Content Creators and Journalists: Redefining News and Credibility in the Digital Age

Edited by Summer Harlow

Part 1: What Digital Content Creators and Journalists Can Learn from Each Other

1. The blurred lines between content creators and journalists: Challenges and opportunities

Summer Harlow

Hugo Travers, a digital content creator known for his news channel Hugo Decrypte, speaks at the 25th International Symposium on Online Journalism in Austin, Texas. He also participated in a roundtable discussion that brought together journalists and creators. Photo by Patricia Lim.

When Hugo Travers started posting interviews on YouTube, journalists often dismissed him as "just" an influencer, or "just" a content creator. By no means was he a journalist, they said. Over the years, though, his audience grew and his influence deepened — he interviewed French President Emmanuel Macron and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as well as stars like Timothée Chalamet and Zendaya. By 2024, his channel "HugoDécrypte" boasted more than 14 million followers across platforms and employed a team of 25.

Journalists' perceptions of him began to change.

"Now the media is saying, 'oh, you have such a big number of followers, and you have a team of journalists, so now, okay, we can say you're a journalist,' even though my content didn't change," Travers said. "I mean, it's more professional; we've got better video stuff, but it's still the same content."

Travers' videos rack up more than 235 million monthly views on TikTok and YouTube, and his Instagram account alone has roughly twice as many followers as the French newspaper of

record, *Le Monde*. And while he has a master's degree in communications and a mission to make news accessible and engaging for French youth, the Forbes 30 Under 30 awardee and one of GQ's 2023 men of the year considers himself more of a "YouTuber" than a journalist per se. On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is a straight-up professional journalist, and 10 is a full-on digital content creator or "influencer," he places himself somewhere in the middle. But knowing how to label his professional identity is no easy task.

"All content creators can be journalists, all journalists can be content creators," he said. "And so it's not like one or the other. And you can be both at the same time, I believe, if you follow certain rules of journalism and at the same time, create content online. So that's what makes it difficult."

Travers' hesitation to fully identify as a journalist or content creator —he doesn't like the term "influencer" because he said it has a negative connotation — illustrates just one of the challenges that come with this evolving digital media landscape and the introduction of new actors contesting traditional ways of doing journalism and reaching news audiences. Travers, like the other participants at an April 2024 all-day roundtable discussion organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas in collaboration with UNESCO, is a "newsfluencer," working at the intersection of journalism and digital content creation.

That roundtable discussion, featuring eight participants from Colombia, Ghana, Finland, France, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States, explored the dynamics of blending professional, ethical journalism with digital content creation, highlighting the potential for collaborations that could help create a more informed, media literate, and engaged society. This chapter encapsulates the essence of that roundtable discussion held in Austin, Texas, offering insights and lessons learned that could prove valuable for media and communication professionals worldwide.

Roles and responsibilities

Overall, the roundtable participants seemed to view journalists as having more stringent ethical and professional responsibilities, while content creators were seen as having more freedom that allowed them to cover news and reach audiences in ways that traditional journalists can't.

"Journalists operate in a more rigid condition than the content creators, and it isn't only about ethics, but also, newsrooms have their news styles or what they call house style," said Manasseh Azure, the founding editor in chief of *The Fourth Estate*, a nonprofit, public interest and investigative journalism project of the Media Foundation for West Africa in Ghana.

The flexibility content creators have is what allows them to "fill the gaps left by traditional journalists," Azure said. "There are a lot of things we [journalists] cannot do, which they [creators] do. Sometimes we are happy they are doing it because we are constrained, so they fill a very important gap. So I believe from the perspective of the audience or those who consume the content, they have a special role."

Similarly, Hannah Ajakaiye, who leads Nigeria's *FactsMatterNG*, an initiative of the International Center for Journalists that promotes information integrity by making facts go viral, said, "I think digital content creators can reach audiences in a less formal way. So that is something that often journalists can't do. And if you are printing news in a media landscape where there is less trust in established media platforms, they kind of fill that gap by providing information to people in languages that they can understand."

Sam Ellis, the creator and showrunner of Search Party, an independent video journalism project on YouTube that investigates and decodes news around geopolitics and global sports, noted that being on social media allows creators to reach niche audiences that large media outlets often ignore: "What's cool about being independent is that you can create a channel dedicated to things that otherwise a big media organization wouldn't...be interested in."

While content creators may have more flexibility, this can lead to concerns about accuracy and professionalism. Azure emphasized the importance of trustworthiness for content creators: "If content creators really want to get this kind of power, authority, they need to also think about how trustworthy they are, and not only how many people they are able to reach."

The creators in the roundtable said they recognized the importance of building trust and credibility to be taken seriously on important topics.

Importantly, the flexibility creators might have doesn't mean they can't do journalism, said Salla-Rosa Leinonen, producer and writer working for the Finnish Public Broadcaster Yle, and co-instructor for the Knight Center and UNESCO online course "Digital Content Creators and Journalists: How To Be a Trusted Voice Online."

"Journalism can be less formally presented," she said. "I think it's not impossible to be more relaxed and still keep the guidelines and all the rules in place."

Dylan Page, better known as the U.K.'s News Daddy for his TikTok channel that aggregates news for roughly 13 million followers, said the rules, ethics, and codes that bind journalists are not much different than those creators must adhere to if they want to build a successful business.

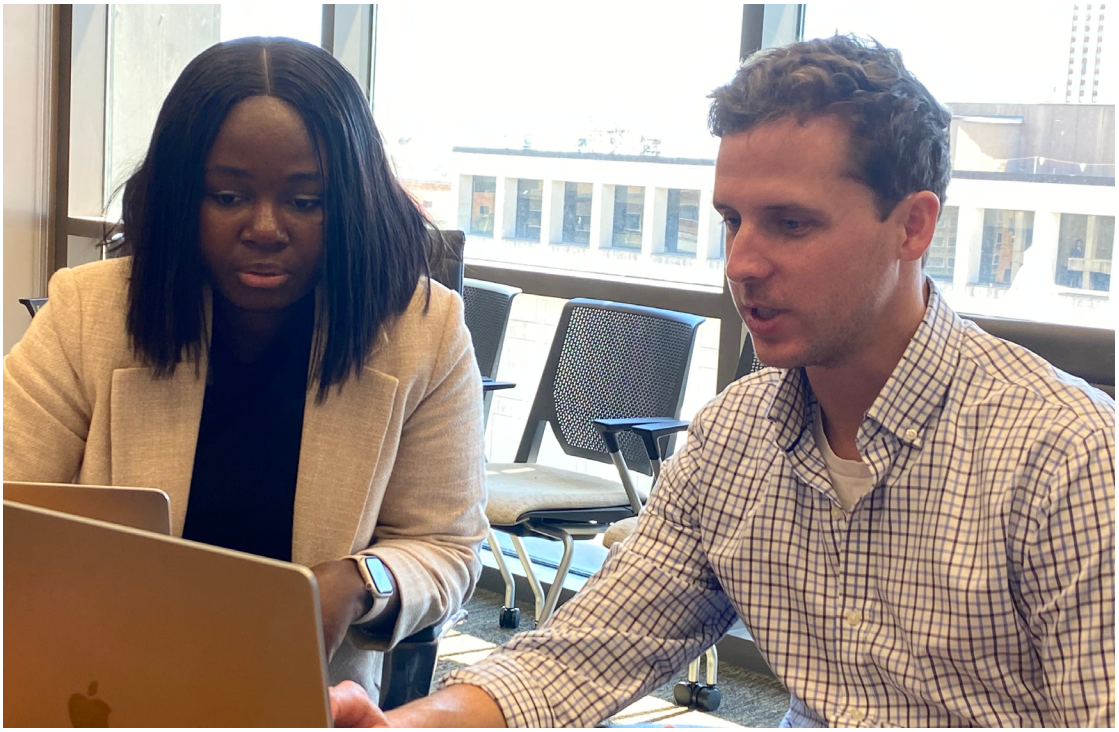
"If you have a customer, the viewer, and they watch one of your videos and you got these things wrong and you continuously, continually get those things wrong, you're not going to be able to make it as a business," he said. "And so the audience that you have, they're, I think, a determining factor of success in how large you are... and how many years you can spend doing that while still growing and being successful. So yeah, I can if I wanted to, I can go on and say anything I want, but I'll lose my audience and it goes completely against everything that I want to do. So to be successful as a content creator in the new news space, to be successful is built in to be correct, factual, because otherwise you're not going to do it for very long. You can say whatever, but you know, it works against you."

Ellis noted that when thinking about roles and responsibilities, it's important to distinguish between types of content creators, and ultimately most creators aim to entertain, even if they're providing news and information.

"Journalists have always been content creators," he said. "I view journalism as an action…based on a set of rules and responsibilities. So a content creator can do journalism, but they also can not do journalism. I kept thinking of Emma Chamberlain, she's a vlogger. She's a content creator. She doesn't really have a responsibility to her audience. She could wake up and decide one day to do a fake play or something; that's totally fine with content creators. Journalists have this set of rules that they have to, or should, follow, and that's kind of the difference."

Travers said he didn't see content creators as fulfilling any particular societal role in the same way journalists do.

"Loads of content creators do funny, useful, interesting stuff," he said. "I think content creator itself, it's more like a technique or a way of doing something than a mission…If you think of 'role' as a mission, well, a content creator… can be a journalist, but also a content creator. So I feel like it's more like a way of doing something than a mission or specific role."



Sam Ellis and Hannah Ajakaiye pair up to discuss similarities and differences in their work during the Austin, Texas, roundtable that brought together digital content creators and journalists. Photo by Summer Harlow.

Ethics

Roundtable participants' understandings of roles and responsibilities intertwined with a discussion of ethical standards and trust. Participants saw journalists as driven, ideally, by a public service mission to inform the public, hold power to account, and provide accurate, fair, and balanced reporting. Their work is guided by established ethical and professional standards that emphasize impartiality, accuracy, and accountability. Journalists adhere to rigorous fact-checking processes and editorial oversight to ensure the accuracy and credibility of their content. They are expected to present multiple perspectives and avoid conflicts of interest.

In contrast, participants said digital content creators often focus on personal branding, entertainment, and engagement with their audience. Their content is typically more subjective, reflecting personal opinions or experiences, and may prioritize relatability and engagement over traditional journalistic notions of objectivity. Their content also often blends personal insights with information, so that they don't necessarily follow the same rigorous standards as journalists. While some creators strive for accuracy, the emphasis is more on personal connection and authenticity rather than strict adherence to journalistic standards. While audiences often expect creators to be transparent, especially when it comes to sponsorships and partnerships, the lines can be blurred, and the level of disclosure may vary significantly among influencers.

For Leinonen, one of the biggest ethical questions is knowing from where content creators derive their income.

"So, who is funding it? Are you doing sponsorships? Where do you get your money from?" she asked. "I think that has a big impact on the content itself."

As much as funding, motives behind why they became a creator in the first place can dictate ethics and content, Azure said.

"There's some who decide that, well, I want to entertain. So they go into it," he said. "There are some [who are] profit-oriented. They are going into content creation to make profit, and that is their motive. There are some who are political that are going to produce content to favor this political party or that. There are others who are also into advocacy and social justice…And there are others that, for me, all that they do is to spread propaganda and disinformation. So I think what got them into content creation can greatly determine what they do and how they do it."

Audiences

Transparency, participants agreed, was key to building trust and credibility.

"Traditional media is often seen as sort of a black box," Travers said. "We had, during the presidential election, a weekly program on Twitch where we would just put a camera in the newsroom. I would just launch a live Twitch and, like, answer people's questions and like, bring in journalists on scene, and be like, okay, we've got this candidate, and like, there's a whole debate about the way to cover this news topic, how should we do it? Do you feel like the way we've been doing it is right or wrong? And also, it's a way for us to show that we're not perfect…We're trying to find the best way possible. But, I mean, we're not sure we've got the best way possible. So I feel like this sort of open transparency helps a lot."

Travers and his team even go so far as to let audiences know why certain stories might not have been covered, even if it's just because they ran out of time and will get to it later–something you'd never see a TV news station do, he said.

Part of being transparent also means being open about who you are, roundtable participants said.

Audiences have to be able to see you in the content, Page said, if you want them to trust you.

"You want to be able to create content that you find enjoyable, and the end result of that will be good content, and they [audiences] will love it," he said. "Because if you talk about a current piece of news or a topic or whatever that you're really interested in, that changes it entirely for your audience."

Similarly, Ellis said, "Journalists do need to show more of themselves. When I was at Vox, I did not appear on camera… You quickly learn that as an independent channel on YouTube, they have to see you. And so you don't need to be the star, the host of the show, but like, now, I appear at the end. Now I appear in the middle, like around the edges, kind of. It does make a big difference. It's almost mandatory, I think, now."

Being direct with audiences and "de-jargonizing" content also goes a long way, participants said.

Journalists are "too technical," Azure said, which means audiences tend to tune them out. "So I think what the content creators do better is to dejargonize it, or simplify it, so that the average person understands," he said.

Accessibility doesn't mean having to "dumb down" the content, participants said, and being engaging is not the same as having to be funny. Rather, creators bring emotion into what they do, and that appeals to audiences.

Tone, personality, and identity are key, said María Paulina Baena, co-creator of Colombian YouTube channel La Pulla, a political, satirical, and opinion journalism program owned by national newspaper El Espectador. Creators talk to their audiences like they would to their friends or family, and journalists need to learn to do that, too, she said: "A 130-year-old newspaper is like a grandfather that doesn't connect with young people. So the question is, how can you make something cool about journalism the way YouTubers do?

Amanda Zamora, co-founder and former publisher of The 19th, a nonprofit newsroom focused on gender and politics in the U.S., highlighted the importance of actively engaging with audiences.

"My sort of rule of thumb is if you ask your audience a question, will they actually answer you?" she said. "It's a good kind of barometer because if you've done enough of the legwork of listening to them and being responsive to their needs, that you're asking relevant questions and that they feel inclined to take the time to respond or offer something in return, I think it's a good indication that you have a more active, engaged relationship versus a transactional one."

Overall, most participants indicated that they believed creators' emphasis on transparency, personalization, and engagement with audiences gave them more trust than what's found in legacy news media.

"When you have traditional media in an authoritarian regime, every person knows that legacy media is captured," Azure said. "Then, you have content creators being more believable and trustworthy than traditional media. So I also see the media landscape can determine who is trusted more."

In the U.S., Zamora said, she thinks creators have a higher "baseline" of trust than traditional media.

Page, though, disagreed, arguing that for major news, if a content creator broke the story, most people wouldn't fully believe it until they saw it reported on the BBC, for example.

"I think a lot of people can look at content creators and be like, 'you know, there's this distrust in legacy media and content creators have trust because they're personable.' But, when push comes to shove, the legacy media always almost subconsciously has that authority still," he said.

Journalists and digital content creators from around the world came to Austin, Texas, for a roundtable discussion as part of a Knight Center and UNESCO project to better understand the changing digital media environment. Photo courtesy of UNESCO.

Fact-checking

Age, platform, and magnitude of the story also come into play, with younger audiences trusting creators on Instagram more than Fox News in the U.S., for example, participants said. But just as trust in legacy news outlets can be misplaced, so, too, can trust in creators. As Ajakaiye pointed out, creators spread a lot of mis- and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preliminary findings from a recent UNESCO survey of 500 content creators from 45 countries suggested about 62% of respondents reported not checking the accuracy of content before sharing it with their audience.

It's just this lack of fact-checking that concerned Ajakaiye, who worked to try and expand the audience for verified information by partnering with influential people — whether celebrities or digital content creators — to deliver fact-checked information.

It's important to look at your own media landscape, and "reach audiences that are underserved by the mainstream media platforms," Ajakaiye said. "Audiences are underserved by fact-

checking content and media literacy. And so we have to be much more deliberate about how we push this content so that it gets to people who can use it."

Part of the problem, Ajakaiye added, is that journalists and media organizations that fact-check information are not necessarily on TikTok or other spaces where young people are, which means there's a vacuum of verified information.

Travers suggested that content creators need to know how to fact-check in order to "create a bridge" to the people on social media who aren't necessarily following the news.

"I feel like our responsibility, whether as journalists or content creators, is not just fact-checking, it's also just informing where those things are happening," he said. "So, making sure that those people on social media have reliable sources they can turn to and they can trust, I think that's most important... Disinformation or misinformation is not always fake news as we hear it, like politicians toying with things to spread fake news. It's often, at least in France, it's very often just rumors, or people asking themselves questions, and that's fine, that's something that's human. Sometimes we see something we think is true, and then, it ends up not being true. And so I think that's something as a journalist or as a media team, you have to be careful to address it, not in a condescending way. People have questions, and it doesn't mean they're conspiracy theorists. Sometimes they just have questions... so I think we have to be careful with the way we address them, not be condescending and just try and answer the questions."

Part of fact-checking also means acknowledging and correcting mistakes, Baena said.

"Being honest with your audience is key," she said.

Content creators have to be careful, though, because they can't always just delete content, since that can raise red flags for audiences and hurt trust, participants said.

"You don't want to make a mistake, but you live through it, you correct it, you're transparent about it...The best worst option sometimes is just leaving it up and being transparent about it," Ellis said, adding that he tries to be transparent that just because he posts a video doesn't mean the story is complete.

Travers gave the example of a time when he and his team had to decide whether to delete a video about a political candidate because it neglected to mention some of the most important issues his audience was interested in.

"Whether it's a content creator, or me, or a journalist, you have to try and push your ego aside, and if you fail in something, you have to assume that there was an error on that thing. And if you have to change something, you change it," he said. "We were like, should we delete this video and if you delete it, people would be saying like, 'that's not professional.' Like, 'what are you doing?' 'Why are you deleting it?' We deleted the video. We published a story saying, 'we saw your comments, we feel like it's good feedback, like it's something that's useful. And we should put it in this content. So we'll just republish the video.'..Overall, like 99% of the comments when we said we were doing this were super positive, like, 'thanks for taking the feedback. Thanks for

just listening to what matters to us.' And so I feel often, transparency, admitting those things, is often seen as a risk, it's unprofessional. But I think it's the other way around. We should try and put this ego aside and assume errors and have this sort of dialogue."

Ultimately, participants said, whether you're a content creator or journalist, storytelling should be fact-based, and if you want audiences to engage, the information needs to be relevant to their lives.

Format of the story, length of videos, and algorithms all play a part in whether content will reach audiences, but there's no magic formula to guarantee success, they said.

"My team has this saying, that we should make things sexy," Travers said. "If we believe this international topic is super important, we'll try and make it interesting for young people following us. And at the same time, some things are super popular online and like, okay, if that's a popular thing, as you said, we should probably talk about it, but let's make it interesting and make it valuable for people."

Similarly, Leinonen said, "It's very important to talk about things that actually are affecting these young people's lives, or what they should know. It can be a really boring thing, in a way, on paper, but if it's about how it's actually affecting their lives, I think that's kind of the key."

And importantly, Baena said, success is not the same as perfection.

"You should be resourceful, and you don't have to be sophisticated in order to deliver a good message," she said. "That's something I think that blocks a lot of journalists and content creators, like you have to have this huge media outlet or this huge camera or a big team but perfect things are enemies of good things. "

Despite the need for more social media literacy among journalists and creators, participants saw the possibility of innovation as immense. And, as the roundtable concluded, participants expressed optimism about the future of journalism and digital content creation, and the ability of both to adapt to the digital age while maintaining journalistic integrity and promoting media and information literacy.

"Legacy media outlets usually don't have the skills to do social media content creation, like influencers/content creators would," Leinonen said. "And there's kind-of somehow a need to push them down in a way. But we need to note what they're doing and learn from it...But I think there's also some people who are scared because they can't really understand what is happening on social platforms, [so] then they think that, 'oh, we don't care about that, that's not journalism.' But I think that, as journalists, we can ... understand that we work on the same platforms and we...can't continue denying the impact."

Page said he hoped more content creators –and journalists–could understand and respect what the other does, noting that there need to be more trained journalists, and not just content creators doing news, on social media.

"It's important for journalists to become better content creators," he said.

The quality of information online depends on it.

2. Journalists and influencers united: The experience of the Youth Multimedia Room at #WPFD2024

Carolina de Assis

Moderator Adeline Hulin (left) from UNESCO leads a panel on climate awareness and literacy on social media during the World Press Freedom Conference in May 2024 in Santiago, Chile. The panel included activists and content creators, many of whom participated in the Youth Multimedia Room. Panelists left-to-right: Paulo Galvão (Brazil), Charlotte Brum Bezié (Mexico), Kassy Cho (UK), Francisco Vera (Colombia), and Selinä Nera (Finland). Photo by Arly Faundes B.

Five years ago — even one year ago — the idea that TikTok influencers would work alongside professional journalists to cover the environmental crisis might have seemed far-fetched. But not anymore. In May 2024, the World Press Freedom Day Conference in Santiago, Chile, became the laboratory for a groundbreaking experiment that could reshape the future of environmental reporting.

"It's a really interesting paradigm shift," said Charlotte Brum Bezié, known to her 880,000 TikTok and Instagram followers as @noseaswaste. Little did she know that her presence at the 31st World Press Freedom Day Conference would be part of a revolutionary approach to information dissemination.

The afternoon of May 2, 2024, an eclectic group of youth from around the world gathered at Santiago's Pontifical Catholic University for a half-day of training to prepare them for their participation in the "Youth Multimedia Room." This wasn't your typical newsroom. Journalists rubbed shoulders with climate activists, while students exchanged ideas with social media influencers, or digital content creators. Their mission was to cover a high-level United Nations conference in ways never attempted before.

But why this unusual collaboration? In an era when traditional news outlets struggle to capture the attention of younger audiences, UNESCO and the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas posed a daring question: Could the synergy between journalists and digital

content creators revolutionize environmental reporting? Would the rigorous fact-checking standards of journalism clash with the engaging, personal style of influencers? Could these diverse communicators find common ground in their quest to inform the public about pressing environmental issues?

Over the next two days, a hybrid kind of multimedia storytelling emerged — one that blended the depth of traditional, fact-checked journalism with the reach and appeal of social media. But it wasn't all smooth sailing. There were sometimes frustrations and confusion over roles. Different styles of work and communication clashed and reconciled during the two days of activities in the youth newsroom. In the end, the understanding prevailed that journalists and influencers gain much more from collaboration than from competition — and these benefits extend to the audiences they serve.

This chapter delves into the challenges, triumphs, and unexpected lessons from this experimental newsroom. It explores the blurred lines between journalism and digital content creation, and questions how, in the face of global environmental crises, can this unlikely alliance help engage a new generation of informed citizens?

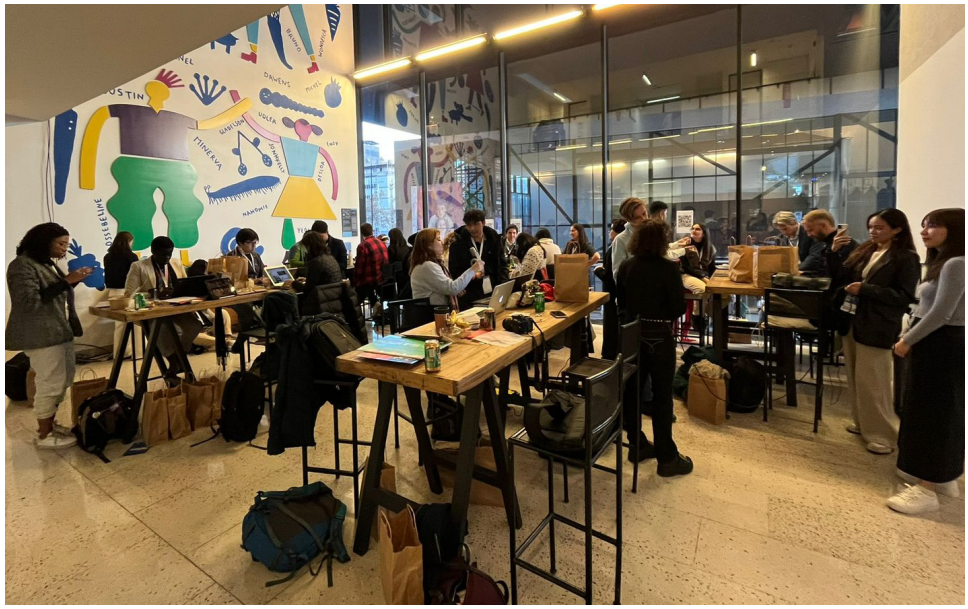
#WPFD2024

The 31st World Press Freedom Day Conference — or #WPFD2024 — addressed an urgent question: **how can journalism respond to the environmental crisis?**

The 2024 celebration, held annually since 1994, took place May 3-4 in Santiago, Chile. More than 2,000 people from 116 countries participated in more than 70 panels, lectures and workshops that highlighted the importance of journalism and press freedom in the context of the current global environmental crisis.

Amid the growing importance of digital platforms, for the first time, UNESCO, in collaboration with the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, invited digital content creators —sometimes referred to as influencers — to participate in the coverage of this annual conference. It was an update to the "Youth Newsroom," which UNESCO has organized since 2012 with young journalists and students covering major UN agency events.

The 2024 "Youth Multimedia Room" brought together 27 young communicators, including journalists, influencers, students, and climate activists, and five fact-checkers dedicated to verifying all the material produced in the coverage. The goal was to understand how journalists and digital content creators can work together and what they can learn from each other.



Journalists, student journalists, digital content creators, and activists in the Youth Multimedia Room worked 12-hour days to cover the World Press Freedom Day events in Santiago, Chile. Photo by Arly Faundes B.

A new paradigm

The theme for the 31st World Press Freedom Day Conference was "A press for the planet — Journalism in the face of the Environmental Crisis." The idea was for activists and influencers who produce digital content about the environment and climate change to work alongside journalists.

"Digital journalists, content creators, and activists are having a growing impact on the dissemination of information related to climate and environment, reaching audiences that are diverting from mass media to rely on online creators as their main source of information," UNESCO said on its website.

Bezié, who produces social media content about how to live and consume while generating less waste, called the newsroom experiment a "paradigm shift." "Sometimes, in my prejudices, I can see that they [journalists] don't take the work of content creators seriously, because they are 'influencers.' It's beautiful to know that there is mutual respect and that there is space for everyone," she said.

Bezié, from Mexico, was one of the influencers in the group of young communicators from South and North America, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East who occupied the second floor of the Gabriela Mistral Cultural Center throughout the conference.

They first met the day before the conference at a workshop on misinformation and fact-checking. They learned about post-publication fact-checking methods, fact-checking tools, disinformation using artificial intelligence (AI), and disinformation about climate change.

The training was led by a team of fact-checkers from Lebanon, Jordan, Nigeria, Spain, and Chile, who were responsible for verifying the content produced by the young communicators.

"There are a lot of content creators who, in their day-to-day work, are not used to having their work reviewed by someone else," said Spanish journalist Joselu Zafra, who works at

Maldita.es and was part of the fact-checking team. “I think having professionals do this gives them peace of mind, but we also like being able to participate in their content because it’s something very unusual in what we do as fact-checkers in our daily work.”

A content creator, Zafra pointed out, can be “a figure who motivates a lot of misinformation, who is even capable of contesting very established narratives, facts that are already verified.”

As such, he said, content creators can learn from journalists to report truthful information and defend press freedom.

And journalists can learn from content creators how to pay more attention to their audiences, he said.

“The journalist, in principle, has no obligation to anything other than the public’s right to be informed,” Zafra said. “But he doesn’t have any applications in his day-to-day life to ensure that this is happening. Meanwhile, the content creator puts his effort and work into keeping an eye on whether his audience is doing well and is on the same wavelength as that person. The journalist could learn something from that.”

Content creators or influencers?

During the workshop on the 2nd, the coordinators of the newsroom — Arly Faundes, professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile; Lionel Brossi, professor at the University of Chile; and Summer Harlow, associate director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas — divided the communicators into groups, each with at least one journalist, one student, one influencer, and one activist.

While becoming familiar with each other and finding ways to work together, the young communicators reflected on the roles of journalists and influencers in the circulation of information in the digital environment.

For Elizabeth Sherr, or @lizlivingblue on Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube, digital content creators are people who share information and stories, for educational purposes or not, on social networks.

“As a content creator, I’m taking not just information from my life, but information that I learn online through news and science articles to help translate that in an easier way to understand that uses language that’s not so sciency, and more approachable for a general audience,” said Sherr, who describes herself as an ocean scientist, activist and storyteller.

A difference between digital content creators and journalists, she said, is the freedom that the former have to share their personal impressions in the content they create. “We can be really mad or really happy about a story, whereas journalists might have to hide those emotions sometimes. That’s something that’s cool about having the freedom of expression on social media,” Scherr said.

Shampi Anna, a climate activist from Kenya, also highlighted the role of emotions in the work carried out by digital content creators. She said she believes that journalists could incorporate emotion into their reporting to reach more people.

"Traditional journalism is usually so serious and formal," she said. "There are feelings attached to digital content creation. There are emotions, either happiness, sadness, or whatever the content is about. If journalists would also focus on the emotions of the people they're reporting about, and bring out stories to have feelings like that, I think it would be good."

Brazilian activist Amanda Costa, founder and executive director of Instituto Perifa Sustentável, disseminates information about climate change to her 28,000 followers on Instagram. For her, digital content creator and influencer are two different categories.

"A content creator is a person who studies, who uses information to be able to disseminate it to a larger audience. They have this role of translating information, regardless of the niche," she said. "Not all influencers are content creators. A content creator actually creates content. The influencer is just showing aspects of his life and has no commitment to providing verified information."

Thinking about the role of journalists today is a more complex task, and the precarious nature of information work also affects content creators, Costa said.

"The profession of journalism, which is extremely important, has been saturated. This place, so important to society, is being scrapped. In the past, content production was carried out by journalists, scriptwriters, cameramen, and editors. Today, all of these professions go to one person, who is the content creator, who is also exhausted, anxious, and facing several challenges."

Amanda Costa, a climate activist and content creator who is the founder and executive director of Instituto Perifa Sustentável in Brazil, showed off her press pass to cover World Press Freedom Day events in May 2024 as part of the Youth Multimedia Room. Photo courtesy of Amanda Costa.

Journalists can learn from content creators to be more flexible and spontaneous, Costa said. And content creators can learn from journalists to have more depth.

"It is very important to study, investigate facts, understand the news beyond the headline, beyond the superficiality. From my interaction with journalist friends, I realize that they have a very deep commitment to the truth, while a content creator sometimes shares fake news without realizing it. This care with fact-checking is one of the points that content creators can learn from journalists," she said.

Colombian activist Francisco Vera, who has almost 840,000 followers on his Instagram, Facebook and X profiles, said he uses social media as a "loudspeaker."

"My work is activism more than content creation, and social networks serve as amplifiers for me," he said. "In other words, social networks are not the end, but one of the means, because I also do political advocacy. I have the movement and I have social networks. There are several ways to broadcast a message."

Vera, who at the age of 13 was named by UNICEF as the first young advocate for the environment and climate action for Latin America and the Caribbean, focuses his social media content around climate justice and human rights, especially the rights of children and adolescents to a healthy environment. He highlighted the importance of being careful with the credibility of information shared on social networks.

"Regardless of whether someone is a content creator or a journalist, I believe that it is an ethical responsibility of citizens not to pass on false information or information based on less credible or invented sources," he said. "That's not just what you do as a journalist or me as an activist or any other person, but each person must be responsible for what they share. It is a collective responsibility."

Challenges and lessons

The two days of journalists, influencers, activists, and students reporting alongside each other resulted in 30 articles published on the Youth Multimedia Room's official website, 20 video posts on social media from UNESCO's Media & Information Literacy initiative (@unescomil), a video published on UNESCO's Instagram profile, and at least 50 videos posted on newsroom participants' own social media accounts.

The experience also offered valuable lessons for those who worked across the new communication universes.

"What I learned from digital content creators and what I'm still learning is how to create more engaging content, how to approach the audience, how to engage them better," said Bosnian journalist Haris Buljubasic, host of the AJB Start program on the TV channel Al Jazeera Balkans.

He said he doesn't believe in competition between influencers and journalists. "I don't think that an influencer is more trustworthy than a news outlet, so I don't think that we are competing at all. And, as journalists, we are arrogant enough to think that nobody competes

with us," he joked.

Generally the group had a good working dynamic, but it was still a challenge, Buljubasic said.

"Obviously, the influencer is a bit, you know, out there, trying to be in the center, to be in all the pictures and videos. That's an issue with influencers and content creators. It's about them mostly. They want to be in the center, in the focus, because that's what makes them an influencer. But as I said, they know how to produce engaging content," he said.

Bezié, who is a publicist by training, had never collaborated with journalists until her experience in the multimedia newsroom.

"Something that happens with content creators or influencers is the fact that we give a lot of personal opinions. 'I think this,' 'I think that,' 'this makes me feel happy or sad.' And something I just learned that has grounded me is that journalism is neutral: 'These are the facts. This is what happened,'" she concluded.

She said that at many times it was a "frustrating" process, as she had to adapt her way of working, as she usually does everything alone and had to incorporate the group's contributions. However, this same process made her feel validated by her reporting colleagues.

"Normally, I don't script the videos, I just talk," she said. "This time, I first had to write the script so that the data could be checked by the editor and then it had to go through the fact-checking team. Thus, I felt doubly validated, with the journalistic team and the fact-checking team. I leave with a lot of reflection and a lot of responsibility. Yes, I feel more responsible."

Trinidad Riobó, who was about to graduate in journalism from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, said the experience in the newsroom helped her learn new ways of transmitting information.

"At least for us at the [Pontifical Catholic University], we are taught in a very specific way to transmit the news, perhaps very focused on the media, which is a more traditional way of sharing information," she said. "People read much less, they spend much less time focused on one thing. So I think [journalists] can learn to find new ways to convey information in a more attractive way."

However, unlike Buljubasic, Riobó said she believes that there is competition between journalists and digital content creators. Competition is not necessarily a bad thing, though, she said, since traditional journalism is falling behind.

"Ultimately, traditional media is not up to par, so to speak, with new audiences," she said. "What I consume most is content from content creators. Therefore, I know that it is something very attractive, that we have to adapt, and I think that is why there is competition. But I also think that's a good thing, because it challenges journalists to find new ways of doing this. And I also think that as long as there is still good journalism, content creators will also be challenged to have good content."

An influencer journalist

One of the participants in the Youth Multimedia Room group lives in both worlds with ease and has a lot to say about how journalists and digital content creators can work together and learn from each other.

Kassy Cho, based in Taiwan, describes herself as "a journalist and audience strategist pioneering a social media-first approach to growing young audiences." As audience development editor at BuzzFeed News between 2017 and 2019, she was among those responsible for growing the media outlet's presence on social media.

In 2020, Cho founded *Almost*, an outlet dedicated to covering international news whose main channel is its Instagram profile. *Almost*'s target audience is young women, and all of its reporters are under 30 years of age.

"I consider myself a journalist, first and foremost, but also a digital content creator," Cho said. "Journalism nowadays is not just focused on TV or newspapers. In order to reach young people, we have to be creating digital content on social media platforms. It's not a great idea to separate them. At the end of the day, we're all telling stories and sharing information."

Participants in the Youth Multimedia Room used the Gabriela Mistral Cultural Center in Santiago as their homebase. Photo courtesy of Arly Faundes B.

Cho said she always encourages news organizations and traditional journalists to look away from what other journalists or outlets are doing and pay attention to the content their target audience consumes on social media.

"As journalists, we tend to get into this tunnel vision or echo chamber situation where we just look at what other journalists are doing, and then we just copy that. But in order to really create content that our audience wants to engage with and really connect with, we need to do it in ways that feel natural to them," she said. "We can't expect people nowadays, especially young people, to open a computer, open their browser and then type 'www dot New York Times dot com' into their browser search bar and then read the news. People are spending time on TikTok and Instagram. And they're looking at content from content creators and influencers."

According to Cho, the team that makes Almost applies "rigorous journalistic standards" to all content produced: they investigate and verify information and write the scripts for the videos and the texts for the posts. To deliver this content to the audience, they use formats similar to those used by young content creators on social media.

She said she believes young audiences want to receive content from someone they can see and identify with, "instead of this faceless news corporation that's just shoving news at them."

She rejects the rivalry between journalists and content creators and suggested that journalism embrace these new communication actors. "I think we should lean into that. And just for example, I think traditional media could hire more young people and digital content creators," Cho said.A big problem is that social networks are platforms controlled by private companies, which make decisions about how content circulates without being accountable to the public. Cho acknowledged that media outlets that invest in these platforms depend on an algorithm, over which they have no control, to access their audience. BuzzFeed News itself saw its audience drop significantly when Facebook changed its priorities, she said – and in May 2023 it even closed its journalistic operation.

"It's really difficult for new digital media to be around due to how the world has been structured in terms of platforms and the power that platforms have over media, which is definitely a problem. But unfortunately, that is what we are stuck with at the moment," Cho said. "Right now, young people are spending time on TikTok, so we're going to be on TikTok because we need to meet them where they are."

It is crucial to prioritize young audiences when addressing the future of journalism, Cho said. Young people are avoiding the news not because they don't care about what's going on around them, but "because we're not listening to them and not presenting things to them in ways that make sense. And that involves really understanding the audience and not just through digital content creators, but through actual, real life young people," she said.

"If we want to solve this problem of news and sustainability, then we need to incorporate our future audience in this. We can't be the ones making decisions for them and about their future."