

From Columnists to Influencers: Digital Transformation and Independent Professionalism among Thai Football Journalists¹

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Abstract

This study examines the digital transformation of Thai football journalists from newspaper columnists to content creators and influencers within a platformized media environment. It explores how veteran football journalists adapted to technological change, expanded their professional roles, and reconstructed credibility and professional identity across successive media eras.

Using Oral History as a qualitative historical approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews with six veteran football journalists whose careers span print newspapers, radio, television, online media, and social media platforms. The findings identify three stages of professional

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transformation: the Traditional Media Era, characterized by institutional journalism and editorial gatekeeping; the Cross-Platform Era, in which journalists expanded their work across radio, television, and online media; and the Digital Creator Era, marked by personal media platforms, direct audience engagement, and hybrid roles as journalists, creators, influencers, and media entrepreneurs.

The findings show that credibility has shifted from institutional affiliation toward a combination of personal expertise, ethical conduct, and sustained audience relationships. Although participants embraced platform-based communication, they consistently maintained core journalistic values, including accuracy, fact-checking, responsibility, and public trust.

Rather than replacing journalism, digital transformation has reshaped how journalism is practiced and how professional authority is established. To explain this shift, the study proposes the concept of independent professionalism, referring to professional authority grounded in personal expertise, ethical commitment, and audience trust rather than institutional affiliation alone. The study contributes to research on digital journalism, sports journalism, and platformized communication by demonstrating how journalism adapts and maintains its professional legitimacy within creator-oriented media environments.

Keywords: sports journalism; digital transformation; independent professionalism; oral history; platformized communication.

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Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped journalism by changing how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Few areas of journalism have been affected more profoundly than sports journalism, where technological change has transformed professional practices, institutional authority, and relationships with audiences. Traditionally, sports journalism was concentrated within mainstream media organizations, particularly newspapers, where journalists and columnists served as gatekeepers of information and interpreters of sporting events. The rise of digital platforms and social media, however, has enabled individuals outside traditional news organizations to create and distribute sports content, challenging the authority of professional journalists and fundamentally transforming the sports media landscape.

Historically, sports journalists occupied a privileged position through their access to athletes, clubs, and exclusive sources of information (McChesney, 1989; Velloso, 2023). This privileged access functioned as symbolic capital, distinguishing professional journalists from ordinary fans and amateur content creators (Mirer, 2022). The expansion of digital communication has gradually eroded this distinction. Sports organizations increasingly communicate directly with audiences through their own media channels, reducing their reliance on journalists as intermediaries and reshaping the boundaries of professional journalism (English, 2021). Consequently, sports journalism faces growing challenges in maintaining its legitimacy, authority, and relevance within a platform-driven media environment (Rowe, 2017).

Social media has further blurred the boundaries between journalists, fans, bloggers, and influencers. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) enable a wide range of actors to participate in sports communication and audience engagement. Previous studies have shown that sports journalists are increasingly expected to work across multiple platforms,

produce diverse forms of content, and maintain continuous interactions with audiences (Daum & Scherer, 2017; McEnnis, 2018). Within this environment, visibility and influence are increasingly measured through engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, encouraging journalists to cultivate personal brands and build direct relationships with followers (Molyneux & Holton, 2015; Olausson, 2018).

Together, these developments have given rise to hybrid forms of professional communication in which journalistic expertise intersects with platform-based influence. A notable example is football transfer journalist Fabrizio Romano, whose success illustrates how professional credibility can be established through both specialized knowledge and sustained audience engagement on social media (McEnnis, 2023). Such examples suggest that contemporary sports journalists increasingly occupy multiple and overlapping roles as journalists, creators, influencers, and media entrepreneurs.

Similar transformations have occurred in Thailand. Football has long been one of the country's most popular sports and has sustained a vibrant media ecosystem spanning newspapers, magazines, radio, television, websites, and, more recently, social media and creator-oriented platforms. Consequently, Thai football journalists have experienced multiple waves of media transformation, ranging from print and broadcast journalism to platform-based communication and personal media production. Rather than functioning solely as reporters or analysts, many now communicate directly with audiences through personal social media channels, develop distinctive personal brands, and cultivate communities of followers. Their influence increasingly depends not only on professional expertise but also on their ability to establish trust and cultivate meaningful relationships with audiences. Recent research has shown that audience trust in sports

influencers is strongly associated with perceived expertise and credibility rather than institutional affiliation (Supakitcharoen & Anantachart, 2025).

Although scholarship on sports journalism in Southeast Asia remains limited, existing studies indicate that digital transformation has substantially altered journalistic practices across the region. In Indonesia, sports journalists are increasingly required to develop multimedia competencies, adapt rapidly to technological change, engage directly with audiences, and maintain professionalism in convergent media environments (Nurrachmad et al., 2024). Similarly, research on Malaysian sports journalism highlights the growing influence of media economics, audience competition, and digital communication on newsroom practices while also revealing the absence of formal ethical guidelines and the increasing reliance on individual professional judgment (Ismail & Adnan, 2016). However, these studies primarily focus on newsroom practices, professional competencies, and organizational challenges. Considerably less attention has been paid to how veteran sports journalists themselves have experienced this transition, reconstructed their professional identities, and renegotiated credibility and professional authority within creator-oriented media environments.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the transition of Thai football journalists from newspaper columnists to digital content creators and influencers. Using Oral History as a qualitative historical approach, the study investigates how veteran football journalists adapted to technological and structural changes in the media industry, reconstructed their professional identities, and maintained credibility in the digital era. Drawing on these oral histories, the study makes three contributions to scholarships on digital journalism and sports media. First, it extends current understanding of how journalism is reshaped rather than replaced

by digital transformation. Second, it provides empirical evidence of how sports journalists adapt to creator-oriented media environments in Southeast Asia, a context that remains underrepresented in existing scholarships. Third, it proposes the concept of independent professionalism, referring to a form of professional authority increasingly grounded in personal expertise, ethical commitment, and sustained audience relationships rather than institutional affiliation alone. Practically, the findings provide insights for journalists, media organizations, and journalism educators seeking to sustain professional credibility within increasingly creator-oriented and platformized media environments while contributing to broader discussions on the future of journalism and professional communication!

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine how technological transformation has reshaped the structure and professional practices of Thai sports journalism across different media eras.
2. Explore how football journalists have adapted and expanded their professional roles during the transition from traditional media to digital platforms.
3. Investigate how credibility, professional identity, and audience relationships have been reconstructed in the digital era of sports journalism.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the premise that technological transformation reshapes journalistic structures and professional practices, prompting journalists to adapt their professional roles and reconstruct their identities within platformized media environments. As communication increasingly shifts from institutional media to personal platforms, professional credibility is no

longer derived solely from organizational affiliation but is continuously negotiated through expertise, ethical conduct, and sustained audience relationships. These interconnected processes provide the analytical framework for examining the emergence of independent professionalism among Thai football journalists.

Research Questions

To address these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How has technological transformation reshaped the structure and professional practices of Thai sports journalism across different media eras?

RQ2: How have football journalists adapted and expanded their professional roles during the transition from traditional media to digital platforms?

RQ3: How have credibility, professional identity, and audience relationships been reconstructed in the digital era of sports journalism?

Literature Review

Technological Determinism and Media Transformation

Technological Determinism has long provided a useful framework for understanding how technological innovation reshapes media institutions, professional practices, and social relations. McLuhan (1964) argued that communication technologies function as “extensions of man,” fundamentally altering patterns of perception, interaction, and social organization. Rather than focusing solely on media content, McLuhan emphasized that the characteristics of communication technologies themselves influence how societies are organized and how individuals experience the world.

In journalism studies, technological change has been regarded as a major driver of newsroom transformation. The development of the internet, mobile communication, social media platforms, and digital publishing technologies has significantly altered how news is produced, distributed, and consumed (Pavlik, 2000; Pavlik, 2019). These developments have enabled journalists to communicate directly with audiences, bypass traditional gatekeeping structures, and encourage greater audience participation.

However, contemporary scholars caution against viewing technology as the sole determinant of social change. Hauer (2017) argues that technological effects should be understood as conditional rather than deterministic, emphasizing the interaction between technology, human agency, and social structures. Similarly, García-Orosa et al. (2020) suggest that digital journalism is shaped not only by technological innovation but also by editorial values, civic participation, and democratic ideals. Technological transformation should therefore be understood as a process that creates new opportunities and constraints while interacting with broader social and professional contexts.

For this study, Technological Determinism provides a framework for examining how successive communication technologies have reshaped sports journalism across different media eras, from print newspapers and broadcast media to digital platforms and social media environments.

Digital Journalism and Platform Transition

Digital journalism has transformed the traditional boundaries of news production by introducing new forms of audience participation, multi-platform distribution, and networked communication. Increasingly, journalism is characterized by collaboration between journalists

and audiences, often described as networked journalism (Beckett, 2010; Van der Haak et al., 2012). In this environment, audiences no longer function solely as consumers of information but also participate in the creation, circulation, and interpretation of news content.

The expansion of mobile communication and social media has further accelerated these changes. News organizations now operate in platform-based environments where content must be adapted for different devices, audiences, and distribution channels (Westlund, 2012). As a result, journalists are expected to develop multi-skilled competencies, including writing, video production, social media management, audience engagement, and data analysis (Singer, 2004; Salaverría & Negredo, 2009). At the same time, audience analytics and engagement metrics increasingly influence editorial decision-making and content strategies (Anderson, 2011; Kristensen, 2021).

These developments have contributed to the emergence of entrepreneurial and creator-oriented journalism, in which journalists increasingly cultivate personal brands, engage directly with audiences, and diversify their communication and revenue practices across platforms (Meyers & Davidson, 2016; Bunce, 2017; Newman et al., 2024). Within these platformized environments, professional influence increasingly depends on the ability to combine expertise, authenticity, and sustained audience engagement. Consequently, digital journalism represents not merely a technological transformation but also a reconfiguration of professional identities, labor practices, and relationships between journalists and audiences.

Sports Journalism, Influencers, and Professional Identity

Sports journalism has undergone profound transformation in the digital era. Historically, sports journalists occupied privileged positions due to their access to athletes, clubs, and

exclusive information sources, which distinguished them from ordinary fans and amateur commentators (Boyle, 2017; Velloso, 2022). However, the rise of digital platforms, fan-generated content, and organizational media has increasingly challenged this distinction.

Previous research shows that sports journalists now operate within highly competitive and platformized media environments characterized by continuous content production, audience engagement, and multimedia storytelling (Moritz, 2014; McEnnis, 2018). Simultaneously, sports organizations have expanded their own media operations, while fan bloggers, content creators, and influencers have emerged as alternative sources of sports information and commentary (English, 2021; Mirer, 2022).

As sports media have become increasingly platformized, the boundaries between journalists, creators, and influencers have become progressively blurred. Audiences now frequently consume sports news through individual personalities rather than media institutions (Newman et al., 2024), shifting professional authority toward personal credibility, expertise, and audience trust. Consequently, sports journalists are increasingly expected to operate as hybrid media professionals who combine reporting, analysis, audience engagement, and content entrepreneurship while continuing to uphold professional and ethical standards.

Although previous studies have examined personal branding, entrepreneurial journalism, and influencer journalism, these perspectives provide only a partial explanation of how professional authority is sustained once journalists move beyond institutional news organizations and communicate directly with audiences through personal platforms. To address this gap, the present study introduces the concept of **independent professionalism**, referring to a form of

professional authority increasingly grounded in personal expertise, ethical commitment, and sustained audience relationships rather than institutional affiliation alone.

Considered as a whole, the literature suggests that digital transformation has fundamentally altered the structures, routines, and boundaries of journalism. Technological change has expanded journalists' roles beyond traditional reporting while fostering new forms of audience engagement and platform-based communication. Yet existing scholarship has largely examined these developments through separate perspectives, including technological disruption, newsroom convergence, entrepreneurial journalism, and influencer culture. Comparatively less attention has been given to how experienced journalists themselves navigate these transitions and reconstruct professional authority across successive media eras. This study addresses that gap by examining the historical experiences of Thai football journalists and advancing **independent professionalism** as an emerging framework for understanding professional authority in platformized media environments.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative historical research approach, using Oral History as the primary method of data collection. It examines the transition of Thai football journalists from traditional newspaper columnists to digital content creators and social media influencers. Oral History was selected because it enables researchers to capture firsthand accounts, professional experiences, and personal reflections that are often absent from archival documents and media texts.

Historical research seeks to understand social phenomena and professional practices within their specific temporal and cultural contexts (Neuman, 2014; Gunn & Faire, 2016). In journalism studies, historical approaches have been widely used to investigate changes in professional roles, newsroom practices, and media institutions across different periods of technological transformation (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Oral History is particularly well suited in examining media transitions because it allows practitioners to reconstruct career trajectories, describe adaptation processes, and reflect on the meanings they attach to professional change.

In this study, Oral History was used to document the experiences of veteran football journalists whose careers span multiple media eras, including print newspapers, radio, television, websites, and social media platforms. The method enabled the researchers to examine how technological changes influenced professional practices, career development, and relationships with audiences over time.

Participants

The participants consisted of six veteran Thai football journalists who met three criteria: (1) they had established careers as football columnists in traditional print media, (2) they had experienced the transition to digital media environments, and (3) they currently manage their own social media channels on social media platforms and are recognized as influential sports content creators.

Purposive expertise sampling was employed to identify participants with extensive professional experience and high visibility within Thailand's football media landscape. The participants were selected because they represent some of the country's most experienced football journalists and have personally navigated the transition from print and broadcast journalism to

platform-based communication. Consistent with the Oral History approach, priority was given to obtaining rich, in-depth historical narratives rather than achieving a large sample size. The six interviews provided sufficient depth and diversity of experience to address the study's research objectives. Interviews were conducted during April 2025.

The six participants included:

- IP1 – Jittakorn Srikhamkhrua (Yak DD)
- IP2 – Metha Punwaratorn (Look Mae King)
- IP3 – Nuttapol Dumrongrojwattana (Tang Kui)
- IP4 – Siampong Phol-mak (Bee Lamsing)
- IP5 – Bouranij Rattanavichien (Bor Boo)
- IP6 – Adisorn Piungya (Jackie)

Collectively, these participants represent more than three decades of experience across multiple generations of Thai sports journalism.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours and was conducted individually. This interview format enabled participants to narrate their professional journeys while allowing the researchers to probe significant experiences, reflections, and turning points throughout their careers.

The interview guide focused on participants' career trajectories, experiences of technological change, professional role adaptation, identity reconstruction, perceptions of credibility and professional values, social media practices, and relationships with audiences across different media eras. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and

transcribed verbatim for analysis. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided informed consent. As the participants are well-known public figures in Thai sports journalism and agreed to be identified in the study, pseudonyms were not used. All interview data were used exclusively for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the principles of historical interpretation and chronological reconstruction commonly employed in Oral History research. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify significant events, turning points, and recurring patterns in participants' career narratives.

The narratives were subsequently organized into three major phases of professional development:

1. Traditional Media Era – Participants worked primarily as newspaper journalists and columnists within established media organizations.
2. Cross-Platform Era – Participants expanded their work into radio, television, satellite broadcasting, and online news platforms while remaining connected to traditional media institutions.
3. Digital Creator Era – Participants established independent media presences on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, increasingly functioning as content creators, influencers, and personal media brands.

Following this chronological reconstruction, thematic analysis was undertaken to identify shared patterns across participants' experiences. Particular attention was given to changes in

professional roles, relationships with audiences, perceptions of credibility, and strategies for adapting to technological transformation.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, interview transcripts and emerging interpretations were reviewed repeatedly throughout the analytical process. Preliminary interpretations and thematic categories were discussed among the research team to improve analytical consistency and minimize individual bias. An audit trail comprising interview records, coding notes, and analytical memos was also maintained throughout the study to enhance transparency and dependability.

The analysis focused on identifying both continuity and change across successive media eras. By connecting individual narratives to broader developments in the sports media industry, the study sought to explain how technological transformation reshaped professional practices while preserving core journalistic values. This approach enabled the researchers to understand not only what changed but also how veteran football journalists interpreted, negotiated, and gave meaning to these transformations throughout their careers.

Results

Participant Profiles

The six participants represent a generation of veteran Thai football journalists whose careers span multiple phases of media transformation, from print newspapers to digital platforms. Although their career trajectories differ, they all began their professional lives within traditional sports media organizations before adapting to radio, television, online media, and eventually social media platforms.

Collectively, the participants accumulated between 20 and 30 years of professional experience in sports journalism. Several worked for major sports media organizations such as Siam Sport, while others established careers as columnists, editors, commentators, broadcasters, and content creators. At the time of the study, all maintained their own social media channels and had developed substantial followings on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

A review of participants' career histories revealed a common pattern of professional transformation. As summarized in Table 1, all participants progressed through three successive stages of media development despite differences in their individual career trajectories.

Table 1

Summary of the Professional Trajectories of the Six Participants.

Participant	Traditional Media Era	Cross-Platform Era	Digital Creator Era
IP1 (Yak DD)	Newspaper journalist and columnist	Television presenter and multimedia producer	Content Director, Main Stand; creator of Footballista
IP2 (Look Mae King)	Newspaper journalist and editor	Sports marketing and online media entrepreneur	Founder of Sockr and independent sports creator
IP3 (Tang Kui)	Sports journalist and correspondent	Television presenter and football commentator	Social media creator and football analyst
IP4 (Bee Lamsing)	Sports journalist and columnist	Radio host and football commentator	YouTube creator and digital sports influencer
IP5 (Bor Boo)	Columnist and editor, Siam Sport	Television analyst and sports broadcaster	Independent creator and football content entrepreneur
IP6 (Jackie)	International sports journalist	Television commentator and broadcaster	Social media analyst and football content creator

The shared career trajectories suggest that the digital transformation of Thai sports journalism was not an abrupt disruption but a gradual process of professional adaptation that unfolded over several decades.

Findings

1: Three Eras of Transformation: From Print Journalism to Digital Creation

Era 1: Traditional Media Era – Building Expertise Through Professional Journalism

Across the six oral histories, a common pattern emerged: all participants began their careers as sports reporters or football columnists in traditional print media organizations. Despite their diverse educational backgrounds, they shared a strong passion for football and aspired to build careers in sports journalism.

Most participants started with fundamental newsroom responsibilities, including translating international news reports, selecting news stories, and writing daily news articles. Through years of professional practice, they gradually progressed into roles as columnists, analysts, editors, and commentators.

IP5 (Bor Boo) described this professional development process:

“Before I became a columnist, I had to master news writing, develop strong analytical skills, and ensure accuracy in every piece of information. Back then, obtaining information was much more difficult than it is today.”

IP5's account illustrates that becoming a football columnist during the print era was not an immediate achievement but the result of years of professional training, accumulated expertise, and the gradual development of credibility.

Participants also described print journalism as operating within a highly structured professional environment characterized by editorial gatekeeping, rigorous fact-checking, and clearly defined professional standards. Accuracy, responsibility, and reliability were regarded as essential requirements before any story could be published.

Several participants further emphasized that overseas assignments in countries such as England and Germany significantly broadened their professional perspectives. These experiences enabled them to understand football not merely as a sport but as a cultural, social, and community institution, enriching both their knowledge and their journalistic practice.

Era 2: Cross-Platform Era – Expanding Beyond Newspapers

Participants consistently described the expansion of sports radio, satellite television, and online media during the late 2000s and early 2010s as a major turning point in Thai sports journalism. As media convergence accelerated, football journalists were required to move beyond the traditional role of newspaper writers and adapt to increasingly diverse communication environments. Their work expanded across radio, television, websites, and online news platforms, while new competencies—including radio hosting, live sports analysis, television presentation, video production, and multimedia storytelling—became integral to professional practice.

For many participants, this transition involved a substantial change in both communication style and professional routines. Skills that had been sufficient in print journalism were no longer adequate in broadcast and digital environments, where immediacy, presentation skills, and audience engagement became increasingly important.

IP1 (Yak DD) reflected on his transition to television:

“I used to wake up every morning and practice reading aloud in front of the bathroom mirror to improve my presentation skills.”

Similarly, IP6 (Jackie) emphasized the differences between print and television journalism:

“Newspaper language and television language are completely different.

Television is live; once you say something, you cannot take it back.”

These narratives suggest that the Cross-Platform Era involved far more than the adoption of new communication channels. Instead, it represented an ongoing process of professional learning, skill development, and adaptation across multiple media formats.

Era 3: Digital Creator Era – Direct Communication with Audiences

Participants described the period between approximately 2015 and 2018 as marking another major transition in their professional lives. During this period, all six participants established independent media spaces on digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and other social media channels. Unlike previous media eras, they no longer depended exclusively on media organizations to reach audiences. Instead, they developed their own platforms, cultivated online communities, and built personal brands that enabled greater control over content production, distribution, and audience engagement.

This transformation also reshaped relationships between journalists and audiences. Communication shifted from a largely one-way model, in which media organizations served as intermediaries, to a more interactive environment characterized by direct engagement, audience feedback, and continuous dialogue. Participants became responsible not only for producing

content but also for cultivating communities and maintaining long-term relationships with followers across multiple platforms.

At the same time, participants consistently emphasized that establishing personal platforms did not mean abandoning journalism. Rather, digital media provided a new environment through which professional journalism could continue to be practiced.

IP5 (Bor Boo) explained that his Facebook content remained rooted in analytical writing, which later became the foundation for his YouTube presentations:

“My Facebook content focuses on analysis and detailed information. Since I have already written everything down, when I speak on YouTube, I do not need a script—I can simply talk.”

Participants also stressed the importance of maintaining ethical standards within highly competitive platform environments. As IP2 (Look Mae King) explained:

“At Sockr, I never create content that spreads hatred or provokes conflict. No matter how important views are, they are never more important than ethics.”

These accounts demonstrate that participants continued to anchor their professional identities in journalistic values even as they adopted new technologies, communication formats, and platform-based practices.

Across the interviews, the Digital Creator Era was consistently described as more than a technological transition. Rather than replacing journalism, digital platforms enabled participants to extend their professional identities beyond traditional news organizations while preserving the expertise, credibility, and ethical commitments developed throughout their careers. In this new

environment, football journalists became platform owners, community builders, and personal media brands without abandoning the professional values that had long defined their work.

2: From Journalist to Creator and Influencer: Expanding Professional Roles in the Digital Era

Across the six oral histories, participants consistently described how digital transformation expanded rather than replaced their professional roles. As communication technologies evolved and audiences migrated to digital platforms, participants gradually moved beyond traditional reporting and commentary to assume a broader range of responsibilities.

The participants' career trajectories can be understood as the following progression:

Journalist → Storyteller → Creator → Influencer → Media Entrepreneur

Rather than occurring as a sudden career shift, this progression developed over time as participants adapted to changing technologies, communication platforms, and audience expectations. In addition to producing journalistic content, they increasingly became responsible for managing personal media channels, cultivating online communities, developing new content formats, and exploring alternative business opportunities.

Participants described this professional expansion in different ways. IP2 (Look Mae King), for example, extended his work beyond journalism by founding Sport Desk, a sports marketing and content company that integrates journalism, branding, and sports business. Similarly, IP4 (Bee Lamsing) explained that building a loyal audience community enabled him to expand into other professional activities beyond content production:

"Having a community of real followers allowed me to branch out into other businesses, such as organizing football tours and selling souvenirs and books through my page." (IP4)

Likewise, IP1 (Yak DD) moved beyond his role as a newspaper columnist to become a Content Director and co-founder of a digital sports media organization, combining editorial leadership with digital content production.

These experiences illustrate that contemporary sports journalists increasingly perform multiple and interconnected professional roles. Rather than functioning solely as reporters, they also act as storytellers, content creators, influencers, community builders, and media entrepreneurs within platform-based media environments.

Participants further emphasized that expanding their professional roles did not require abandoning journalism. Instead, they transferred long-established professional values—including accuracy, expertise, and responsibility—into their personal media platforms while developing closer and more sustained relationships with audiences.

All in all, a consistent pattern emerged: digital transformation broadened the scope of journalistic practice rather than replacing it. Professional development in the digital era involved not only acquiring new technical skills but also redefining how journalistic expertise could be communicated, monetized, and sustained through direct relationships with audiences.

3: Redefining Credibility, Identity, and Audience Relationships

Across the interviews, participants consistently described a fundamental shift in how credibility is established within sports journalism. During the Traditional Media Era, credibility

was largely associated with institutional affiliation, where professional authority was derived from the reputation and editorial standards of established media organizations.

Media Organization → Professional Authority → Audience Trust

In the Digital Creator Era, however, participants described credibility as increasingly grounded in personal identity, professional expertise, and sustained relationships with audiences rather than institutional affiliation alone.

Personal Identity + Professional Expertise + Audience Relationship → Credibility

Despite assuming the roles of creators and influencers, participants consistently emphasized that they continued to identify as journalists and remained committed to the core values of journalism.

IP2 (Look Mae King) explained:

“I still see myself as a journalist.”

Similarly, IP6 (Jackie) reflected:

“I still consider myself as a journalist, not a YouTuber.”

Participants also stressed that credibility could not be built solely through popularity or platform visibility. Instead, it depended on professional expertise, responsible communication, and the trust they had developed with audiences over many years. As IP1 (Yak DD) noted:

“Real credibility comes from expertise.”

Likewise, IP3 (Tang Kui) emphasized that credibility was built through storytelling and long-term audience trust rather than sensationalism:

“I may not be a very well-known influencer, but the people who follow me do so because they appreciate my storytelling. I don't rely on toxic content,

sensationalism, or unfounded accusations to attract attention. I believe that credibility is my greatest asset.” (IP3)

These accounts illustrate that participants rejected sensationalism, clickbait, and divisive content as strategies for attracting attention. Instead, they emphasized fact-checking, responsible communication, consistent content quality, and the cultivation of long-term trust with their audiences.

Across the interviews, a consistent pattern emerged: participants no longer viewed professional legitimacy as being derived primarily from media organizations. Rather, they described credibility as something earned and continuously maintained through personal expertise, ethical conduct, and meaningful relationships with audiences across digital platforms.

These experiences point to the emergence of what this study terms independent professionalism—a form of professional authority grounded in personal expertise, ethical commitment, and sustained audience relationships rather than organizational identity alone. Rather than replacing journalism, digital transformation has reshaped the foundations of professional legitimacy, enabling journalists to preserve their professional values while exercising authority through new platforms and forms of audience engagement.

Discussion

The Reshaping of Sports Journalism Across Media Eras

The findings suggest that the transition of Thai football journalists cannot be understood simply as a process of technological disruption or professional displacement. Rather, the evolution from the Traditional Media Era to the Cross-Platform Era and, ultimately, the Digital

Creator Era reflects a broader process through which sports journalism has been continuously reshaped by technological change and evolving communication environments.

This interpretation is consistent with the central premise of Technological Determinism, which argues that communication technologies play a significant role in shaping social institutions and professional practices (McLuhan, 1964; Pavlik, 2000). The emergence of online media, social networking platforms, and creator-oriented communication ecosystems fundamentally transformed the organizational structure of sports journalism and altered how journalistic content is produced, distributed, and consumed. Similar to Pavlik's (2019) observations, participants experienced a shift from institution-centered communication toward platform-based, audience-centered communication.

At the same time, the findings also support more recent critiques of technological determinism, which argue that technology alone does not determine social change (Hauer, 2017). Instead, journalists actively negotiate technological transformation while maintaining established professional values. Consistent with García-Orosa et al. (2020), the experiences of Thai football journalists demonstrate that digital journalism develops through the interaction of technological innovation, professional norms, organizational change, and audience expectations.

Across all three media eras, participants continued to perform the core functions of journalism—gathering information, verifying facts, interpreting events, and communicating with the public. What changed was not journalism itself, but the organizational structures, communication channels, and professional practices through which journalism was carried out. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that digital transformation has reshaped journalism rather than replaced it.

From Journalist to Creator: Expanding the Boundaries of Professional Practice

A second major finding concerns the expansion of professional roles among football journalists in the digital era. The progression identified in this study—from journalist to storyteller, creator, influencer, and media entrepreneur—reflects broader transformations documented in digital journalism scholarship.

Previous research has shown that journalists increasingly function as multi-skilled professionals who combine multimedia production, audience engagement, social media management, and entrepreneurial activities (Singer, 2004; Salaverría & Negredo, 2009; McEnnis, 2018). The experiences of Thai football journalists support these observations while demonstrating that such transformations are particularly evident in sports journalism, where expertise, personality, and audience engagement are closely intertwined.

The findings also resonate with Beckett's (2010) concept of networked journalism and its subsequent development by Van der Haak et al. (2012). Rather than serving solely as information providers, journalists increasingly participate in collaborative and interactive communication with audiences. Participants in this study functioned not only as reporters and analysts but also as community builders, content creators, and facilitators of audience engagement.

Importantly, these findings challenge the assumption that creators and influencers are replacing journalists. Instead, they suggest that journalists have incorporated creator-oriented practices into their professional repertoire. Activities once considered peripheral to journalism—including personal branding, community management, and content entrepreneurship—have become integrated into contemporary journalistic practice. This interpretation supports Bunce's

(2017) argument that entrepreneurial journalism represents an extension of professional journalism rather than a departure from it.

The transition observed in this study therefore represents an expansion of professional roles rather than occupational replacement. Journalism has adapted to the creator economy by broadening the ways in which professional expertise is communicated, shared, and monetized across digital platforms.

From Institutional Authority to Independent Professionalism

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study concerns the transformation of professional authority and credibility in the digital era.

Historically, journalistic legitimacy was closely associated with media institutions. Professional authority was derived from organizational affiliation, editorial oversight, and institutional reputation (Deuze, 2005). This institutional model of credibility was clearly reflected in the Traditional Media Era, when participants worked within established newspaper organizations under formal editorial structures.

The findings suggest that this model has undergone substantial transformation. Consistent with recent research on news influencers and platform-based journalism (Newman et al., 2024), credibility is increasingly constructed through personal expertise, identity, audience engagement, and perceived authenticity. Participants repeatedly emphasized that audiences followed them not because of the organizations they represented but because of their accumulated football knowledge, professional consistency, and long-established credibility.

This finding also aligns with scholarship on personal branding, which argues that journalists increasingly cultivate individual identities to establish visibility and trust in digital

environments (Molyneux & Holton, 2015; Olausson, 2018). However, the findings also extend this literature. Whereas personal branding primarily emphasizes self-presentation and visibility, and entrepreneurial or influencer journalism often focuses on audience growth, engagement, and monetization, the participants in this study consistently framed their digital presence in terms of journalistic responsibility, professional expertise, and ethical commitment.

To explain this distinction, this study proposes the concept of independent professionalism. Independent professionalism refers to a form of professional authority grounded in personal expertise, ethical conduct, and sustained audience trust rather than institutional affiliation alone. Unlike existing concepts that emphasize visibility or commercial success, independent professionalism highlights the continuity of journalistic professionalism beyond organizational boundaries. In this sense, veteran football journalists do not cease to be journalists when operating on personal platforms; rather, they reconstruct professional legitimacy by transferring established journalistic values into creator-oriented media environments.

The findings also highlight important tensions within platform-based journalism. The growing influence of algorithms, engagement metrics, and continuous content production creates pressures toward sensationalism, polarization, and commercial competition that may undermine journalistic quality and professional independence. Although participants deliberately rejected clickbait, divisive communication, and toxic content, maintaining professional standards while remaining visible within increasingly competitive platform environments remains an ongoing challenge.

Overall, the findings suggest that platformization has transformed not only where journalism is practiced but also how professional authority is established and sustained. Rather

than undermining journalistic values, digital platforms have altered the mechanisms through which those values are communicated, recognized, and negotiated with audiences. The concept of independent professionalism therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how experienced journalists maintain credibility and professional identity while adapting to creator-oriented and platformized media environments.

Conclusion

This study examined the digital transition of Thai football journalists through Oral History interviews with six veteran practitioners whose careers span print newspapers, radio, television, online media, and social media platforms. By tracing their professional trajectories across multiple decades, the study explored how technological transformation has reshaped sports journalism, expanded professional roles, and reconfigured the foundations of credibility in the digital era.

Three major patterns emerged from the participants' narratives. First, Thai sports journalism evolved through three interconnected media eras: the Traditional Media Era, the Cross-Platform Era, and the Digital Creator Era. Second, football journalists expanded their professional roles beyond traditional reporting to become storytellers, content creators, influencers, and media entrepreneurs. Third, the foundations of credibility shifted from institutional affiliation toward a combination of personal expertise, ethical conduct, and sustained relationships with audiences.

Overall, the findings indicate that digital transformation has not replaced journalism but fundamentally reshaped how it is practiced. Although communication technologies have transformed media structures, distribution channels, and audience engagement, the core functions of journalism—information gathering, verification, interpretation, and public communication—

remain central to professional practice. What has changed is the way these functions are performed, communicated, and recognized within platform-based media environments.

This study further proposes the concept of independent professionalism to explain how professional authority is increasingly constructed through personal expertise, ethical commitment, and sustained audience trust rather than institutional affiliation alone. Unlike concepts such as personal branding, entrepreneurial journalism, or influencer journalism, independent professionalism emphasizes the continuity of journalistic authority and professional values beyond organizational boundaries. The concept therefore extends current discussions of digital journalism by demonstrating how professionalism can be sustained while adapting to creator-oriented and platformized media environments.

Rather than signaling the decline of journalism, the experiences of Thai football journalists demonstrate the profession's capacity to evolve in response to technological, economic, and cultural change. The transition from columnist to influencer should therefore be understood not as a departure from journalism but as a contemporary expression of how journalistic professionalism adapts, persists, and is redefined within an increasingly platformized media landscape.

Implications and Future Research

Academic Contribution and Practical Application

This study contributes to communication scholarship in three ways. First, it offers a historical account of digital transformation in Southeast Asian sports journalism through the experiences of veteran Thai football journalists using an Oral History approach.

Second, it shows that digital transformation has reshaped rather than replaced journalism. While technologies have changed media structures and audience relationships, core journalistic values remain central within platformized environments.

Third, it introduces independent professionalism as a framework for understanding emerging forms of journalistic authority in the creator economy. This concept highlights the continuity of professional authority through expertise, ethics, and audience trust beyond organizational boundaries, and provides a basis for future research on professional legitimacy in platformized media.

Practically, journalists need to combine expertise with platform skills and audience engagement. Media organizations should recognize journalists as individual media brands, while journalism education should prepare students for hybrid roles that integrate reporting, content creation, and ethical practice.

Limitations

This study focuses on six veteran football journalists who successfully adapted to digital transformation, reflecting the perspectives of experienced practitioners in Thai sports journalism. It may not represent younger digital-native journalists or those who did not sustain their careers. As a qualitative Oral History study, the findings provide contextual insights rather than statistical generalization.

Future Research

Future research could examine independent professionalism across different media contexts and cultures. Comparative studies involving digital-native journalists and creators from various countries would deepen understanding of how professional authority evolves. Further

work may also explore how emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic platforms, continue to reshape journalism.

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