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Interactivity from the Inside: How Ukrainian Digital Media Newsrooms Perceive and Apply Interactive Features

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This study explores the role of interactivity in the communication strategies of Ukrainian digital media. It investigates editorial perspectives on the benefits and challenges of implementing interactive features, as well as how media outlets assess their effectiveness. **Method.** The primary research method was an expert survey, which enabled the collection of opinions and evaluations from professionals with in-depth knowledge of the digital journalism landscape. In June–July 2025, responses were gathered from 16 representatives holding editorial or managerial positions in leading Ukrainian digital media outlets. **Results.** The study confirms the growing importance of interactivity in the communication strategies of Ukrainian newsrooms, while also revealing only partial alignment between the stated approaches to interactivity and its actual implementation. Interactivity is commonly associated with audience feedback mechanisms, hypertextual and multimedia storytelling, and interactive content formats – all of which attract significant editorial interest. In contrast, deeper forms of audience engagement, such as content co-creation or horizontal communication among users, receive less attention from newsrooms. Respondents noted that interactive formats can provide tangible benefits for media, both in terms of performance on social media (e.g., increased reach and audience engagement) and on websites (e.g., higher visit counts, longer session durations, and deeper interaction). The key barriers to broader adoption of interactivity remain the lack of technical resources, time constraints, and the need to involve external specialists. **Conclusions.** The article concludes that successful integration of interactivity requires not only appropriate tools but also editorial openness, managerial support, and a willingness to rethink the relationship between journalists and their audience.

Keywords: digital journalism, online media, newsrooms, interactivity, audience engagement

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Інтерактивність зсередини: як редакції українських онлайн-медіа сприймають та застосовують інтерактивні функції

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У статті досліджено роль інтерактивності в комунікаційних стратегіях українських онлайн-медіа, з'ясовано редакційне бачення переваг та бар'єрів впровадження інтерактивних функцій, підхід редакцій до оцінки ефективності їх імплементації. **Метод.** У якості основного методу дослідження використано експертне опитування, що дозволило залучити думки та оцінки професіоналів із глибоким розумінням внутрішніх процесів цифрового медіаландшафту. У червні-липні 2025 року було зібрано 16 відповідей на анкету від респондентів, що представляють управлінську чи редакторську ланку провідних українських онлайн-медіа. **Результати.** Дослідження засвідчило зростаючу роль інтерактивності в комунікаційних стратегіях українських онлайн-медіа, однак лише часткову відповідність між заявленими підходами до інтерактивності та фактичним її втіленням. Поширенім є звернення до інтерактивності як до можливості філдбеку аудиторії, гіпертекстуального та мультимедійного сторітлінгу, значний інтерес редакції онлайн-медіа проявляють також і до інтерактивних форматів контенту. Натомість глибші форми взаємодії з аудиторією, зокрема співтворення контенту або горизонтальна комунікація всередині аудиторії, користуються нижчим інтересом редакцій. З відповідей респондентів встановлено, що інтерактивні формати можуть забезпечити відчутну користь для медіа – як у контексті ефективності в соціальних мережах (зростання охоплення, збільшення зацікавленості аудиторії), так і на вебсайтах медіа (збільшення кількості відвідувань, зростання тривалості сеансу та глибини взаємодії). Основними бар'єрами до ширшого впровадження інтерактивності залишаються нестача технічних ресурсів, часові обмеження та необхідність залучення сторонніх фахівців. **Висновки.** Зроблено висновок, що успішна інтеграція інтерактивності потребує не лише інструментів, але й редакційної відкритості, підтримки менеджменту та готовності переосмислювати відносини між журналістами й аудиторією.

Ключові слова: цифрова журналістика, онлайн-медіа, редакція, інтерактивність, взаємодія з аудиторією

Interactivity is widely recognized as one of the defining characteristics of digital journalism, reshaping the traditional one-way model of communication. It is conceptualized as a multidimensional characteristic encompassing the interaction between the audience, editorial staff, content, and technological environment (Zagorulko, 2025), and thereby expanding the role of the audience in the journalistic process (Trafchuk & Andriyushenko, 2024). Early theoretical works emphasized interactivity for its potential to enhance journalistic practice by facilitating richer, more democratic communication (Pavlik, 1997), which would distinguish digital journalism from traditional forms of media. However, despite the theoretical optimism, its actual implementation in newsrooms has lagged behind expectations. Scholars have repeatedly noted that the adoption of interactive technologies has been hesitant and limited (Kenney et al., 2000; Chung, 2008). Domingo referred to interactivity as “a powerful myth” in the newsroom – a concept frequently invoked in academic discourse but rarely fully realized in professional practice (Domingo, 2008).

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Nonetheless, more recent research demonstrates that interest in interactivity among journalists and editors remains strong, and many newsrooms are experimenting with interactive features and formats. As digital journalism matures, the scholar focus has shifted from whether interactivity should be used to how it can be effectively integrated into editorial strategies. This study addresses that gap by examining how Ukrainian digital newsrooms perceive and apply interactive features. By focusing on the internal logic of editorial decision-making, we contribute to a deeper understanding of interactivity not just as a technological feature, but as an evolving professional and organizational practice within digital journalism.

Literature Review

While interactivity has long been identified as a hallmark of digital journalism, empirical studies demonstrate that its newsroom implementation remains constrained by structural and professional factors. Scholars emphasize that the success or failure of interactive features often hinges less on technology than on organizational conditions, editorial routines, and journalistic culture, amplifying the urgency for rethinking how newsrooms engage with audiences (Hayes, 2021).

Domingo argues that despite the prevalence of interactive tools, newsrooms tend to prioritize immediacy over participation, with interactivity often handled separately from the core news production process (Domingo, 2008). As a result, opportunities for audience engagement are limited to pre-defined, low-impact channels such as comments or ratings. Chung, based on interviews with editors, observes that although there is interest in interpersonal interaction with users, practical difficulties prevent its full realization (Chung, 2007). Boczkowski argues that online-only newsrooms, which view users as co-producers, are more likely to innovate in interactivity, with organizational structures and audience perceptions playing a decisive role (Boczkowski, 2004). Similarly, García highlights three key obstacles to meaningful interactivity: working conditions, limited contact between journalists and users, and the inertia of organizational culture (Garcia, 2007). Foxman proposes the concept of the "magic circle of play" to describe emerging models of audience engagement, where journalists design interactive experiences that invite playful and iterative public involvement (Foxman, 2016). However, he cautions that engagement is often filtered through abstract performance metrics, reinforcing the separation between editorial logic and user feedback.

Barredo Ibáñez et al. provide important empirical insight through 35 in-depth interviews with digital journalists from Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador (Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2019). Their findings reveal that interactivity is largely perceived as a formal and diagnostic tool, rather than a mechanism for participatory content co-creation. Civic input is welcomed for audience monitoring or agenda setting but is rarely integrated into journalistic production itself. Skepticism toward user-generated content contributes to a one-way model, where interactivity often replicates legacy routines rather than transforming them. While analyzing interactivity implementation on USA online news websites, Kenny et al. found that only 3% of newsrooms provide personalized responses to audience emails, while 28% send generic replies and 69% do not respond at all – revealing a significant gap between the professed and practiced commitment to interactivity (Kenney et al., 2000).

In the Ukrainian scholarly discourse, studies by Honcharova (Гончарова, 2014), Terkhanova (Терханова, 2019), Fedorchuk (Федорчук, 2010), and Zhenchenko (Женченко, 2016) have examined the transformation of newsroom roles in digital environments, focusing on convergence, editorial multitasking, and professional hybridization. Although these works acknowledge the influence of user behavior and platform dynamics, they stop short of systematically analyzing editorial attitudes toward interactivity as a communication strategy. Trachuk and Andriushchenko note emerging challenges such as the automation of feedback and the rise of synthetic AI based interaction, further complicating genuine audience engagement (Трачук & Андрющенко, 2024). To date, however, no research has focused specifically on how Ukrainian editors conceptualize



and operationalize interactivity within their organizational contexts – a gap this study seeks to address.

This study **aims** to examine the role of interactivity within the communication strategies of Ukrainian digital media, to explore how editorial teams perceive the benefits and barriers to implementing interactive features on their websites. To operationalise this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Ukrainian digital newsrooms conceptualize interactivity within their communication strategies, and how is this understanding reflected in the selection and practical implementation of interactive features?

RQ2: How do editorial teams assess the benefits and perceived effectiveness of interactivity for audience engagement and media website performance?

RQ3: What barriers limit the broader adoption of interactive features in Ukrainian digital media?

Method

To address the research questions, this study employed the method of expert survey, which is widely used in the social sciences to gather in-depth insights from individuals with specialized knowledge or professional experience. This method involves the strategic selection of respondents whose institutional positions enable them to observe or influence specific organizational processes (Bogner, 2009). Expert surveys and in-depth expert interviews, although different in format, are grounded in the same methodological logic of purposeful and information-oriented sampling. Accordingly, the broader scholarly discussion on optimal sample sizes in expert-based qualitative research remains applicable to survey designs as well. Determining an adequate sample size is often debated, as it depends not only on numerical thresholds but also on the homogeneity and “information-richness” of respondents (Patton, 2015). Previous scholarship generally recommends 5–20 participants as an optimal range for expert interviews (Mason, 2010; Різун & Скотникова, 2013; Govindaraj, 2020). Guided by this methodological rationale, the present study applied the same principle of information sufficiency and selected respondents whose institutional roles provide direct insight into newsroom communication strategies, ensuring the relevance and depth of the data obtained.

The expert survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire distributed via email to the editorial teams of the 50 most popular Ukrainian digital media outlets, based on audience rankings provided by Similarweb for the fourth quarter of 2024. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to editorial email addresses listed on the official websites of these outlets. Additionally, a link to the questionnaire was published on social media pages affiliated with the Institute of Journalism (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv) to broaden outreach. The questionnaire was administered using the Google Forms platform and consisted of 15 questions (marked Q1...Q15), including both closed and open-ended formats, allowing for a combination of quantifiable analysis and qualitative insight. The questions were grouped into five thematic sections, aligned with the study’s research questions. The first section examined how newsrooms conceptualize interactivity within their communication strategies and how this understanding shapes the selection and implementation of interactive features (RQ1). The second and third sections focused on the practical adoption of interactivity in newsrooms: the former addressing participatory and dialogic features, and the latter examining the production of interactive content. Together, these sections primarily contribute to answering RQ1, while also providing insights the constraints relevant to RQ3. The fourth section explored newsroom evaluations of the benefits and perceived effectiveness of interactive features (RQ2), as well as the barriers limiting their broader adoption (RQ3). The fifth section collected brief respondent background information, including their role and the characteristics of the media they represent.



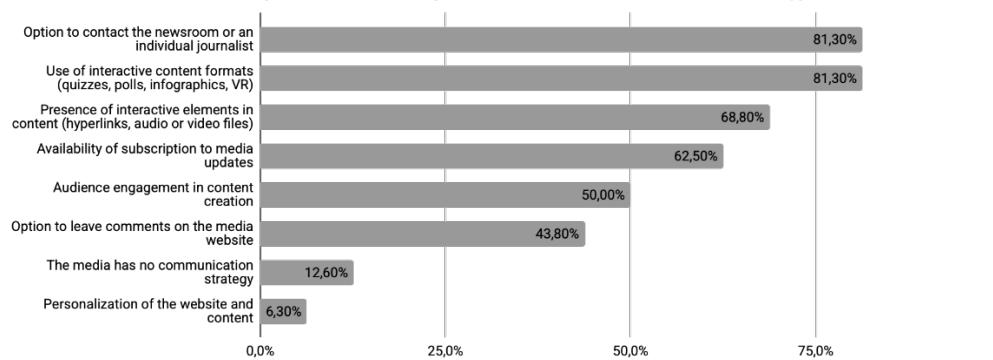
Results and Discussions

The initial stage of data collection took place during June-July 2025. A total of 16 responses were received, including submissions from editorial teams representing the following outlets: BBC News Ukrainian, 24 Kanal, Ukrinform, LB.ua, Radio Svoboda (with representatives from both the main newsroom and Donbas Realii project), Deutsche Welle Ukrainian, Texty.org.ua, Slovo i Dilo, Fakty ICTV, Chytomo, Kunsht, Slidstvo.Info, SPEKA, Vilne Radio, and Mukachevo.net. The professional profile of the sample includes 81,25% editorial and strategic decision-making personnel (10 editors, 1 development director, 1 brand manager, and 1 community manager) and 18,75% digital journalists. A key limitation of this study lies in the size of the expert sample, which represents only part of the Ukrainian digital media landscape. This constraint limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire media sector. At the same time, the analytical value of the study is strengthened by the fact that most respondents occupy senior editorial or strategic positions, which provides insight into decision-making processes and institutional perceptions that are not accessible through larger but less specialised samples. Given that some of the findings may pertain to commercially sensitive editorial strategies, the results are presented in anonymized form.

The first section of the questionnaire focused on whether Ukrainian digital media outlets have a defined communication strategy and what role interactivity plays within it. A majority of respondents (87.5%) reported that their media do have an approved communication strategy (Q1: "Does your media outlet have an approved communication strategy?"). Among those, all confirmed that their strategies include certain forms of interactivity (Q2: "Does your communication strategy include any forms of interactivity?"). When asked to specify what forms of interactivity are included in their strategies (Q3: "What forms of interactivity are included in your outlet's communication strategy?"), respondents most frequently mentioned the possibility for users to contact the newsroom, interactive content formats (e.g., quizzes, polls, infographics), and embedded interactive elements (such as hyperlinks, audio, or video files). In contrast, editors showed considerably less interest in fostering audience participation in content production or in enabling user-to-user interaction via comment sections (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Forms of interactivity included in media communication strategies (Q3, n=16)

What forms of interactivity are included in your outlet's communication strategy?



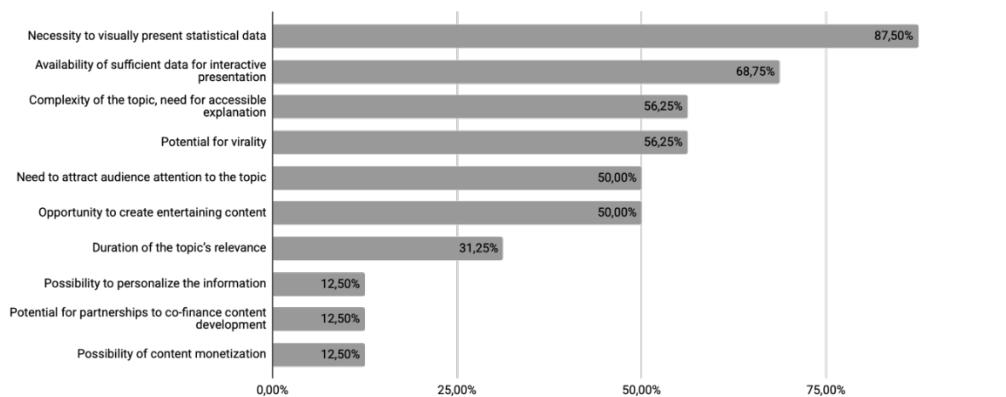
Although 50% of respondents stated that participatory opportunities for audience involvement in content development are included in their communication strategies, such mechanisms appear to be underutilized in practice. In response to Q4 ("If your website allows users to contact the newsroom or suggest a news item, how often do they use this opportunity?"), only 25% reported



that users often reach out. According to respondents, 37.5% indicated that users engage occasionally, while another 37.5% noted such contact is rare. A similar pattern is observed in how newsrooms use user-generated content. Only one respondent (6.3%) stated that their outlet incorporates user-submitted content on a daily basis. Another 31.3% indicated doing so at least once a month, while the majority (62.4%) reported using it less frequently (Q5: "How often does your newsroom use content proposed by readers/viewers?"). The reasons for the limited use of audience-submitted content include lack of relevance (e.g., low news value, insufficient factual basis, lack of focus, overly local scope, unverified information, hate speech, or promotional content), insufficient editorial resources to process submissions, or, in one case, a policy of considering only contributions from members of the outlet's paid membership club (Q6: "If your newsroom does not use audience-submitted content, what are the reasons?"). In contrast, newsroom engagement in direct communication with audiences is significantly higher. A total of 62.4% of respondents stated that their outlet responds to user comments on a daily basis (Q7: "How often does your newsroom respond to user comments on the website or on social media?"). An additional 18.8% reported responding at least once a week, while 18.8% do so less frequently.

Figure 2.
Factors that determine suitability of interactive content format (Q8, n=16)

If your newsroom were to develop interactive content – such as quizzes, infographics, maps, VR, news games – what factors would determine whether a given topic is suitable for such a format?



The following section of the questionnaire explored editorial attitudes toward interactive content. When asked about the factors influencing decisions regarding the appropriateness of interactive formats, respondents most frequently emphasized the importance of making information accessible to audiences. Specifically, they highlighted the need to clearly visualize statistical data, address topic complexity, and ensure clarity in explanation (Figure 2). Slightly less common were considerations related to technical feasibility and overall relevance of the interactive format (Q8: "If your newsroom were to develop interactive content - such as quizzes, infographics, maps, VR, news games - what factors would determine whether a given topic is suitable for such a format?").

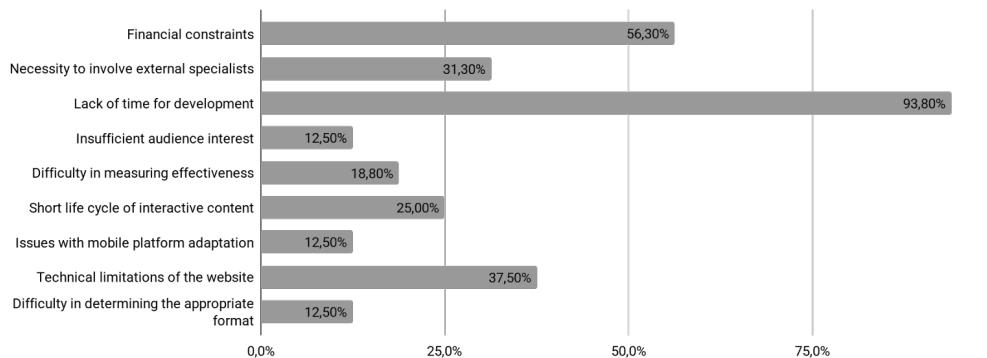
Given that limited technological expertise and the need for external contributors are often cited by researchers as barriers to implementing interactivity, the study examined the technical capabilities of newsrooms deeper. Among the surveyed Ukrainian digital media, 68.75% acknowledged a need to involve external specialists (Q9: "If your newsroom were to produce interactive content, would it require external expertise? If so, what kind?"). Most commonly,



respondents mentioned the need for developers, designers, layout specialists, and data journalists. Thus, the shortage of in-house professionals is one of the key barriers to broader adoption of interactivity. Other important constraints identified (Figure 3) included lack of time for development, financial limitations, and technical restrictions of website infrastructure (Q10: “In your opinion, what are the main barriers to implementing interactivity in Ukrainian digital media?”).

Figure 3.
Main barriers to implementing interactivity in digital media (Q10, n=16)

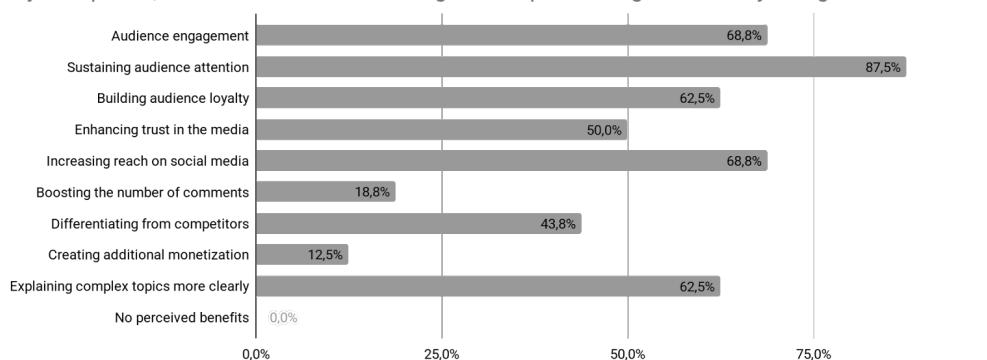
In your opinion, what are the main barriers to implementing interactivity in Ukrainian digital media?



In contrast, the main perceived benefits and motivations for using interactivity included enhanced audience engagement and retention, increased reach on social media, greater audience loyalty, and improved accessibility of complex topics (Q11: “In your opinion, what are the main advantages of implementing interactivity in digital media?”). Notably, only 12.5% of respondents identified interactive technologies as having a direct impact on content monetization (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Main advantages of implementing interactivity in digital media (Q11, n=16)

In your opinion, what are the main advantages of implementing interactivity in digital media?



The final core section of the survey examined how newsrooms assess the effectiveness of interactive formats. In response to the question “How does your newsroom evaluate the effectiveness of interactive content?” (Q12), the leading metrics cited were the number of views (87.5%) and the depth of engagement (68.8%). Additional relevant indicators included click-throughs to



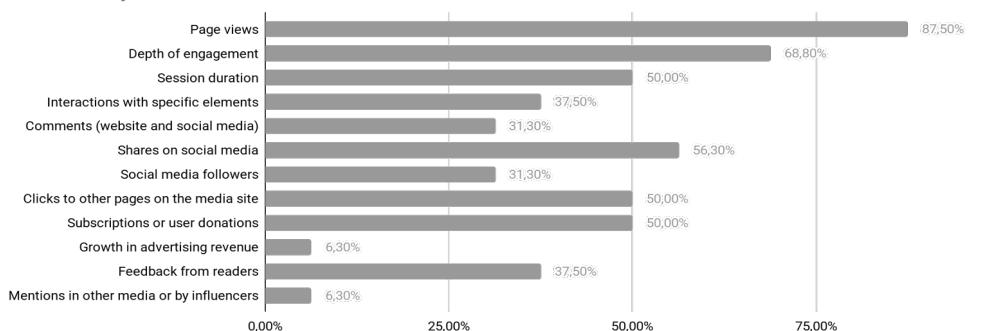
other media content (50%) and average session duration on the website (50%). Respondents also emphasized metrics related to social media performance, including shares, comments, and follower growth, as illustrated in Figure 5.

In the final question of this section (Q13: “What actual impact of implementing interactive content has your newsroom observed?”) respondents were asked to reflect on tangible results from the implementation of interactive formats. Most linked the positive impact to improved social media performance – both in terms of user reach and engagement. However, respondents also noted measurable benefits on their websites, including increased traffic, longer session duration, and greater user interaction (e.g., scroll depth). One respondent also emphasized that active participation in low-effort interactive features such as polls can generate valuable input for future editorial content, serving as a form of crowdsourced agenda-setting. Additional perceived effects included increased audience trust and loyalty toward the media outlet overall.

Figure 5.

Indicators reflecting the effectiveness of interactive content in digital media (Q13, n=16)

How does your newsroom evaluate the effectiveness of interactive content?



The alignment between the expected (Q12) and actual (Q13) effects of implementing interactivity in online media leads to a positive conclusion: editorial teams are generally successful in achieving the outcomes they anticipate when employing interactive technologies, which supports the justification for their use. The reported effectiveness of interactivity in social media metrics is particularly significant given the growing role of social platforms as a key source of referral traffic for online media websites (Троян, 2024). Thus, interactivity can serve as an important tool not only for attracting but also for retaining audiences on media platforms, strengthening user engagement, and potentially fostering greater brand loyalty over time. However, outlined difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of interactive features (Q10) may hinder a fuller understanding and appreciation of their impact. This uncertainty in metrics could limit the strategic use of interactivity and complicate its integration into long-term editorial planning, especially in newsrooms where performance is primarily evaluated through quantifiable outcomes.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that interactivity is increasingly recognized by Ukrainian digital media as a valuable component of digital journalism. Addressing RQ1, the findings show that most editorial teams incorporate interactive elements into their communication strategies – primarily through direct user channels and multimedia formats – indicating a positive shift toward more engaged forms of storytelling. However, deeper types of user involvement, such as participatory content creation or user-to-user interaction, remain underdeveloped. The findings reveal only a partial alignment between the declared importance of interactivity and its practical application. While many respondents report that participatory features are formally included in their strategies, actual use of user-generated content is limited.



In relation to RQ2, editors generally perceive interactive formats as effective, especially in enhancing audience engagement, increasing time spent on site, and boosting social media performance – now a critical source of traffic for online media. The observed alignment between expected and actual outcomes suggests that interactivity, when implemented intentionally, can bring measurable editorial and strategic benefits. At the same time, the study's insights into RQ3 confirm the persistence of several structural barriers that hinder the broader adoption of interactivity – chiefly limited staffing, financial constraints, and insufficient technical expertise. Addressing them through capacity building, workflow optimization, or the development of accessible technological solutions may significantly advance the use of interactive tools.

While these findings provide a nuanced understanding of newsroom perceptions and practices, they should also be interpreted in light of the study's methodological limitations. The expert sample, though information-rich, represents only a segment of the Ukrainian digital media landscape, meaning that some institutional perspectives may remain underrepresented. Accordingly, the conclusions reflect informed insights from practitioners directly involved in decision-making but do not claim statistical generalizability across the entire industry.

Overall, the results reinforce the view of interactivity not merely as a set of technical affordances, but as a forward-looking editorial approach requiring both institutional support and a reimagined relationship with the audience. Promising avenues for future research include comparing newsroom perspectives on the implementation of interactivity with audience expectations, as well as exploring potential solutions to the identified barriers hindering its adoption.

Authors' contribution: Kateryna Horska was responsible for the methodology and overall supervision of the study, while Dmytro Zagorulko conducted the research, interpreted the results, and prepared the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative Artificial Intelligence and Technologies Using Artificial Intelligence in the Writing Process. During the preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT (GPT-4o) exclusively as a translation aid to ensure linguistic clarity. All translations were subsequently reviewed and revised by the authors. The authors bear full responsibility for the accuracy and appropriateness of the final text.

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