt to the evolving online environment to continue fulfilling these professional needs in their work.

Katz et al. (1974, p. 517) also emphasise user agency and the role of contextual social factors, such as values, expectations, and social tensions in shaping media-related needs. Understanding these influences is key to assessing how societal and cultural shifts, such as major newspapers leaving X or the platform's heavy critique for associations with disinformation may impact journalists' views and interactions on the platform. Given their agency to stay, leave, or use multiple platforms, journalists must balance their evolving needs with industry norms. This thesis explores how Irish journalists navigate these decisions, including the potential for platform migration or swinging, where users either leave a platform or routinely engage with multiple platforms (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 57). Scholars such as Shade et al. (2015, p. 318) have linked UGT with media migration studies, reinforcing its value in explaining how journalists decide to move between platforms depending on whether their needs continue to be met as platform affordances and constraints evolve. Overall, UGT's emphasis on user motivations helps explain how journalists perceive and adapt to changes in the gratifications once fulfilled by X. At the same time, these gratifications are also shaped by platform design, which will be further explored in later discussions (2.7) on digital affordance theory.

2.4 Potential Divergence in Journalists' Responses to X's Takeover

While UGT acknowledges that media use is driven by individual needs and goals, not all journalists necessarily seek the same gratifications or use social media in the same way, and therefore have not been affected uniformly by the takeover of X. As such, variations in how journalists use, rely on, or have disengaged from X- and how they have been affected by the takeover- are expected to

differ based on a range of individual and institutional factors. As Nenadić (2020, p. 24) notes, "journalists are not a homogenous group and not all of them respond in the same way to change".

2.5 Institutional Related Factors

Journalist's usage (or non-usage) of X for their work may be shaped by organisational, role and industry specific dynamics. Firstly, whether a journalist is employed independently or within a news organisation may be a relevant factor shaping their platform use. Studies show that freelance journalists tend to engage with X more actively and discursively, relying more heavily on its branding affordances to build visibility and reach (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, p. 1509). Branding practices differ between freelance and employed journalists, with freelancers using X more interactively and personally, while employed journalists often focus on promoting their news outlet by sharing colleagues' work (Temmerman et al., 2013, p. 13). This difference is important when examining potential changes to branding affordances following the takeover of X, as such changes may affect the behaviour of freelancers more significantly, given their greater reliance on the platform's affordances to make their work and profile more visible.

Moreover, the organisation a journalist works for may influence their use of X through normative expectations or explicit policies. For example, Lu et al. 's (2025, p. 568) Pre-Musk study highlighted how The New York Times discouraged X usage through a revised social media policy, which led to reduced activity and even disengagement among some journalists. This is relevant because it shows how institutional context can shape platform behaviour, beyond individual preferences or needs.

Additionally, it is important to consider research showing that journalists' platform choices often vary based on the characteristics of their news organisations, such as their medium of origin (e.g., TV versus radio) and the political demographics of their audience (Pew Research Centre, 2022, para. 7). For example, a study found that journalists from TV-based outlets were more likely to rely on Twitter than those from print backgrounds (Pew Research Centre, 2022, para. 7), possibly reflecting the medium's emphasis on speed and audience engagement compared to the slower pace and depth of print reporting (Reich, 2015, p. 555). Lastly, research has shown that the geographic scope of a news organisation can influence platform choice. Jurkowitz and Gottfried (2022, para. 11) indicated that US journalists working in locally focused roles rather than those engaged in reporting on large national scales were more likely to use Facebook over X. Overall, these studies suggest that the impact of X's takeover on journalists may vary depending on how central the platform was to their work prior to the changes.

2.6 Individual Factors

Similar to institutional factors, individual characteristics may also shape journalists' engagement with X. In line with UGT, people actively shape media use based on who they are and what they need- making factors below like age, experience, political alignment and role scope potentially relevant to how they experience and respond to platform developments.

In terms of demographic influences, research suggests that age can be a significant predictor of social media usage and variation among journalists (Lars & Weaver, 2018, p. 903). As previously stated, although X was found to be used by many contemporary journalists; age appears to interact with usage patterns. Among younger journalists, X stands out as an essential tool, with 83% of those aged 18 to 29 naming it as one of the platforms they use most often for work-related tasks (Pew Research Centre, 2022, para. 5). A study examining Swedish journalists found that age significantly influenced Twitter use, with younger journalists tending to be more active on the platform (Hedman, 2020, p. 675). This preference and potential greater dependence on X may stem from generational tendencies or the early stages of a journalist's career, where they may rely more heavily on its branding features and the platform's strong ties with journalism. At the same time, younger journalists have also been found to engage more experimentally with a wider range of social media platforms for newsgathering beyond X, reflecting traits often associated with digital natives, such as platform fluency and adaptability (Brandtzaeg & Chaparro Domínguez, 2018, p. 1).

A journalist's role or area of specialisation may equally shape how they use X, as research shows that platform behaviour often differs by job function. Editors, for example, tend to use X primarily to promote organisational content, while reporters and sports journalists are more likely to focus on live updates and interaction (Canter & Brookes, 2016, p. 875). Research also suggests that X plays a dominant role in certain discourses, particularly political ones, with one study finding that 59% of users use the platform to keep up with politics more than with other platforms (Gearhart et al., 2024, p. 167). Journalists covering political issues may therefore be more professionally reliant on X due to its central role in real-time public discussions. Russell (2015, p. 198) found that specialisations like current affairs versus entertainment influence how journalists use X's affordances. For instance, sports journalists frequently use @mentions and hashtags to engage publicly, while political journalists rely more on retweets to curate and share information. While Russell's (2015, p. 188) study highlighted differences in X usage among journalists across specialisations, he noted that the effect sizes were relatively small. Nevertheless, it remains important to recognise that journalists do not all use the platform in the same way. Acknowledging the unique needs and gratifications of individual journalists challenges the idea of a unified journalistic experience and supports this thesis's focus on how variation in role and professional context shape responses to the takeover.

Lastly, and rather significantly, given the growing politicisation of the platform under Musk's governance, including his public alliance with Donald Trump and promotion of far-right parties like

Germany's AFD, it is important to acknowledge the growing body of research highlighting that a user's political alignment can inform platform choice and usage. For example, Boulianne et al. 's (2024, p. 3) study found that users with a conservative or Republican background are now more likely to post on X compared to their Democratic counterparts. Moreover, there is supported research that X presents algorithmic bias, with reports of the political right receiving higher amplification rates compared to the political left (Huszár et al., 2021, p. 1). This matters as it contributes to a growing perception of the platform as politically unbalanced or even unethical which may influence which journalists remain active and which choose to disengage.

2.7 **From UGT to Affordances: Linking Platform Design and Journalistic Use**

While Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers a useful starting point for understanding journalists' motivations and media choices, it does not fully capture how platform structures shape user actions. Given the growing role of digital platforms in journalism, digital affordance theory (DAT) provides a valuable framework to examine how journalists engage with specific platform features and adapt their work accordingly. To fully grasp journalists' responses to the evolving role of X, it is necessary not only to consider their motivations and needs but also to account for how platform features such as verification, visibility settings, and algorithmic ranking influence what journalists can do. Affordance theory explains these possibilities and constraints in digital environments (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 504).

While UGT is somewhat grounded in a social constructivist perspective that emphasises user agency in shaping media use and need fulfilment, Katz et al. (1974, p. 515) equally recognised that media features can influence user behaviour, highlighting the importance of "taking media attributes as a starting point" when exploring how people satisfy their needs. This recognition anticipates elements of a more technologically oriented perspective, which makes DAT especially relevant for understanding how platform design and features can shape journalistic interactions. However, despite a wealth of literature on affordances, there remains considerable ambiguity and inconsistency in how the concept is defined and applied in research (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 3165). Thus, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the concept's evolution and its relevance to social media use.

Shortly after UGT emerged, Gibson's Affordance Theory (1979, pp. 227–235), originally developed in ecological psychology, was adapted to media to examine how different types of media enable or constrain user actions. As Ronzhyn et al. (2022, p. 3166) note, the concept has since been extended to product design (Norman, 1988, p. 9), communication technologies (Hutchby, 2001, p. 441) and increasingly to social media research, where it serves as a useful lens for understanding digital behaviours. This theoretical evolution has given rise DAT, which introduced the concept of 'sociotechnology' as a form of 'soft determinism' that does not "[...] ignore the way in which

technologies can, and often do, put users on particular paths" (Hopkins, 2016, p. 3). In other words, the architectural design of a platform shapes the way users communicate and operate within it.

It is important to note Norman's (1988, p. 145) influential distinction between actual and perceived affordances- actual affordances refer to what a system enables in practice, while perceived affordances refer to what users believe they can do based on interface and design cues. This distinction may be significant for this research, as it helps explain why journalists may respond differently to the same platform changes depending on how they perceive the opportunities offered by certain functionalities. Affordances are both material and perceptual and subject to individual interpretation- so one journalist may view a feature of X as useful, while another may not.

Much research has applied affordance theory to social media, such as that of Santos and Valenzuela (2025, p. 2), who define affordances as digital platform properties that enable or constrain specific types of engagement, describing them as "opportunities for action". Before applying affordance theory specifically to journalists' usage of X's features, it is helpful to review affordance typologies that explain how general users commonly engage with social media affordances.

Several typologies of social media affordances have been developed, but Treem and Leonardi's (2012, p. 1) widely cited research identifies four consistent affordances that social media enable: visibility, persistence, editability, and association. Visibility refers to making behaviours and connections easily seen by others, enabled by features like tagging, status updates, comments, and search visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 151). Persistence means content remains accessible over time in its original form, supported by features like searchable profiles, photo archives, chronological and visible activity histories (p. 155). Editability refers to a user's ability to craft, revise, or modify a message before or after sharing, enabled by features like asynchronous posting, content revision, and the ability to delete others' contributions on one's page (p. 160). Association refers to how social media platforms make visible the connections between people or between people and content, through features like follower/following lists, @mentions, hashtags, likes, and interactions such as comments or bookmarks (p. 162). These affordances are particularly salient for journalism. Siegert et al. 's (2020, pp. 8–14) used the aforementioned typology in their analysis of X before the takeover and found that it ranked high in visibility and association, allowing journalists to strategically perform identity and build public ties, while also offering moderate persistence and limited editability through curated posting and selective deletion.

2.8 Mapping X's Former Affordances and Journalistic Appeal

Many studies have instrumentalised the above affordances as a backdrop for platform analysis. Hase et al.'s (2022, p. 1502) multiplatform comparative analysis reviewed several platform affordances, including algorithmic curation (tailored news for users), access to external links, interactivity (news engagement), and visuality (news in image or video form). The study found that X

is particularly strong in supporting hyper textuality (e.g. links in posts and bios) and interactivity (such as retweets and polls), making it well-suited for breaking news and real-time engagement. In contrast, it places less emphasis on visual storytelling and algorithmic curation, as users still retain more control over what they see.

Hermida and Mellado's (2020, p. 865) study compared the affordances offered to journalists on X and Instagram by looking at how narrative forms, textual-visual cues, and audience relations are shaped across five key dimensions: structure, aesthetics, genre, rhetoric, and interaction. It found that X better supports fast-paced, text-driven news updates and audience interactions, while Instagram lends itself more to visual storytelling and personal branding (Hermida & Mellado, 2020, p. 865). It also found that X's design ranked high on editability and was well-suited to support external linking (to e.g. shared articles), quick updates, and real-time interactions; fitting journalistic norms like immediacy and live reporting, which helps explain its popularity among journalists (Hermida & Mellado, 2020, p. 880).

2.9 Damages to X' Journalistic Affordances Post-Takeover

While literature specifically measuring the affordance changes for journalists of X post takeover is relatively limited (a gap in which this thesis attempts to fill), there have been some notable and publicly discussed platform changes. For example, in 2022, Musk introduced a policy that restricted passive or non-logged-in users from viewing tweets. This change has implications for journalists' newsgathering gratifications and the affordance of visibility, as it limits their ability to discreetly and consistently monitor public discourse. This monitoring function was a key component of what Hermida (2010, p. 1) describes as 'ambient journalism', where news becomes omnipresent and accessible 24/7 in real-time through platforms like X. Such restrictions may have weakened Treem and Leonardi's (2012, p. 151) concept of visibility by reducing content accessibility, particularly for journalists who depended on passive observation to follow events, verify information, and stay informed, ultimately hindering their ability to perform ambient journalism effectively.

Building on Treem and Leonardi's (2012) affordance framework introduced earlier, the 'persistence' of content on X may have been affected by Musk's changes, including the removal of Twitter API, a tool which journalists previously used to support their research (Canter, 2014, p. 3), as well as an observed shift towards promoted algorithmic content over organic posts (Graham & Andrejevic, 2024, p. 17). These changes may have impacted X's newsgathering capacities by making relevant information harder to find, thus reducing its usefulness for sourcing timely and credible content.

Another notable change under Musk is that the affordance of 'editability' is now restricted to paying users. This may affect dissemination gratifications for journalists without this access, as they

are unable to revise content. Using the platform then demands greater editorial discipline, offers less control over their work, and poses greater risks to their credibility. Journalists may also be less inclined to gratify their dissemination needs through X due to shifts in content moderation, which now rely more on automation and allow more harmful or misleading content to remain visible (Reuters, 2022, para 4).

Changes to X's 'association' affordance for journalists may have been affected by Musk's decision to remove blue tick verification labels, disrupting public cues about credibility and authority. Additionally, Van Raemdonck et al. (2025, p. 1) found that X's architecture promotes in-group loyalty and limits open debate, leading to echo chambers. Although not journalism-specific, these dynamics may influence journalists by restricting access to diverse sources which impacts sourcing needs and limits the reach of their work when it does not align with the algorithm's preferences, thus affecting the gratification of dissemination needs.

2.10 'To Each Their Own Affordance': Journalistic Choice in a Shifting Media Ecosystem

As highlighted above, different journalists seek to gratify different professional needs and thus rely on distinct platform affordances. This helps explain why changes to X's core features may affect them in uneven ways. For some, altered visibility or association tools may limit dissemination and reach while for others, algorithmic shifts may hinder their ability to adequately gather or share information. In response, some journalists have adapted their practices or explored alternative platforms like Bluesky. These alternatives may supplement former affordances or offer new ones, such as Bluesky's 'starter packs' which help journalists instantly connect with relevant professional groups and grow their following, but they may nonetheless lack the visibility and reach provided by X's larger user base.

These individual differences in platform usage do not occur in isolation. Theories of polymedia and media ecology can offer a complementary lens for understanding platform decisions within a holistic communication environment. Rather than treating platforms as isolated tools, such perspectives view them as part of a dynamic media ecosystem shaped by cultural, technological, and ethical changes. Scolari (2009, p. 44) notes that media rarely vanish completely; instead, they adapt to new environments by adopting characteristics of emerging platforms or becoming part of their systems. This helps explain how journalists navigate between platforms not simply to find functional replacements but to adapt to shifting professional values, audience expectations, and technological norms. In this sense, the media environment is constantly changing, and both media and digital culture are continually evolving and being shaped (Scolari, 2009, p. 43).

At its core, this thesis argues that the removal or alteration of key affordances on X has disrupted certain gratifications previously fulfilled by the platform. These shifts have prompted

journalists to modify their workflows, reconsider their presence on X, or explore new channels for their professional needs. Understanding these behaviours requires a balanced socio-technological perspective that recognises how affordances, from a more technological determinist view, interact with social context and perception, as emphasised in social constructivism. Sundar and Limperos (2013, p. 504) contest that new features of a medium create new possibilities for use, which lead to new types of gratifications for users. It is therefore necessary for UGT to consider the material influences of platform design alongside user agency.

In summary, this chapter has explored typologies of journalists' needs, potential factors influencing certain needs, and the historical role of X from both a UGT and DAT perspective. It has outlined how changes to digital platforms, along with journalists' interpretations of those changes, shape professional behaviours and choices. By combining UGT with affordance theory, considering polymedia and media ecology, this thesis offers a framework for understanding how journalists adapt within an increasingly volatile and interconnected digital environment. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach of this study, detailing how qualitative interviews were used to explore journalists' varying experiences and responses to the changing features and environment of X. It introduces the sample, data collection process, and analytical strategy used to examine how journalists navigate these platform shifts in practice.

3. Research design

3.1 Choice of Method

This thesis explored how Musk's takeover of X affected journalists' work and their responses. It addressed the research questions: How has Elon Musk's takeover of X impacted the work of journalists, and what factors and needs shape their individual responses? Reflexive thematic data analysis was chosen as it is commonly used to explore detailed personal experiences and broader patterns across large data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). More broadly, this study was informed by a qualitative research design, which is suited for exploring concepts like perception, experience, and individual behaviour. Such an approach is recommended for investigating phenomena, social contexts, subjective and collective experiences, and the processes through which people create meaning (Flick, 2018, p. 5).

Building on this qualitative approach, the study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore how journalists perceive and respond to changes in social media affordances in relation to their unique needs. While surveys could capture broader trends, interviews offered the depth and flexibility necessary to understand variations in motives and behaviours. This method allowed participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences, providing richer insight into the reasons behind their platform engagement and responses. In-depth interviews are widely used and effective in social research, granting direct access to journalists' expertise and how they balance personal needs with industry challenges (Flick, 2018, p. 4). The semi-structured format offered a balance between flexibility and focus, enabling tailored follow-up questions while maintaining alignment with the study's core themes (Ruslin et al., 2022, p. 22). Interviews were chosen over focus groups due to practical scheduling constraints with a hard-to-reach population, confidentiality concerns (particularly for high-profile journalists hesitant to speak openly in groups), and the study's aim to capture individual perspectives rather than group dynamics.

3.2 Sample Context: Irish Journalists

This study focused on a sample of nine journalists [2] who are either currently active or formerly worked in the Irish journalism landscape. They were selected due to the researcher's cultural familiarity, background, and professional networks within the Irish media landscape.

Ireland offers a valuable national context for examining platform change and journalistic experience. Previous research found that Irish journalists were among the heaviest users of social

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[2] From here on, interviewees are referred to as J1 to J9, listed in chronological order of their interviews. Their real names have been anonymised to protect confidentiality. A full list of each journalist and their relevant characteristics is visible in Appendix 1.

media for work, particularly X, while also expressing scepticism about its trustworthiness even before the takeover (Heravi & Harrower, 2015, p. 1194). Moreover, Ireland's status as a small, English-speaking democracy with high reliance on X positions it as a relevant case for understanding how platform changes affect journalism in similar media systems. Countries such as Australia and Canada, which operate within comparable liberal-democratic frameworks and share institutional, linguistic, and professional norms, may face parallel challenges. Ireland is also situated within the European regulatory context and adheres to broader journalistic standards, as a respected member of the International Federation of Journalists and the European Association of Journalists. According to the Reuters Institute, Irish media remain relatively well received by international standards, with overall trust in news holding at a steady 52% (Murrell, 2022, para. 8).

The Irish media system has undergone significant transformation, including rapid digitalisation, the long-term effects of the 2008 financial crisis, and evolving ownership structures (Rafter & Wheatley, 2023, p. 4). Despite these shifts, Irish journalists have demonstrated resilience and remain committed to ethical and public interest journalism (Rafter & Wheatley, 2023, p. 5). However, recent research indicates a decline in journalists' use of and willingness to share on X, with some Irish journalists feeling nostalgic for when the platform was a more positive, enjoyable, and social space (Wheatley, 2023, p. 11). These shifts, alongside ongoing cited challenges such as harassment and emotional strain, particularly for women on X (Wheatley, 2023, p. 7), make Ireland a timely and relevant case. Rafter and Wheatley (2023, p. 25) also anticipated that Musk's takeover and related controversies might affect future platform use by Irish media professionals. This thesis responds to that expectation by examining whether those changes have contributed to shifting journalistic practices.

Although grounded in the Irish context, the findings of this study are intended to offer rich, contextualised insights into the impact of Musk's takeover on journalists' practices. The sample described below prioritised depth over breadth and was sufficient to reach thematic saturation (Polit & Beck, 2010, p. 1451).

3.3 Sample

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit journalists meeting the study's criteria, ensuring participants remained relevant to the research objectives. Recruitment involved email outreach via existing contacts and a public call on LinkedIn. When recruitment proved difficult, snowball sampling was employed, with participants recommending others. While useful for accessing hard-to-reach professionals, snowball sampling risks participant homogeneity or bias (Etikan & Bala, 2017, p. 215), so mitigation efforts focused on securing diverse perspectives across region, specialisation, gender, and experience, with a spreadsheet tracking such diversity. Towards the end of

data collection, purposive sampling recruited a journalist with a right-leaning stance to enrich the data with broader perspectives. The following section further details the sample.

To participate, interviewees had to be current or former journalists working in the Irish media landscape who used X both before and at least once after Musk's 2022 takeover to enable comparative insights on how platform changes affected their professional practices. As part of sampling and light triangulation, participants' X and Bluesky profiles were reviewed to verify their journalistic work and compare pre- and post-takeover activity. This included examining posting frequency, bio details, follower counts, and organisation affiliations, which helped shape interview questions and context. The sample primarily included those for whom journalism is a significant source of income to ensure the findings reflected the experiences of professionals most affected by these changes. Two journalists, J3 and J6, were highly experienced in Irish journalism but had recently shifted toward copywriting and PR; however, they continued to freelance frequently and could thus offer valuable industry insights.

To capture varied impacts of the takeover, a diverse sample was interviewed (see Appendix 1). Participants ranged across organisation size, experience (early-career to senior editors), roles (news reporters, radio journalists), employment type (staff and independent), coverage (local and national), and medium (print, radio, multimedia). Six of nine were female, offering some gender variation but potentially reflecting certain gendered perspectives. Four of the nine participants had either deactivated or fully deleted their X account during the period in which interviews took place.

3.4 Interview Process

Nine expert in-depth interviews each lasting each around 45 minutes were conducted virtually via Teams software and recorded, transcribed and then anonymised (in order from J1-J9). As digital interviews can present practical challenges, such as reduced non-verbal cues or technical difficulties, best practices were followed to mitigate these limitations (MacEachen & Khan, 2022, p. 1), such as encouraging camera use to help enhance rapport and visual cues. Some minor issues occurred, such as J9 arriving late to the meeting, and having to send another link after the initially planned one ran out. In this case, the transcripts were merged, and a comment was added to note this disruption.

The semi-structured interviews included around sixteen questions exploring journalists' experiences with X before and after Musk's takeover, changes in affordances, impacts on their work, and factors shaping their responses (see Appendix 2). Near the beginning of each interview, participants typically clarified whether they were still using X or not, and questions were adjusted accordingly using two pathways outlined in the topic guide. While the core structure was consistent, the interviews allowed room for spontaneous discussion and elaboration; not all nine questions were asked verbatim if participants had already addressed certain topics organically. The conversation began with general rapport-building, with key questions asked early on to prioritise the most relevant

insights. The flexible format allowed insights beyond the guide, with key points often emerging unprompted. While questions remained consistent across participants to ensure comparability, the structure allowed room for relevant deviations.

An initial pilot interview was conducted with participant J1 to test the clarity and relevance of the interview questions in relation to the research aims. The participant was informed that the interview was part of a trial process and provided informed consent for both participation and the inclusion of their data in the final analysis. Following the interview, minor revisions were made to the interview guide to improve alignment with the research focus and remove questions that steered too much toward personal or ethical opinions about platform ownership, as the study specifically concentrated on professional journalistic practices. Although originally conducted as a pilot, the interview was retained due to the richness and relevance of the data it yielded.

3.5 Ethics

Before each interview, participants received a general study information sheet, an informed consent form, and details about data privacy. They were also reassured that their names would be anonymised. To reduce the risk of response bias or demand characteristics, the specific research aims were not disclosed in full. Some participants returned the signed consent form, while others gave verbal consent after being informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were told they could withdraw at any time or skip any questions. No major risks were identified, and all data was treated confidentially, stored securely on a private local drive accessible only by the researcher. Participants were informed that the researcher may wish to publish findings at a later stage and that they would be contacted for confirmation should this occurred. Accordingly, they agreed that interview transcripts would be retained for up to six months after the completion of the research project or deleted sooner if no publication was pursued.

3.6 Processing and Analysis of Data

With the consent of participants, interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed using Teams virtual meeting software (except for J6, where Zoom was used at the participant's request and whereby a native automatic transcription tool was also used). Participants were informed in advance about the recording and transcription process and gave explicit consent. All recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected local drive accessible only to the researcher, minimising any data security risks. Once the transcripts were prepared, they were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a widely trusted qualitative research tool that enables systematic, rigorous, and reflexive analysis (Paulus, 2015, p. 405).

3.7 Operationalisation

This thesis explored how Musk's takeover of X affected journalists' work, their responses, and the factors shaping those responses, with attention to platform affordances, user needs, and adaptation behaviours like platform migration as cited in the theoretical section.

The first part of the research question focused on the impact of the takeover on journalists' work. Before measuring this impact, it was important to understand how they used X before the takeover, and which of its features fulfilled their unique needs. As previously illustrated, not every journalist used X the same way and hence was not likely impacted equally. Thus, journalists were asked about previous usage, for example: "What sorts of professional uses did X previously fulfil for your work?". Prompts based on journalistic social media usage were occasionally used to encourage reflection without leading responses, such as asking, "Did you mainly use it for audience engagement, networking, story sourcing, etc.?". This provided a useful baseline for comparing changes to the platform. At this stage, journalists were also asked which other platforms they currently use or had used in the past for their work. In response, many voluntarily mentioned whether they were still active on X. If they did not mention this, they were asked if they had an account and were still active.

Once this baseline was measured, questions about perceived changes to the platform, and its impact on their professional practices and previously stated relationship and needs fulfilled by the platform were asked to both interviewees who remained and left the platform, such as "Since Musk's takeover in 2022, did you notice any changes in how you or your colleagues use X for work?" and "Have there been any broader shifts in how journalists engage with the platform?" Again, while many journalists spoke freely, primes were sometimes used when needed, such as referring to documented changes like the monetisation of blue tick verification and asking how these might have affected their work.

Measuring the second part of the research question, "What factors and motives, including journalists' individual needs and circumstances, shape and interact with their responses to these changes in working practices?", required a range of questions, as it addressed multiple interconnected aspects. Firstly, motives for staying/leaving were asked as it was a key part of RQ1. For example, if a journalist had left X, they were asked "What were the key factors that influenced your decision to leave X?". To measure which other interacting factors and needs (as pre-empted in the theoretical section) might shape a journalist's response to remain or leave X, journalists were asked questions like "Do you think that the takeover has affected all journalists in the same ways?" and "Have you noticed any patterns in which types of journalists tend to stay on or leave X?". Primes such as asking the journalists about the role of their specialisation and contract type (e.g. independent vs employed) were used to follow up and explore why specific needs for using X applied, often linking responses to the journalist's own role and differences between them and their colleagues. For example: "Do you think your reasons for remaining on X, or your experience on the platform as a younger journalist,

might differ from those of a more senior or established colleague?". This enabled journalists to reflect on the needs they did or did not seek to fulfil through X and helped account for factors contributing to variation in responses and impact, in line with the focus of RQ2.

3.8 Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 97) respected framework for thematic analysis (TA) was employed, as it is well-suited for identifying patterns in large qualitative datasets and answering specific research questions. Their six-phase process involves: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Byrne (2022, p. 1398) emphasises that while these phases are organised in a logical sequence, thematic analysis is a recursive and iterative process, requiring researchers to move back and forth between phases, with this flexibility being key to ensuring rigour and responsiveness to the data.

Reflecting this approach, the data analysis began with data scanning and the open coding of four interviews. Taking a primarily inductive approach, the process aimed to explore a novel topic without testing a hypothesis, instead allowing the researcher to discover, understand, and interpret what was happening in the research context (Bowen, 2006, p. 14). However, sensitising concepts were used to support the process, helping to interpret and organise the data while maintaining flexibility (Bowen, 2006, p. 12). These sensitising concepts, drawn from the structural elements of the interview guide and considering the theoretical framework, were related to user gratifications, journalistic needs (branding, construction, dissemination) platform affordances, and individual factors shaping variation in responses to platform changes. Although primarily inductive, the coding process also incorporated deductive reasoning to enhance analytical depth and remain sensitive to both emergent and theory-informed content, reflecting Byrne's (2022, p. 1397) observation that TA commonly combines both approaches.

After the initial coding of four interviews, the same codes were applied to two additional interviews to test their fit. Thematic saturation was then reached, and the codes were reviewed and reapplied to the earlier transcripts to ensure consistency. The remaining interviews were then coded using this refined structure. This iterative approach was particularly important, as the first three interviews were with journalists still active on X, which initially influenced the open coding phase.

Around 250 initial open codes were generated and then refined by assessing relevance to the research questions, removing duplicates, and merging overlapping codes. These refined codes (76 total) were organised into eight code clusters. The clusters were grouped into two main code groups based on their relevance to each research question. Appendix 3 presents a numerical breakdown of each code group and its respective code clusters. Additionally, a full breakdown, including sub-codes, their contributions to theme formation, and exemplary quotes, is provided in appendix 4. After

sorting, the clusters were refined and organised into common patterns, resulting in five main themes, some of which included sub-themes. These are presented in detail in the following chapter.

3.9 Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness

While thematic analysis is widely employed, concerns about its inconsistency and lack of coherence have been raised (Holloway & Todres, 2003, p. 346). Hence, to ensure rigour and credibility, this study followed best practices outlined by Nowell et al. (2017, p. 1), ensuring that data analysis was precise, systematic, and well-documented. Above all, transparency remained a priority throughout, which is reflected in the previous section on the data analysis process.

Firstly, before data analysis commenced, the researcher reflected on potential biases that might interfere with interpretation and took steps to remain open to unexpected findings. For example, a personal interest in platform regulation and governance was acknowledged, as this could influence how critical or sympathetic certain responses were perceived. To mitigate this, coding decisions were made carefully, reflexive notes were kept throughout the process, and at times, different peers were asked to review certain coding choices objectively.

Data analysis followed an iterative approach, allowing for ongoing refinement of codes as new insights emerged (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). A constant comparison method was also used to identify patterns and deviant cases across interviews, ensuring the complexity of participants' experiences was captured. Deviant cases were considered and analysed. For example, one participant noted that their work and use of X had been affected even before the takeover, which did not align with the assumptions of RQ1, but was still included and examined within the analysis.

Finally, respondent validation was conducted at the end of the process when themes were drafted. Participants were invited to review key findings to confirm their accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1902). Both interviewees contacted were satisfied that the presented themes and code clusters represented their experiences.

4. Results

4.1 Chapter Structure and Overview

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted on nine interviews with Irish journalists, with each offering insights into how Elon Musk's takeover of X affected their professional practices and responses to X's changes. While some literature is referenced and related to key themes, a more in-depth discussion and further implications appear in Chapter 5 (Discussion and Conclusion). Journalists are referred to by previously assigned pseudonyms (J1–J9), with a full breakdown of their characteristics in Table 1 (Appendices). While no two journalists were affected in the same way, several clear patterns emerged, particularly around platform reliance.

All participants acknowledged the past centrality of X to journalism, particularly for news construction, dissemination, and personal branding. This aligns with Humayun and Ferrucci's (2022, p. 1502) typology of three core uses of X by journalists: gathering and verifying information, distributing content, and building a personal brand. However, Theme 1, '*Journalism's Evolving Relationship with X: The Golden Age Ends, But the Platform Persists*', shows that most now perceive a decline in its professional utility.

Theme 2, '*Staying, Leaving, Adapting: Journalists' Responses to a New Era of X*', explores how participants responded in practice. Four of the nine had deactivated or fully deleted their accounts, while others adapted their usage or engaged with alternatives such as Bluesky.

Theme 3, '*To Be on X or Not to Be: Negotiating Platform Presence and Its Consequences for Journalists*', examines the dilemma of whether to stay or leave. It outlines the ethical, practical, and symbolic motivations behind these decisions and the consequences of remaining (3.1 '*Risk and Reward*') or stepping away (3.2 '*Ethical and Practical Considerations*').

Theme 4, '*Differentiated Effects of the Takeover Across Different Journalists*', highlights that some changes were felt unevenly. Demographic factors such as gender, race, and political alignment influenced exposure to abuse and marginalisation, pointing to broader structural inequalities.

Theme 5, '*Some People Can't Afford to Leave the Platform: How Journalists' Professional Circumstances and Needs Shape Their Response to a Changing X*', considers how variables such as career stage, specialisation, employment type, and organisational culture shaped both ability and willingness to disengage.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates that each journalist's experience was shaped by a mix of motivations, professional needs, autonomy, and individual circumstances. Table 3 summarises each journalist's use of X before the takeover, changes they observed, their response, and the impact on their work, discussed in more detail below.

Table 3
Summary of Journalist' Responses to X's Takeover and Impacts on Work

Journalist	Usage before	Changes Observed	Response to changes	Impact on Work
J1	Finding sources and stories, networking, real-time info, breaking news, dissemination	Algorithm decline, politicisation, toxic content, loss of credibility and moderation	Adapted use, reduced sharing, platform swinging	Harder to find sources, emotional strain, exposure to abuse, fact checking burdens
J2	Real-time information, newsgathering, dissemination, engagement, networking, sourcing	Politicisation, algorithm decline hostility, disinformation, reduced protections	Adapted use, less sharing, platform swinging, editorial caution	Loss of traction, legal risks, increased moderation burdens, dilemma to leave/stay
J3	Career building, networking + visibility, promotion of work, audience engagement, branding, real-time info sourcing	Algorithmic decline, loss of respectful discourse, toxicity, commercialisation, usability decline	Stayed, more passive usage and lurking to monitor conduct	Risks of exposure to abuse but resilient
J4	News gathering, discourse monitoring, networking, sourcing, disseminating	Loss of key affordances, governance & policy issues, audience shift, credibility and usability decline, toxicity	Deactivated X, migrated to Bluesky & others	Switching costs, loss of followers, reduced visibility, dissatisfaction with alternative affordances, more positive experience and credibility elsewhere
J5	Dissemination, visibility	Policy shifts, politicisation, decline in affordances, loss of credibility	Left X- moved to Bluesky	Loss of traction and visibility, missing some real-time updates and sources
J6	Networking, career building and visibility, sourcing, dissemination, branding	Decline in discourse, disinformation, hostility, reduced utility, algorithmic decline, loss of visibility, engagement, credibility, and blue tick verification	Left X, moved to Bluesky, returned to traditional sourcing practices	Loss of followers + visibility, dissatisfaction with alternatives
J7	Real-time info sourcing, breaking news, sharing work	Algorithm decline, spam, monetisation, toxicity, hostility, politicisation	Stayed, more passive use, also uses Bluesky	Harder to navigate content but still possible, loss of traction, dilemma to stay or leave
J8	Sourcing stories and people to promote on radio show, networking, visibility, branding	Disinformation, credibility decline, algorithm decline, decline in discourse, abuse	Left personal X, editorial adaptation (no tagging reporters), migrated to other platforms	Limited reach elsewhere, loss of followers, unable to monitor X conduct
J9	Sourcing, real-time info and updates, visibility and branding	Decline in functionality, spam, older audience, reduced affordances, politicised algorithm, credibility concerns	Remained on X, platform swinging to alternatives	Increase in visibility and engagement, slightly harder to navigate X's features

4.2 Theme 1: Journalism's Evolving Relationship with X: The Golden Age Ends, But the Platform Persists

In the theoretical section, the concept of the 'Twitterization of Journalism' was introduced to describe the platform's legacy status as the preferred space for work-related matters in journalism. This enduring relevance was echoed by most, if not all, participants, supporting the view that X once effectively gratified all three core professional uses outlined in Humayun and Ferrucci's (2022, p. 1502) typology: news construction, dissemination, and branding. J4's account illustrates this:

> "*It was the number one go-to platform on social media that I would have used as a journalist [...] You just had to go on Twitter and you'd find information and contacts, and could research a story. And you could also then disseminate your story once it was done and get feedback*".

J6 even attributed professional success and getting a job through 'Twitter pals' and branding aspects: "I think Twitter was really invaluable and I could say it definitely helped progress my career, absolutely". However, such positive talk of the platform was often framed in the past tense, signalling that this state was no longer the case. As J9 put it, "The peak, or the golden age of Twitter is definitely gone". Participants often used the past tense when reflecting on the platform's former professional value, indexing that its usefulness was no longer the same. For instance, J1 recalled, "I had built up quite a good algorithm that I would find good sources and it would be things I would be interested in," using the conditional past to describe previous affordances of the platform. These reflections were frequently followed by negative statements highlighting how the platform's affordances had changed since the takeover. As J1 later added, "Now you're getting a lot of content that isn't relevant to you, and it's kind of hard to find sources and it's hard to kind of connect with people now".

Another feature of journalists' accounts was the contrast between past positive experiences and current disappointment, often framed in the past tense to reflect a sense of loss. J1 noted that X "used to be a nice place," while J8 described the post-takeover environment as "really depressing and grim," marking the sudden decline of what had once been a valuable space. Much of this disappointment was tied to specific changes in how X now functions and operates, with journalists highlighting a range of shifts that have affected the platform's value and usability for professional work. Many journalists directly linked these shifts to Musk's takeover and leadership. As J4 put it, "[…] since he took over, it's really dramatically changed," later describing the platform as "less attractive […] as a journalist". J5 similarly explained, "I'm not on X, I haven't been probably since Musk's takeover".

However, not all participants saw the takeover as the main turning point, challenging initial assumptions that Musk's takeover was the primary cause of X's decline for journalists. J6 claimed

that "X had gotten worse even before Musk took over". These discussions often focused less on changes to platform affordances, many of which did align with Musk's takeover, and more on the platform's shifting discourse, which reflected broader socio-political trends in Ireland and globally. J8, for example, identified 2018/2019 (and later also acknowledged the pandemic period 2020-2022) as key turning points, noting a shift in the tone of public discourse on the platform, addressing aggressive Irish anti-migrant protesters:

> "*They were starting to organise on Twitter at that time... the discussion stopped being in any way productive and just became people shouting at each other, whereas before it had been about trying to have reasoned debates*".

J8 argued that negative discourse was already present before the takeover but attributed Musk's changes to moderation and platform structure as reinforcing this decline, stating it "suddenly [made] it a free for all for them after years when they were being monitored more... and being regulated a bit". J9 echoed this view, describing the current state of public discourse on the platform as a sort of "wild west". The impact of such new platform dynamics on journalists is explored further in theme three.

In terms of affordance changes linked to the takeover, journalists pointed to several platform features under Musk's ownership that have made their work more difficult. A consistent observation in the data was the shift in algorithmic functioning, which has reduced the platform's utility for sourcing and newsgathering. This supports the idea from affordance theory that design changes can constrain user action and the fulfilment of gratifications (Sundar and Limperos, 2013, p. 504). Only one journalist acknowledged slightly positive effects in terms of the changed algorithm amplifying their work, attributing this to a perceived political skew, which is consistent with Ye et al.'s (2024, p. 1) research on X's increasingly partisan algorithmic bias:

> "*I noticed a slight improvement, I'm not sure if that's on account of coming from a centre-right perspective or just the way the algorithms favour it but that's probably the one thing Twitter is still very good at […] but yeah definitely benefits, it fits great for professionally and politically, it definitely hits the nail on the head for me*". (J9).

Despite this, most journalists described the algorithm changes as counterproductive. As J8 put it, "When he changed the algorithm, it went absolutely bananas and stopped being useful at all". Many found content less relevant, more politically skewed, and harder to navigate. J3 noted, "You could depend on Twitter then for different voices and different opinions… but not anymore," while J4 added, "The search engines are different now; sometimes you just wouldn't be able to find things".

These accounts suggest a decline in X's visibility affordance, as relevant content has become harder to surface (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 151). Many also criticised perceived the algorithm's perceived political bias. J2 explained: "[…] It's not content that I look for. Also, I think it just doesn't coalesce with my political beliefs". J3 even felt the platform was "starting to push people like me off," reflecting a growing sense of exclusion and polarisation from a platform that had previously been central to their work.

As anticipated, other key challenges presented to journalists by Musk's platform changes included removing independent fact-checkers, introducing crowdsourced fact-checking ('Community Notes'), and removing user's blue tick verification badges. These shifts harmed the credibility of sources and journalists' work. J4 noted, "I strongly disagreed with them reducing the moderators... it was a useful feature that actually would help you". J5, who left X, highlighted the conflict with journalism's commitment to accuracy: "Journalists especially... rely on factual evidence, they rely on independent deciding, so I think that is a big turn-off for journalists". These observations support Claesson's (2024, p. 2606) view that the takeover prompted institutional reflection on X usage due to clashes with journalistic values and align with Katz et al.'s (1974, p. 517) argument that social values shape media use and needs.

A surge of perceived disinformation on the platform as described by many journalists, along with changes to fact-checking features, have increased journalists' burden to verify information and maintain credibility. J1 noted that "everything has to be fact checked now," reflecting how journalists now carry greater responsibility for ensuring accuracy of information sourced. Adding to this challenge, Musk's monetisation of the previously free verification badge frustrated journalists who can no longer easily identify credible sources. J8 explained that before the change, people with these badges "were reasonably reliable and could be trusted," but afterwards, "[…] suddenly, you had no way of knowing who was who at all". J6 also observed a decline in the traction and engagement of their profile after losing their blue tick, stating that the badge's value was undermined as "now anyone can just buy it," leading to fewer followers and less engagement.

Overall, the data showed that these changes reduced the platform's value and utility for journalists, supporting earlier concerns about the diminished gratification of core professional needs. J3 said X was no longer the same "value proposition," while J9 noted it "has diminished in functionality and of quality". J6 went further, calling it "something that was harmful to journalism," echoing literature on tensions between X's current governance and journalism (Henry, 2025, p. 16). Despite these challenges, most journalists acknowledged X's continued industry relevance and unmatched affordances. This prevailing legacy and large user base kept many from leaving. J9 and J3 still called it a "market leader," with J3 explaining, "If you're trying to build a brand for yourself, you've got to be where the market leaders are". J7 echoed this: "Too many people still use it for it to just be ignored… it still holds merit purely because so many people still use it". While some features

had weakened, many remained reliant on core functions like hashtag use, real-time flow, and newsgathering. As J7 put it, this reliance persists despite changes to "[…] the core features that made Twitter attractive to journalists in the first place". J2 also highlighted X's enduring branding affordance (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 162):

> *"It definitely is a great tool for that, especially with the functionality. You can like and repost things, so if you're being reposted, you're reaching someone else's network, which is really helpful".*

Newsgathering and monitoring public discourse have remained crucial functions of X for many journalists which later links to theme five, as those in more news-focused roles and with greater dependencies on such functions were more directly affected by the takeover's impacts. As J3 explained, "If I want to see at that minute what's live or what's trending, what's going on, I will still check X". Another noted that while users may explore alternatives, namely Bluesky, "[...] they are still getting a lot of their information from X" (J3). This supports that X remains the preferred platform for real-time updates and public discourse monitoring (Orellana-Rodriguez and Keane, 2018, p. 78).

These push-pull dynamics have made journalists feel both frustrated and reliant on X despite its challenges. J2 acknowledged the dilemma, saying they would leave if they could, while J4 described "holding [their] nose" and continuing to use the platform despite frustration. J2 summarised this as a "catch 22", feeling stuck professionally. This dilemma was not merely affective nor ethically driven, but also tied to journalists' capacity to act, with factors influencing this explored in Theme Five. As J3 phrased it, "There's people who can't afford not to be on X".

4.3 Theme 2: Staying, Leaving, Adapting: Journalists' Responses to a New Era of X

As previously mentioned, of the nine journalists interviewed, four had either deactivated or fully deleted their X accounts, and five remained on the platform, although almost all used it in some adapted capacity. This theme explores those responses and their impact on journalists' work, illustrating how journalists exercise user agency and actively adapt their media use to satisfy changing professional needs in response to the platform's evolving affordances (Katz et al., 1974, p. 517).

Among those who remained on X, continued usage rarely looked the same as before the takeover, as journalists adapted their behaviour. Some journalists simply said that they were engaging with X less or in a more passive manner than before and this seemed to be a midway strategy to deal with the previously described dilemma of whether or not to engage or disengage with it. J7 described that many journalists are "[...] lurking but aren't taking the actual step of deactivating". This passive engagement wasn't just about lurking for information, but also about keeping up a presence for

branding purposes. As J8 explained, "[…] The younger ones, the digital reporters in particular, don't use Twitter at all, like they may have a holder account to just hold their name on it, but they don't use it at all".

Platform swinging also served as a middle ground between staying and leaving, as X's continued dominance for certain uses and features prevented full disengagement. Bluesky, LinkedIn, Facebook and Substack were commonly cited alternative platforms. Some journalists described posting across multiple platforms to expand their reach and engagement, noting that while Bluesky offered less engagement than X, it was gradually improving as an alternative. As J1 put it, "I just post on both to see, you know which gets more eyes really".

Some journalists reported a reduced willingness to amplify their professional work or share personal aspects of their lives on X, which contrasts with common branding practices among journalists before the takeover (Hedman, 2020, p. 674). This was done largely by reason of a perceived risk of backlash and hostility on the platform. J1 explained this by stating that in the past, "[...] journalists also gave a little glimpse of their own personal as well as professional life but now people kind of are afraid from doing that". J4 shared a similar experience about disseminating their work as X "[...] just seems to bring out the worst in people", thus they were "[...] very hesitant and reluctant to share a lot of work stuff or post a lot". J2 noted that female journalists were less likely to share their work due to higher unequal risks: "I feel like younger women don't advertise their work as much as young male journalists on X because of the risks and the disproportionate amount of abuse".

Additionally, at an editorial level, the takeover introduced new demands on journalists due to a perceived risky environment. The two editors interviewed expressed concerns about added responsibilities for both their publication's work and the wellbeing of their staff, requiring adaptations in their professional platform usage. Some adaptations involved reducing amplification or censoring certain stories by turning off comments or simply not posting them. J2 explained that they sometimes avoid publishing stories likely to provoke a "pile on" in a volatile platform environment. They also noted that rising legal risks and the need to closely monitor comment sections may be a potential reason why their publication has been expanding its team of audience editors, reflecting the increasing demand to manage these challenges effectively. Another editor explained that their organisation once heavily encouraged journalists to use X to promote their work and organisation, but rising hostility changed this approach. Adaptations included recommending reporters to use other platforms and avoiding tagging journalists to protect them from unwanted attention. J8 summed this up:

> "We've said our journalists don't have to be on it anymore. It used to be essential, but the abuse just wasn't worth it. We have a duty of care, so they're being encouraged to build a following elsewhere".

In terms of the response of divorcing from X, as previously mentioned, some journalists had fully exited the platform, while others had only deactivated (temporarily suspended) their accounts without fully deleting them. J4, a freelance journalist, noted that their independent role influenced this decision, as maintaining access to various sources of information remained important for their work. This consideration led them to retain a limited presence on the platform despite their broader disengagement. This kind of selective disengagement was also seen in how journalists signalled platform swinging but not a total exit from X:

> *"A lot of colleagues of mine have stopped posting on it or they will even have their profiles live on the site, but they'll have it in their biography that maybe they're not posting on X anymore or you know, I'm posting on Bluesky more now" (J7).*

4.4 Theme 3: To Be on X or Not to Be: Negotiating Platform Presence and Its Consequences for Journalists

This theme examines the impacts of both staying and leaving in response to platform changes. It shows that both responses come with trade-offs, benefits, and challenges related to affordances, risks, and limitations.

Theme 3.1: Remaining on X: Risk and Reward

The five journalists who remained on X had unique experiences, though some commonalities emerged. Many reported greater challenges and increased risks of abuse in a widely perceived hostile environment. However, one journalist noted positive benefits from staying, such as increased traction on the platform, which they attributed to their right-leaning background. Despite these difficulties, others identified key benefits of staying, including unmatched real-time updates, wide reach, branding, and access to diverse perspectives.

Due to changes in algorithmic functioning and a perceived increase in spam, ads, and promoted content, most journalists found navigating X for networking and information sourcing more cumbersome. J1 described this frustration as having to "[...] waste a lot of your time weaving through stuff to get to the information you want" and added that it was "[…] hard to find sources and connect with people now".

Many journalists associated the new ownership with the creation of an unsafe, abusive, and hostile platform environment, especially in comment sections, which has negatively impacted their work. J2 said Musk's rhetoric positioned journalism as the enemy, making journalists feel unsafe. J4 described the platform's toxicity as a "sewer", while J8 called it a "cesspit," adding that such harmful conduct "didn't happen that much until Musk took over". Abuse, including doxing and implicit fears of being targeted were frequently reported. One female journalist recalled insults received on the

platform such as being called "fat" and a "Nazi operator" (J3). Musk's shift toward looser free speech policies and reduced content moderation measures have also left journalists more vulnerable. As J1 put it, abuse received "might not be sorted... there's no guarantee the platform will protect you". J1 added that seeing harmful content on X had become a part of daily working routines, citing observations of "pro-eating disorder kind of content", and J2 described the emotional toll of such as "a bit of a jump scare... I don't want to see that at 7:00 AM".

Despite these challenges, many journalists felt that staying on X was worth it, justified, or necessary. This was partly due to the platform's continued industry presence and reliance on its affordances, especially related to real-time updates, wide audience reach, branding, newsgathering, and exposure to diverse perspectives. Others highlighted benefits such as searchability, association, and sourcing as reasons for staying. J1, despite noting serious problems above, said, "I still feel like the benefits outweigh the cons... it's a good way of getting my work out there and finding people and information". J1 concurrently noted alternative platforms like Bluesky, LinkedIn, and Facebook do not match X in terms of real-time dissemination, network size and or its predominantly open public features (e.g. not having to be friends with someone on Facebook to reach out to sources).

Many journalists emphasised the importance of exposure to diverse perspectives to avoid echo chambers. J3 explained, "I do like to keep an eye on what they're at… and sometimes see the bad stuff... that's why I probably feel more comfortable being present still". J8 shared a similar view, highlighting that while leaving X over Musk's governance is understandable, such an exodus could lead to alternative platforms merely dominated by "people who just hate Elon Musk," creating an echo chamber that undermines journalistic objectivity. For some, staying was a strategic choice, either as symbolic resistance or a way to monitor platform dynamics. J3 described using X through "a social and political analysis lens," wanting to understand "what the algorithms are doing, who it's amplifying, what they're trying to push," even if negative, seeing this as an advantage. This shows that some journalists remain on X as a form of resistance or critical observation. This contrasts with Claesson's (2024, p. 2604) concept of *'strategic disconnection',* where journalists disengaged from the new X as a way to reconcile their values with the pressure to maintain an online presence. This study suggests both disconnection and continued engagement can be deliberate responses to the conflicting pressures caused by the takeover.

Theme 3.2: Stepping Away from X: Ethical and Practical Considerations

The four journalists who had either deleted their accounts or significantly reduced their usage of X described both positive and negative consequences of stepping away. Many cited ethical or practical reasons for leaving, mainly concerning ownership, platform culture, wellbeing and the overall decline in the value of the platform. At the same time, stepping away also came with trade-offs, including reduced visibility and access to key networks.

One stated benefit of leaving X was evading the risks and hostility tied to staying. Journalists who moved to alternatives, especially Bluesky, reported more positive experiences. For example, J1 said, "I find Bluesky is really positive, a lot of people have made that move over," while J3 described it as having a "[...] nicer, more community-based feel," reflecting X's former culture. J6 compared the two platform's cultures, commenting that: "The plus is all the toxicity of Twitter doesn't exist there because of how the algorithm is". J3 added that Bluesky's tone and design feel less toxic compared to a "manic feeling" X. Another reported advantage of Bluesky over X was its perceived greater credibility. As J4 explained, "The people I want to find, the decent, legitimate people, legitimate voices, will be on Bluesky".

Despite such benefits, journalists who left X concurrently encountered challenges, limitations and switching cost burdens. Some journalists noted less visibility and engagement on Bluesky than on X, indicating that X still offers greater visibility affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 151). J5 put this down to the different algorithmic functioning:

> *"With Bluesky, the algorithm is more personalised so it's not like Twitter where you get random people finding you it's more so like who you're following and whatnot so unless people like know your name, I don't think they're gonna find you necessarily, so that is one drawback".*

Many journalists acknowledged the limitations of Bluesky's affordances and other alternatives for being as useful for X in its current or previous state. For example, J9 stated: "Bluesky will linger, but it hasn't a hope of reaching the heights of Twitter" while J8 stated: "I just don't think any of them can do the range of things that Twitter did when it was good". Another limitation mentioned was the fear of missing out on key information or sources. J5 noted, "I do miss out in some ways because I think a lot of like political figures still will sort of make announcements there," while J8 reflected, "It's one way in which I feel I have lost out since I deleted it… I can't keep track of what the far right are doing".

The switching costs and burden of building a new following and managing another platform were often mentioned by journalists who left X or joined alternatives. J1 noted the challenge of starting from scratch: "The issue at the moment is obviously I've no followers because I'm starting from scratch, so I haven't really put too much work into it so far". J2 expressed frustration over an increased workload: "This is kind of annoying because there's just like one more platform to do," but also acknowledged its importance in decentralising from X, a view shared by others who weighed practical benefits against ethical concerns. J7 highlighted this tension:

"It's a value judgement for organisations; is the traffic from these sites worth the ethical implications of potentially supporting platforms that allow extremist and hate content?".

Follower count and audience size also influenced journalists' decisions to stay on or leave X. As J4 said, "Maybe if you have nothing to lose, you'll go and if you have a lot to lose, you'll stay". However, two journalists with substantial followings (J6 with about 10k, J8 about 20k) both left the platform, both feeling it was no longer worth it. J8 simply said it "wasn't worth [their] while" to stay. Some journalists accepted the switching costs for ethical reasons or to avoid toxicity. J8 admitted they "miss Twitter a bit," but were "happier to be gone". J4, strongly critical of Musk and describing him as "morally reprehensible," justified the professional downsides of leaving with moral reasons: "I will be negatively impacting my own online presence... and I'm prepared to accept that because I feel so strongly about it".

4.5 Theme 4: Differentiated Effects of the Takeover Across Different Journalists

This theme builds on a previously mentioned point that, although each journalist had their own experience of the platform post-takeover, some common patterns emerged. Certain individuals were impacted in more precarious or harmful ways for example like the abuse previously mentioned in theme 3.1 particularly in relation to certain demographic factors such as race, gender, political alignment and journalistic agenda.

It was previously noted by an interviewee that female journalists were less likely to share their work due to fears of "disproportionate abuse" on X (J2), aligning with broader research highlighting the gendered nature of harassment on the platform (Wheatley, 2023, p. 11). This reflects a wider pattern where female journalists faced greater scrutiny and are disproportionately targeted with misogynistic and sexist abuse on X. For example, J8, an editor, reported her female staff received "absolutely horrendous… deeply misogynistic, sexist abuse". J2 also raised concerns about sexual assault threats directed at reporters. This gendered harassment often intersected with factors like age and political views. As J2 put it:

"The younger women, if they so much dare hint that they might have a bit more progressive and more like kind of liberal takes on things, get absolutely lambasted. So yeah, I think that gender definitely has to do with it."

J8 partly put this down to a masculinisation of the platform post-takeover, stating that X was no longer a space for females and female activists:

"For women, Instagram became the main platform, even for politically engaged ones. Twitter, with its conspiracy theories, became more masculine and less welcoming to women. Mostly women follow me on Instagram, while mostly men follow me on Twitter".

Some of the takeover's impacts, particularly the perceived rise in abuse and hostility on the platform, disproportionately affected journalists from more marginalised backgrounds. This is echoed by J5 speaking about Musk's renewed content moderation policies: "I think with the policy changes, it's definitely affected certain groups of people more than it did others". Again, this intersectional unequal impact of the takeover regarding gender, race and political background was echoed by J2:

"It seems like specifically white male journalists who are either, you know, centrists, or potentially a bit more conservative with their views seem to be having the best time like nothing has changed, it's business as usual".

As suggested in the quote above, J2 highlighted race as an important factor in the unequal treatment journalists experience on the platform, and how it shaped decisions to stay or leave X:

"I'd say race also has to do with it, because the comments my colleague from India gets are just nuts… I think anyone who's marginalised has had to sort of re-adjust their behaviour and perhaps flee to Instagram or LinkedIn".

Finally, political alignment, in relation to both the journalist and their content, also shaped how unequally the platform's changes were felt. Reporters covering more liberal, left-leaning, or socially focused issues such as climate change, immigration, and feminism were more likely to be challenged or targeted with hostility on X. For example, J7 stated: "Reporting on immigration or social issues is harder on X now due to the increased hate speech and vitriol allowed, raising the bar on what can be shared". Similarly, environmental journalists were uniquely affected. J5, who primarily covers climate issues, left X after noticing that the algorithm had become "politically skewed". They believed content from climate reporters and left-leaning outlets was receiving poor visibility: "Their kind of content might get funnelled away". J6 reflected a similar experience and observed that the environmental journalist community had migrated to Bluesky. J6 recalled asking their editor where best to share their environmental freelance work, who affirmed their presence on Bluesky.

In contrast, J9, who remained active on X and identified as having a centre-right conservative background with experience at a right-wing Irish publication, reported more positive impacts from the takeover, particularly in terms of increased visibility and engagement. They stated, "I'd say there's

definitely benefits, from a right-wing perspective, it's definitely been a bonanza the past 2–3 years". This supports Boulianne et al.'s (2024, p. 3) finding that political alignment can influence platform choice, with more conservative users tending to favour X.

4.6 Theme 5: "Some People Can't Afford to Leave the Platform": How Journalists' Professional Circumstances and Needs Shape Their Response to a Changing X

The theoretical section noted that journalists' unique needs shape their platform choices and gratifications sought. This theme shows how factors like age, experience, and specialisation interact with these needs and influence a journalist's reliance on, ability to leave, or dependency on X. Some found it easier to leave based on these factors, which often interacted. For example, an experienced journalist might have fewer branding needs but still rely on X for newsgathering due to their specialisation.

Theme 5.1: Age and Career Stage

Early-career journalists often felt more dependent on X for career-building despite its challenges, reflecting Hedman's (2020, p. 675) finding that younger journalists are more active on the platform. The sample mostly reflected this, as of the five entry-mid level journalists in the sample, four were still active to some extent on the platform. This was primarily due to their visibility and networking needs. J2 described this dependence and consequent influence on the decision to remain on X:

> *"If you're a young journalist starting out, getting to know people and finding out the ins and outs of the industry, X is really helpful because people share their experiences and it helps you get a lay of the land".*

The older and more established journalists interviewed described having fewer branding needs, and many acknowledged this as a privilege that gave them more freedom to step back from the platform. As J2 noted, "I think journalists who are a bit more established, can afford to be less active on it". Others more senior recognised why that same freedom might not apply to younger colleagues. J8 explained, "I can see why a younger reporter wouldn't abandon it… for them it would still be somewhat useful." Similarly, J4, an experienced, award-winning freelance journalist who had strong ethical objections to the platform even admitted: "If I was 20 years younger, I probably would still use it". These contrasting dependencies also shaped platform migration and swinging, with younger journalists turning to LinkedIn, TikTok and Instagram, while older journalists felt they could survive with more traditional ways of information seeking and "go back to some extent to the way it was" before X and digital journalism became central (J6).

While X was still seen as essential for up-and-coming journalists, the data also suggested that it is becoming less relevant as a preferred platform among younger people. J9 described the audience as "increasingly fossilised to millennials and above," adding, "I'm noticing more and more speaking to younger people, younger journalists, that Twitter's yesterday's game, it's very much a millennials and over kind of platform". One senior journalist (J8) also observed that younger journalists were using it less, attributing this to the fact that they hadn't experienced the 'Golden Age of Twitter' when it was at its peak professional utility:

> *"I just don't think they do find it useful. I suppose if they graduated in 2020 or whatever, sure, it hasn't been useful for as long as they've been working, they don't know what it was like when it was good".*

Theme 5.2: Journalistic Specialisation, Role and Medium

As mentioned in the theoretical section, the type of journalism and medium of work impacts a journalist's needs and, in turn, their usage and dependence on X. This was mirrored in the data as it shaped their decision to stay on or leave the platform. The data showed that X has become less relevant for certain niche types of journalism, such as environmental matters, but remains crucial for news, current affairs, and business and consumer journalists who rely on its real-time affordances and rapid newsgathering capacities. J2 demonstrated such a specialised need: "As a business journalist, she's always looking for people who work in business to talk to… So she really would need to have her ear to the ground and find new things". Radio journalists, such as J8 (before becoming an editor), relied heavily on X for news construction and sourcing (Pew Research Centre, 2022, para. 7) to gather content and sources for their shows, but noted that the decline in credibility and discourse on X has made this more difficult and the platform less relevant and appealing to use overall.

Editors, by contrast, tended to be less reliant on the platform due to their more limited need for direct live reporting or sourcing and more managerial roles; this was the case with J8, who needed it less when they switched from a news reporter to an editor role: " I suppose for me it just got less important as a tool for my job when my role changed". These findings support Russell's (2015, p. 188) study, which found that journalistic specialisation and role can influence X usage.

Similarly, some national journalists highlighted their reliance on the persistent value of X for local news sourcing, particularly when working outside their own regional networks. In these cases, the platform's usefulness was shaped by the geographical scope of their reporting role (Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022, para. 11). X served as a practical tool to monitor location-specific conversations and identify relevant voices. As J7 explained, "If something has happened in a specific part of Ireland, you put the town name into the search bar and like, you'll see if people are talking about it". In contrast, J4, a local journalist who had left X, described being less reliant on the platform due to strong offline

networks and local proximity: "I wouldn't be at a disadvantage by not having X in terms of local news sourcing… a journalist stuck in Dublin will go on X trying to find out something happening in Sligo would be reliant on that, whereas I wouldn't, I have my own contacts to call people and friends etc".

For others, such as environmental or socially left-leaning issue reporters, dissemination needs had shifted as their target audiences were no longer perceived to be on X. Many migrated to other platforms, citing both reduced audience relevance and increased hostility on X. For example, one freelance journalist, even though they acknowledged that X was once a crucial platform for activists, stated that they would feel more comfortable publishing their work outside of X: "If I was writing about activism or I was writing about sexual crime, I'd probably actually be more active on Instagram than X".

Opinion journalists, depending on the nature of their content, also demonstrated high visibility needs and a desire for amplification of their work. This influenced J3's decision to stay: "When you write something, particularly if it's opinion, you obviously want the most amount of people to read it." However, another opinion writer expressed concerns about posting their work on X due to increased hostility in the comments: "I think especially as an opinion writer as well, you're putting yourself in a very vulnerable space," and said they felt they'd receive "more respectful discourse and engagement" by disseminating it on Substack and LinkedIn (J4).

Moreover, a journalist's medium also played a role in shaping their decision to stay or leave (Pew Research Centre, 2022, para. 7). X's print-focused design has largely remained unchanged, making it less suitable for journalists working in multimedia or photo-led content, many of whom had already moved to other platforms. J5, who worked in photojournalism, found it slightly easier to leave, stating, "I just thought Instagram was a better platform, especially for like multimedia." While J7 observed a shift toward more video content on X since the takeover, saying, "It's a site that's a lot more orientated towards video clips now I would say," this change was not significant enough to retain all multimedia creators. Some journalists also reflected on how central X once was, and to some extent still is, for radio journalism, particularly for sourcing guests or content for live shows. J8 noted how it was used to "provoke discussions" but described a decline in tone and credibility: "[…] You would get people phoning in very abusive and very negative and whatever and when Twitter began to be more like that, I kind of said, I deal with enough of that at work so I don't need to be dealing with it all the time".

Theme 5.3: Freelance vs Staff Journalists: The Role of Organisational Influence

The analysis relieved that employment status (staff vs independent) and organisational influence played some influence on journalists' decisions to stay on or leave X. Freelance journalists often described having more freedom to disengage (of the four independent journalists interviewed, three had left the platform). As a freelancer, (J6) explained: "It's easier for me because I'm not

accountable to anyone and I can choose the direction of my own work". However, this freedom to leave the platform was complicated by their visibility and dissemination needs as a result of being self-employed, consistent with Humayun and Ferrucci's findings (2022, p. 1509). J4, who claimed being a freelancer was the reason she had deactivated but not fully deleted her account, acknowledged: "If you are leaving all avenues open to search for information, you're not going to shove one out".

In contrast, staff journalists were often subject to organisational expectations and commercial branding needs. As J6 noted, "Maybe journalists who aren't freelance might have a greater need to stay on X, their organisation might want them on there". Some staff journalists described a lack of control over how their organisation disseminated their work appeared on X, saying, "Once that's been filed, it's completely out of your hands". This varied by organisation however, with one editor stating that "We have had that policy for a good while that staff don't have to be on it individually at all". Despite this, as the theory alluded, organisations can directly influence a staff journalist's platform usage (Lu et al., 2025, p. 568). One participant shared, "One security magazine I write for... expressly say, do not associate yourself with Twitter". These varied experiences show how both autonomy and organisational branding shaped platform presence.

Table 4 below summarises the motives behind each journalist's decision to stay on or leave the platform (with responses simplified to 'Stayed' or 'Left' for purposes of clarity, as more detailed adapted behaviours were addressed in Table 3), along with the professional factors and associated needs that interacted with these motives and shaped their responses.

Journalist	Response	Response motives	Factors interacting with motives	Needs linked to factors
		Table 4: Summary of Motives, Needs, Factors and Circumstances Shaping Response to Platform Changes		
J1	Stayed	Practical- building career and essential tool for job function	Experience level (entry-level), specialisation (news reporter)	Newsgathering, self-branding, networking, sourcing, disseminating work
J2	Stayed	Practical- required usage for organisation	Job role & specialisation (editor, news) and organisational dependence + expectations on platform, local in-the-know needs	Sourcing stories, disseminating, organisational branding
J3	Stayed	Symbolic- resistance, monitoring conduct, avoiding echo chamber	Experience level (senior), job specialisation (opinion feature writing)	Monitoring public debate + discourse, branding and dissemination
J4	Left	Ethical- strong negative sentiment towards platform owner	Experience level (senior) freelancer, local (has a solid offline network)	Story sourcing, dissemination, branding
J5	Left	Ethical- distaste of ownership and platform conduct & policies	Specialisation & role (environmental, features), freelancer, medium (photojournalism)	Self-branding, dissemination, networking, multimedia affordances
J6	Left	Practical- X loss of utility and value for work and minor ethical concerns	Experience level (senior), role and specialisation (features, social issues), freelancer (*with established network and consistent work)	Sourcing, dissemination
J7	Stayed	Practical- still useful; pragmatic reluctance to leave to avoid echo chamber despite concerns	Experience level (entry-level), job role and specialisation (news reporter, crime), dependence for local stories	Sourcing, dissemination, networking, newsgathering
J8	Left	Ethical- ownership and governance, also practical (loss of value and need for role)	Experience level (senior), medium (less reliant when switched from radio to print)	Branding, disseminating & sourcing stories
J9	Stayed	Practical- still useful and beneficial for work despite challenges	Political alignment (centre-right), specialisation and role (news, headline reporter)	Real-time information sourcing, networking, disseminating, branding

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated how journalists responded to Elon Musk's takeover of X by examining how the platform's evolving features impacted their professional practices (RQ1), and what motives and contextual factors, including needs and circumstances, shaped their responses (RQ2). This was explored through interviews with nine Irish journalists, four of whom had either left the platform entirely or significantly reduced their use. Findings revealed that Musk's takeover significantly altered journalists' work on X by changing platform features, undermining its credibility and usefulness, and affecting overall culture and governance, complicating their ability to meet key needs like news sourcing, dissemination, and branding (RQ1). Despite this, it continues to play an essential role in the industry, with emerging alternative platforms still unable to match X's journalistic affordances for visibility, association, and real-time updates. Many journalists faced hostility on the platform, with some disproportionately affected. Decisions to stay, leave, or adapt platform use (RQ2) were shaped by ethical and practical motives and influenced by key factors such as career stage, specialisation, and employment status. While analysis was mainly inductive and grounded in participants' accounts, prior theory on UGT and DAT and relevant studies helped interpret the emerging themes.

5.1 Key Findings

X has undergone significant degradation in functionality and platform culture following the takeover, undermining many of the platform's once-valued affordances that were particularly beneficial to journalists. Many of these changes stem from platform policy shifts, including reduced content moderation and fact-checking. Journalists linked these shifts to a rise in disinformation, increased risks such as abuse, and a greater responsibility to implement additional measures to ensure credibility, potentially signalling an end to the '*Tweet First, Verify Later*' era (Bruno, 2011, p. 1). The findings showed that different journalists were affected in diverse ways, with some disproportionately impacted by reported hostility on the platform due to demographic and intersectional factors such as gender, race, and political background. This aligns with recent research on Irish journalists, echoing Wheatley's (2023, p. 11) concerns that Irish female journalists face disproportionate abuse on social media, especially on X in recent years. This transformation of X has created a dilemma for journalists, with some leaving for ethical reasons, others staying for practical ones, and some feeling a duty to remain to uphold objectivity, avoid echo chambers, and symbolically resist the platform's governance.

Many journalists noted X's growing politicisation, observing a rightward shift in algorithms, which supports Ye et al.'s (2024, p. 1) research and affects journalists both in terms of information sourcing and work amplification. They also pointed to shifts in the audience base, further demonstrating that political alignment can influence platform choice (Boulianne et al., 2024, p. 3). One right-leaning journalist in this study reported minor positive effects of the takeover, including

increased traction on the platform. While this supports Graham & Andrejevic's (2024, p. 1)'s tentative findings that post-Musk affordances amplify far-right expressions, this finding should be treated cautiously as it was based on a single case and should not be generalised.

Treem and Leonardi's (2013, p. 162) typology previously ranked X's visibility and association affordances as high, but this study shows both have declined. Algorithmic changes and the loss of verification have made it harder for journalists to find relevant content and reach audiences, reducing visibility and credibility. However, X still outperformed alternative platforms like Bluesky regarding visibility and searchability due to its larger audience base and more open design, which allows for easier discovery beyond one's follower network. Moreover, despite concerns about declining visibility, work amplification and credibility, X's association affordances relating to branding and networking remain relatively strong, with many journalists continuing to use X to promote their work and maintain professional connections. Nonetheless, increasingly perceived hostile discourses, especially targeting marginalised groups, have weakened X's capacity for meaningful associations. This has made journalists, especially women, more reluctant to share content on X, further reducing the platform's visibility and branding affordances, with some now preferring to share on platforms like Substack and LinkedIn. These findings challenge earlier research, such as Molyneux and Holton's (2015, p. 197) concept of 'brand journalism', which highlighted the former blending of personal and professional identities through content sharing on the platform. Now, X appears to be a less supportive space for such practices. Such hostility has also created new burdens for editors, including monitoring comments, censoring certain content and implementing protection measures to safeguard their staff. They have taken extra steps like avoiding tagging reporters and encouraging them to use alternative platforms.

Despite the platform's functional and cultural decline and the widely acknowledged end of the 'Golden Era of Twitter', X continues to hold a dominant position in journalism. Many journalists still rely on X to meet key professional needs and have therefore stayed. As outlined by Humayun and Ferrucci (2022, p. 1502), journalist's social media needs typically include news construction, dissemination, and branding. While several journalists described the platform as degraded or harmful, many remain active or have adapted their behaviour, often by reducing their usage, because of X's unmatched affordances, including hashtags for newsgathering, real-time updates, and widespread dissemination capabilities. These features, which originally made X central to journalistic practice (Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane, 2018, p. 77), align with Hermida and Mellado's (2020, p. 880) observation that X's design continues to support fast-paced reporting, external linking, and real-time interaction. The findings also showed that X remains particularly important for fulfilling news construction needs, although this has become more cumbersome due to algorithmic changes and increased promoted content. X's continued relevance is partly due to its legacy status in journalism and the lasting influence of the 'Twitterization of journalism' discussed in chapter two. As it stands,

no alternative platform has replicated X's iconic role in the journalistic ecosystem, which is why some journalists engage in platform swinging to new alternatives like Bluesky without fully deactivating their accounts. This supports the idea that media compete to satisfy user needs (Falgoust et al., 2022, p. 2) and reflects the core principle of UGT that users, in this case journalists, actively seek platforms that meet their professional needs (Katz et al., 1973, p. 510).

Variations observed in platform usage and responses highlight how journalists interpret and respond to changes based on their individual contexts. While some viewed X as entirely unusable and chose to leave, others continued to find value in its affordances. This supports Norman's (1988, p. 145) argument that perceived affordances are subjective and shaped by user interpretation and reinforces Nenadić's (2020, p. 24) observation that journalists are not a homogenous group and do not respond uniformly to technological or platform shifts. Further, ethical and social factors significantly influenced journalists' platform choices, supporting Katz et al.'s (1974, p. 517) argument that media use is shaped by both individual needs and wider social contexts. The move by environmental journalists to Bluesky highlights how professional values and normative expectations can shape engagement, illustrating Claesson's (2024, p. 2618) observation of an ongoing institutional "normative reflection" on the evolving and decentralised role of X in journalism post-takeover. Overall, the findings indicate that platform use is driven by a combination of personal principles, professional standards, and technological affordances.

In accounting for the individual factors that shaped journalists' decisions to stay on or leave the platform, many of the previously cited studies about X accurately anticipate their responses. While motives for staying, leaving, or adapting varied, the ability to act on them often interacted with a journalist's level of reliance on the platform, which was closely linked to their job specialisation, age, and employment status. Most journalists who remained on X had strong news construction needs, often covering areas such as current affairs or business that still benefit from the platform's immediacy-related affordances. This supports research showing that platform choice is shaped by a journalist's role and specialisation (Russell, 2015, p. 198) and reflects X's ongoing presence in public discourse, consistent with Hermida's (2010, p. 1) concept of 'ambient journalism,' where platforms like X enable continuous awareness and dissemination of news. However, this concept may have been challenged by algorithmic changes that reduced the relevance of journalists' personalised feeds, causing them to use these feeds less frequently and more deliberately, instead relying more on X's search engines and hashtag tools rather than actively monitoring their feeds. Consequently, these journalists have been affected by changes to platform affordances, with their core news construction needs still partially met but made more difficult by the shifting platform culture.

In contrast, journalists in opinion writing, climate reporting, and non-print formats like radio were more affected by the takeover because their work often depends on fast, credible information, verification, branding, and audience engagement, all practices disrupted by the platform's changes.

Journalists covering social issues, including migration and environmental topics, reported that the takeover disrupted their ability to reach audiences due to reduced amplification and loss of traction. It was noted that migration reporters faced high levels of hostility when sharing their work. These challenges weakened their credibility and visibility on the platform, increasing their sensitivity to its changes and leading many to leave X.

Most freelance journalists in the sample had left the platform, as they had the liberty to do so without organisational expectations and were heavily affected by X's declining affordances for visibility, association, and networking, particularly the loss of blue-tick verification. This supports previous research showing that freelancers rely more on branding and audience-building features for visibility and promotion (Temmerman et al., 2013, p. 13). Moreover, this variation between freelancers and staff journalists in this study supports Lu et al.'s (2025, p. 568) finding that organisational structures influence social media use through expectations and explicit policies. For example, one editor noted that while their organisation previously encouraged journalists to build their personal brand on the platform, this is no longer the case due to increased abuse and a stronger duty of care towards staff.

Younger or early-career journalists reported greater dependence on X for visibility and networking (Hedman, 2020, p. 675) but were more experimental with different platforms, with some suggesting X is becoming less relevant for this. In contrast, more experienced journalists typically expressed greater flexibility and freedom to disengage, often relying on their established professional networks and returning to more traditional methods of finding and verifying sources. Overall, journalists in this study responded to platform changes in diverse and overlapping ways, reflecting their varied needs, roles, and contexts. This supports the idea that UGT remains a robust framework for exploring how users' media needs are gratified, and aligns with DAT, which highlights the importance of platform design and affordances alongside individual agency and contextual influence. It also aligns with Madianou's (2013, p. 170) view that platforms function holistically within broader communicative environments in today's polymedia ecosystem. Journalist's decisions to stay, leave, or adapt following the X's takeover were shaped not only by functionality but also by ethics, values, professional pressures, and structural constraints, all interacting in complex ways.

5.2 Academic and Societal Implications and Future Research Suggestions

This study contributes to a limited but growing body of research on the impacts of Musk's still relatively recent takeover of X on journalistic practices, some of which have led journalists to leave a platform once deeply embedded in their routines. It explored how these changes have shaped journalistic work, including adaptation, platform migration, and shifts in sourcing and branding practices. More broadly, the study highlights how journalists must navigate an unstable and rapidly evolving digital environment, continually adjusting their methods to meet professional demands.

Many described changing how they source and verify information- for example, by turning to platforms like LinkedIn or private messaging apps, relying more on established contacts, and increasing manual fact-checking to maintain credibility amid reduced visibility and algorithmic changes on X. Journalists also reported sharing their work on alternative platforms like Bluesky, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Substack to reach more relevant target audiences and engage in more credible, respectful discourse. In response to X's increasingly hostile environment, some journalists must take further steps to ensure information credibility and protect editors and staff.

Furthermore, the findings also illustrate the relationship between shifting affordances and journalists' media choices, linking UGT to behaviours like platform swinging. While alternatives such as Bluesky are garnering interest, they still lack the full affordances, audience base and professional value that X once offered. Many journalists expressed either hope for X's return to earlier norms or optimism that alternatives would eventually mature. This underscores the volatility of the digital spaces that journalists rely on and highlights the need for more research and new media infrastructures that can support safer and more equitable engagement.

The findings raise important questions about platform accountability, ethical responsibility, and the unequal impacts of shifting dynamics, especially for women, freelancers, and marginalised journalists. They also highlight concerns about governance, rising hostility, and insufficient protections. This study builds on and extends Claesson (2024, p. 2619) and Wheatley (2023, p. 11), who explored the post-takeover media environment's effects on journalistic practices.

More specifically, this study responds to Claesson's (2024, p. 2619) call for nuanced comparisons between journalists who stayed on X, those who left, and those who migrated to other platforms. It shows how journalists navigated platform changes based on their role, specialisation, and reliance on X, and engages with Claesson's (2024, p. 2620) concept of "strategic disconnection," where journalists reduce their presence due to discomfort or ethical concerns. In contrast, some journalists in this study remained engaged as an act of symbolic resistance to platform governance and as a strategic way to monitor conduct despite these tensions. This may have important implications for journalistic identity and practice and warrants further research.

Another key observation that merits future research concerns the platform's reported political dynamics and possible algorithmic bias. One right-leaning journalist reported increased traction post-takeover, echoing Ye et al.'s (2024, p. 1) study. However, this singular account should not be generalised. Future research could benefit from a purposively politically varied sample to examine how ideological alignment affects visibility and engagement. Studying such potential partisan amplification and its effects on journalism are important, as X's architecture has been shown to promote in-group loyalty and limit open debate (Van Raemdonck et al., 2025, p. 1), restricting access to diverse sources and amplifying certain types of work. This is of critical societal relevance to the news ecosystem and consumers, as potential bias in journalist content on a major platform could

influence the diversity and reliability of information, affecting public trust and the health of democratic discourse.

Beyond political and professional shifts, the study highlights how journalism communities and identity practices are adapting to changes on X. Several interviewees commented on the environmental journalism community's migration away from the platform to Bluesky. This observation is similar to findings by Wang et al. (2024, p. 1), who explored the failed transition of academics to Mastodon and highlighted the difficulty of sustaining professional communities on decentralised platforms. Future research could examine whether the environmental journalism community has managed a more successful transition and what factors influence such shifts.

This thesis also contributes to existing literature on 'brand journalism'. As Molyneux et. al (2017, p. 197) define, brand journalism involves building and promoting a journalist's identity through relationships. While earlier studies showed that blending personal and professional identities was common, the findings here suggest a shift away from this trend due to growing hostility on the platform, which has made journalists reluctant to share personal content. Many are choosing platforms like LinkedIn, Bluesky, and Substack to supplement such branding and dissemination needs. Given the disrupted affordances and growing hostility on X, further research is needed to examine how brand journalism practices are evolving across platforms.

Lastly, as previously addressed, this research builds on Wheatley's (2023, p. 11) study of Irish female journalists, who face increasing hostility, hesitate to share their work, and have become more cautious in their engagement practices. Several participants in this study similarly commented on the lack of organisational or national-level protections and coordinated guidelines, particularly from media organisations or regulatory bodies such as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in Ireland. Therefore, a key recommendation from this study is that future research should examine how institutions can take a more active role and contribute to the development of holistic guidelines, especially around practices such as employer tagging or disseminating content without a journalist's consent.

In essence, this research contributes to broader debates around journalism's relationship with digital platforms. It points to the urgent need for safer online spaces, stronger protections for journalists, and greater platform accountability. As platform conditions continue to shift, journalists are forced to adapt in real-time, making complex choices about where and how to work. Ensuring that these choices do not come at the cost of key professional needs, safety, ethics, or public trust is a challenge that demands immediate attention.

5.3 Limitations

While this study made extensive efforts to ensure sample diversity, credibility, validity, and reliability throughout the research process, several limitations should be acknowledged, particularly in relation to time, sampling, and geographical scope.

Due to the study's qualitative nature and relatively small sample size, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to all journalists. Rather, they can offer rich and in-depth insights into a specific moment of platform transition. Moreover, as some participants were recruited on a voluntary basis through LinkedIn, there may also have been a risk of self-selection bias and limited generalisability, where those with particularly strong views or more negative experiences of the platform may have been more inclined to take part (Popovic & Huecker, 2023, para. 20).

In terms of geographical scope, participants were based in Ireland. As such, the findings may reflect region-specific experiences and may not fully capture platform dynamics in other national or cultural contexts. Moreover, given the fast-changing nature of social media, the data represents a snapshot in time and may not reflect future developments or long-term trends, but it still provides valuable insights into how journalists navigate shifting work environments.

A further limitation relates to the sample's political alignment. Only one journalist in the sample explicitly identified as right-leaning, which limited the study's ability to explore how political orientation may influence journalists' perceptions or experiences on X. Future studies would benefit from a more politically diverse sample to better capture a fuller spectrum of perspectives.

Finally, one deviant case in the data challenged the researcher's assumption that the changes journalists experienced were solely due to Musk's acquisition of X. While most participants linked platform shifts to the post-takeover period, one journalist noted similar patterns, particularly regarding a decline in respectful discourse and growing politicisation, emerging on the platform from as early as 2018. They attributed these changes to broader social developments, such as increasing polarisation in public discourse, the Trump presidency, and the pandemic. This suggests that some effects observed in this study may result from overlapping societal and political factors rather than the takeover alone. Future research, ideally longitudinal and combining qualitative and computational methods, should take these wider influences into account when examining platform transitions.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 1: Overview of Journalists Included in the Sample						
Label:	**Gender**	**Employment Type**	**Geographical scope**	**Experience Level**	**Role**	**Specialisation**	**Active on X?**
J1	Female	Employed	National	Entry-mid level	Multimedia news reporter	News	Yes
J2	Female	Employed	Regional, Dublin	Entry-mid level	Audience editor	News	Yes
J3	Female	Self-Employed	National	Senior	Communications specialist and freelance journalist (print and radio)	Politics, current affairs, business	Yes
J4	Female	Independent	Regional (North-West of Ireland)	Experienced	Freelance print and radio journalist	Crime, news, politics	No
J5	Female	Independent	National	Entry level	Freelance opinion writer, photojournalist	Environment, social issues	No
J6	Male	Independent	National	Experienced	Communications specialist and freelance journalist	Investigative, features	No
J7	Male	Employed	National	Entry-mid level	News reporter	Crime/legal	Yes
J8	Female	Employed	National	Senior	Editor (Print and previously radio)	Opinion, Features, Op-Eds	No
J9	Male	Employed	National	Entry-mid level	News headline journalist and freelancer	EU news, features, op-eds, politics	Yes

Appendix 2

Sample Topic Guide		
Section	**Question**	
Introduction (after consent and research purposes)	Could you tell me your age and describe your journalistic experience, e.g. how long you've been working, your role, focus, and whether you work freelance/independent, full-time, for which organisations etc.? Can you tell me about your use and experience of using social media and other online platforms for your work as a journalist?	
Use of X pre-takeover, (UGT, affordances…)	What sorts of professional uses did X previously fulfil for your work? Many journalists use or have used X for their work. How do you think it has played, and continues to play, such an important role for journalists?	
Post-takeover impact (UGT, affordances…)	Since Musk's takeover in 2022, have you noticed any changes in how you use X for your work? Have there been any broader shifts in how journalists engage with the platform?	
	Journalist is still using X	**Journalist has left X**
Motives for staying/leaving	Have you ever considered leaving X or using it less? Why/why not?	What were the key factors that influenced your decision to leave X?
	Why and for which reasons do you think another journalist would leave X?	Why and for which reasons do you think another journalist would remain on X?

Accounting for variations in usage and impact	Do you think all journalists have the same level of reliance on X in the same way, or do factors influence their use of it? Have you noticed any patterns in which types of journalists tend to stay on or leave X?	Do you think all journalists have the same level of reliance on X in the same way, or do factors influence their use of it? Have you noticed any patterns in which types of journalists tend to stay on or leave X?
	Do you think that the takeover has affected all journalists in the same ways?	Do you think that the takeover has affected all journalists in the same ways?
Responses (UGT, Affordances…)	Do you use or have you considered using alternatives to X? If so, which ones? and how do they compare to X in terms of benefits, challenges, and helpful features for your work? Many journalists have left the platform for various reasons since the takeover. What would you say are the main advantages/disadvantages of remaining on X today as a journalist?	Do you use alternatives to X? Which ones? and how do they compare to X in terms of benefits and challenges for your work? Do you feel that not using X creates any gaps in your working needs, practices and or routines? If so, do other platforms help fill those gaps, and in what ways do they fall short?
External influences	Do you ever feel pressured or influenced by social, industry, or personal factors/trends to leave X and or explore alternatives?	Did you ever feel pressured or influenced by social, industry, or personal factors to leave X?

	Does your organisation have a policy surrounding the use or non-usage of X?	Does your organisation have a policy surrounding the use or non-usage of X?
Wrap-Up and Reflections	What do you think is the future of X for journalists in the future? Is there anything else you would like to add about how X's changes have affected your work as a journalist?	What do you think is the future of X for journalists in the future? Is there anything else you would like to add about how X's changes have affected your work as a journalist?

Appendix 3

Table 2: Overview of Code Groups and Clusters			
Code Group:	**Code Cluster**	**Number of Sub-Codes (N)**	**Total Segments (n)**
Group 1	General Impact	5	144
	Impact of Leaving X	6	53
	Impact of Staying on X	8	133
	Platform Changes	20	206
	Response	11	107
Group 2	Factors Shaping Response	8	136
	Motives for Leaving	8	47
	Motives for Staying	10	144

Appendix 4

Code Book				
Theme	**Sub-theme**	**Code Cluster**	**Codes**	**Example Quote**
Perceived Changes in Platform Functionality		Decline in platform value for profession	Perceived importance of X (past), platform changes, Impact, Dilemma to engage with or disengage with, lamenting old platform	"The peak, you know, the Golden Age of Twitter is definitely gone"
Initial Behavioural Responses to Platform Change		Adaptation in usage of changed platform:	Editorial censorship, migration to alternative platforms, hiring more editors platform swinging, reduced willingness to share work, continued usage and need despite issues, deactivating vs fully deleting, decline in usage, deletion	"But, like, you know, yeah, I'd say that everyone's just kind of changing their behaviour [...] journalists also gave a little glimpse of their own personalised as well as professional life but now people kind of are afraid from doing that"
To Be on X or Not to Be: Negotiating Platform	Remaining on X: Risk and Reward	Motives to stay:	Continued preference for X affordances, continued presence of industry and audience on X, exposure to	"I still feel like the benefits outweigh the cons, you know,

Presence and Its Consequences for Journalists			diverse opinions as journalistic duty, refusal to leave as resistance, reliance despite sentiment, reluctance to leave to monitor platform conduct, staying due to lack of awareness/indifference, benefits outweigh the cons	it's a good way of getting my work out there and it's a good way of finding people and information"
		Impact of staying:	Challenge of sifting through irrelevant content, decreased traction, difficulty in networking, increased content moderation on journalists, increased traction, increasingly hostile and toxic platform culture	"Largely that's becoming more and more of the same of a very manipulated toxic area that I don't feel I can get anything of value from"

	Stepping Away from X: Ethical and Practical Considerations	Reasons to leave:	Benefits outweigh the cons, industry pressure to leave X, lack of want of association, organisational duty of care, ownership, practical, social pressure to X, ethical	"I'm off it partly because I didn't really didn't feel the need for it anymore, but actually mostly for ethical reasons"
		Impacts of leaving:	Leaving decreased traction, increased credibility on other platforms, limitations or loss on other platforms compared to X, loss of access to political sources and updates, meeting needs in a more positive environment, switching costs and extra efforts	"I'm prepared to take a backward step. I'm starting from scratch on Bluesky, I have maybe two followers, I am back to square one"
Differentiated Effects of the Takeover Across Different Journalists		Unequal impacts:	Women sharing work less, race, politics, specialisation, marginalised, gendered abuse, ageism	"The younger women, if they so much as dare hint that they might have a bit more of a progressive and a liberal take on things, they get absolutely lambasted"
"Some People	Age and Career	Factors	Age and career stage, local	"There's people

Can't Afford to Leave the Platform": How Journalists' Professional Circumstances and Needs Shape Their Response to a Changing X	Stage	shaping response	vs national, following, freelance, job specialisation and role, lack of usage and reliance, medium, organisational influence, political alignment, tabloids vs broadsheets	who can't afford not to be on X"
	Journalistic Specialisation, Role and Medium			
	Freelance vs Staff: The Role of Organisational Influence			