

# Unveiling the Tactics: Moroccan Journalists' Approach to News Reporting and Data Authentication during Breaking News

نهج الصحفيين المغاربة في إعداد الأخبار والتحقق من البيانات خلال الأزمات

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## الملخص:

في ظل التحولات المتسارعة التي يشهدها المشهد الإعلامي المغربي، أصبحت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي عنصراً جوهرياً في نقل وتصفح الأخبار والبيانات، مما فرض على الصحفيين تحديات جديدة تتعلق بتقسي مصداقية الأخبار والتعامل مع التدفق الهائل للمعلومات غير المرشحة على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الكيفية التي يتعامل بها الصحفيون المغاربة مع الأخبار أثناء الأزمات، مع التركيز على التحديات والفرص التي تقدمها وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، خاصة في جمع المعلومات، والتحقق من الحقائق، ومراجعة مصادر المحتوى الإعلامي. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نهج بحثي نوعي يرتكز على مقابلات مع واحد وعشرين صحفياً مغربياً ينتمون إلى مختلف وسائل الإعلام المكتوبة، الرقمية، والإذاعية. تُظهر نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الصحفيين المغاربة يعتمدون على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي كمصدر رئيسي للمعلومات، ولكنهم في الوقت ذاته يدركون جيداً المخاطر المرتبطة بالتضليل وانتشار الأخبار الزائفة. وعلى الرغم من الإمكانيات التي توفرها منصات التواصل الحديثة في إتاحة مصادر متعددة للمعلومات وتسهيل الوصول إلى مختلف المستجدات، فإن المشاركين في هذه الدراسة يؤكدون ضرورة امتلاك مهارات نقدية وأدوات متخصصة للتحقق من صحة الأخبار، لا سيما أثناء التغطية الصحفية للأحداث الطارئة، مثل حدث زلزال الحوز الذي استلزم تضافر الجهود وخلق شبكة إعلامية بين الصحفيين قصد تدقيق البيانات ومراجعتها. أبرزت هذه الدراسة كذلك أن الصحفيين المغاربة يجب أن لا يكتفوا فقط بجمع ونشر المعلومات، بل يجب أن يتبنوا أدوار جديدة مرتبطة بتصفيق الأخبار والتأكد من مصداقيتها. تفتح النتائج التي توصلت إليها هذه الدراسة المجال أمام المزيد من النقاش حول ضرورة تعزيز أخلاقيات

مهنة الصحافة، وتطوير أدوات أكثر تطوراً لمكافحة التضليل الإعلامي في بيئة إعلامية باتت أكثر تعقيداً من أي وقت مضى.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الصحافة الرقمية، التحقق من المعلومات، الأخبار الزائفة، الإعلام في المغرب، منصات التواصل الاجتماعي، الأزمات.

## Abstract

Within this rapidly evolving media environment, social media has emerged as a central ecosystem for navigating news and information. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube hold an integral part of the global information market, revolutionising various aspects of society, including journalism. This study strives to dissect the challenges and opportunities that social media offers journalists, particularly in information-gathering, fact-checking, and content verification. With a focus on Moroccan journalists, the specific aim of this study is to explore the strategies employed by Moroccan journalists for content gathering and verification. Drawing on previous studies examining the use of online sources in news gathering and reporting, this study is based on a qualitative data collection procedure, focusing primarily on interviews with 21 Moroccan journalists to elicit their perceptions of and attitudes toward news, information gathering, and online information verification. This study reveals that Moroccan journalists express positive attitudes when it comes to using social media but they assert the importance of critical media skills when scrutinizing the reliability of data on social media. The participants acknowledge the diversity and plurality of perspectives, voices, and narratives that social media provides, but they also recognize the potential risk social media raises when it comes to manipulation and spreading misinformation.

**Key Words:** disinformation; information; journalism; Morocco; newsgathering; social media

## Introduction

The digital age has ushered in a profound transformation in the landscape of journalism, reshaping how news is gathered, verified, and disseminated (McBrayer, 2020). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become integral to the global information market, revolutionising various aspects of society, including journalism. These platforms provide valuable tools for journalists to uncover real-time stories, source quotes, and connect with diverse voices. They are widely described as central ecosystems for navigating news and information. Moroccan journalists, much like their peers worldwide, turn to digital platforms as potential sources of news and information. However, the use of social media platforms for news and information gathering raises critical questions about the credibility and reliability of available information on these platforms (Diekerhof, 2023). As social media continues to blur the lines between information and disinformation, Moroccan journalists are indebted to adopt new responsibilities of reporting news and discerning between credible and unreliable information for their audience. In this context, the primary aim of this study is to delve into the experiences, practices, and obstacles faced by Moroccan journalists as they navigate information online.

This study adopts an exploratory research design focusing on the attitudes of journalists and news reporters on news and information on social media. The first section of this study presents a background for the study, highlighting online information-gathering practices and key challenges and opportunities social media platforms present for journalists. The second section is devoted to the research methodology, describing the different procedures used in data collection. The last sections provide an overview of key findings, discussing the Moroccan media landscape and investigating the potential use of social media in journalistic practices.

### 1. Background of the study

The increasing influence of social media has profoundly transformed the news landscape. Journalistic practices evolve as journalists face the pressure of processing a vast amount of information from diverse sources

in real-time. The demand for immediacy, coupled with the complexity of verifying sources and managing misinformation, has reshaped traditional journalistic practices. This shift has led to a rethinking of how news is gathered, processed, and presented. Therefore, journalists, and news media in general, opt for new approaches in dealing with the constant flow of information in the digital age.

### **1.1. The Challenges and Responsibilities of Modern Journalism in an Era of Immediacy and Misinformation**

According to the Encyclopaedias of Science, Technology, and Ethics (ESTE), "*journalism is the profession of writing, editing, and publishing high-frequency periodicals that aim to report and comment on events of public interest, commonly called news*" (Journalism Ethics, n.d.). Journalism is a profession that requires quality in dealing with events and necessitates its practitioners to employ efficient procedures for gathering, verifying, and reporting events. Researchers who study journalism agree upon the fact that journalists' basic role in society is to inform citizens by providing reliable news for them (Ainakhuagbor, Arikenbi, Ikharo, & Ekhueorohan, 2023; Diekerhof, 2023; Roger & Hirst, 2022; Winston & Winston, 2020). However, journalists have more to offer to society; Winston and Winston (2020) argue that journalists not only provide reliable news but also act as mediators in shaping public discourse and raising public awareness. On the same matter, Roger & Hirst (2022) suggest that the role of journalists extends beyond information provision; they are the watchdogs of society, holding those in power accountable for their actions.

While some researchers emphasize how journalists serve as gatekeepers, watchdogs, lapdogs, and informers of society, other researchers seem to focus more on the practical aspect of journalism, analysing how news is processed and how journalists harness technology to gather, analyse and report news. Across academia, there are several studies on how news stories are moulded in newsrooms and what obstacles journalists encounter during their information-gathering procedures (Picha Edwardsson, Al-Saqaf, & Nygren, 2023; Zhang & Li, 2020; Lecheler, Kruikemeier, de Haan, Katz, & Mays, 2019; Brandtzaeg, Følstad, & Chaparro

Domínguez, 2018). In general, news stories are formed through an editorial journey, starting with the conception of an idea or event and progressing through successive stages of data collection, and analysis. Collected data is then rigorously evaluated based on validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. It moves through an editorial process where all pieces of information are critically scrutinized and dismantled, separating facts from opinion, and information from disinformation. These journalistic practices involve rigorous research, verification, careful story framing, and consideration of legal and ethical aspects.

With new advances in technology, several journalists enhance their journalistic practices through reliance on social media and online platforms to pinpoint events, sort information and collect sufficient data. The internet enables wider access to news and information across a variety of platforms and paves the way to a new Platform Society (van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018) where new communication technologies, more importantly social media, allow journalists to interact with events as they occur, gather available information, verify sources, and report news instantaneously. These new technologies provide important information for journalists and an important space for diversifying perspectives. However, even with new advances in technology, collecting information is not always as smooth as it might appear. While social media shortcuts paths to finding news stories, it also unfolds a set of obstacles.

Journalists usually encounter obstacles and barriers during both information gathering and verification, especially when dealing with information online. Bruce Garrison (2000) is one of the first researchers who dealt with online obstacles in computer-mediated communication. Even before social media, Garrison warned that advances in technology could exacerbate existing problems in information gathering. He contends that journalists have perpetually faced barriers while collecting information, including inaccuracy, incompleteness of information, unreliability of sources, and deceptive behaviours of information providers. In his works, Garrison argues that these existing truth barriers can easily migrate into the World Wide Web or even help in creating new barriers.

While discussing the role of technology in providing information, Garrison demonstrates that gathering and verifying information online might pose a major challenge for journalists, especially those who face strict deadlines and strive to be the first to report news. Garrison believes that advancements in technology require journalists to adapt and develop new online research skills. He highly accentuated the need for continuous newsroom training to help overcome new emerging obstacles.

In today's news market, the major obstacle to news gathering is the abundance of news from various sources, perspectives, angles, and ideologies, as well as time constraints for verification and fact-checking. In a study by Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, and Følstad (2018), the researchers argue that the abundance of information online, as well as the speed with which newsrooms must function today, puts high pressure on journalistic practices. Social media facilitates information gathering but at the same time can result in confusion owing to the increasing volume of information it provides.

Similarly, Hornmoen et al. (2017) contend that today's fast-paced news publishing environment requires journalists to simultaneously monitor social media and filter information from different platforms to identify reliable content for their news stories. The researchers argue that the real challenge to journalistic information gathering today is the plurality of information and information providers. Hornmoen, et al. (op.cit) conducted interviews with 22 European journalists and observed that journalists must keep track of various social media platforms to gather information. The interviewees believe that online tracing of social interactions and social events is often problematic because social media platforms provide varying degrees of attention to events, especially during emergencies and breaking news; the interviewees emphasise the necessity of simultaneously monitoring all platforms to stay abreast of evolving events.

Additionally, Adeyemi Obalanlege (2017) argues that the abundance of information on social media platforms forces journalists to opt for new roles and practices. He argues that journalists today are not only reporting

news and informing the public of events as they happen but are also responsible for the critical task of discerning between reliable and unreliable sources for the public. The abundance of news and the time journalists need to put into discerning the reliability of sources puts huge pressure on newsrooms, especially in a news market characterised by immediacy in news reporting and the presentation of news often as a source of entertainment. In this digital age, where information travels at unprecedented speeds, journalists are under constant pressure to provide news as it unfolds. This demand for immediacy ensures that the public remains well-informed and engaged with events.

However, while immediacy serves to keep the public informed in real time, it simultaneously burdens the traditional journalistic values of accuracy and reliability (Diekerhof, 2023). In the relentless race to break news stories, news organizations often face heightened pressures to deliver information swiftly, sometimes at the expense of thorough fact-checking. The tension between the immediacy of reporting and the reliability of content has been widely discussed in the works of Els Diekerhof (2023). Diekerhof discusses that social media forces journalists to compete over who is the first to present news. But in the middle of this competition, Diekerhof argues, immediacy in reporting can increase the likelihood of errors, inaccuracies, and the dissemination of unverified information. As journalists grapple with the constant pressure to be the first to break a news story, there is a temptation to prioritize speed over precision, Diekerhof argues. This rush can lead to incomplete fact-checking, reliance on unverified sources, and even sensationalism –the presentation of stories to provoke public interest or excitement at the expense of accuracy.

While the speed of news production and reporting is vital, balancing the need for quick reporting with the duty to provide reliable and trustworthy information is an ongoing challenge that continues to shape the contemporary news landscape. To ensure immediacy and credibility in news reporting, there is a pressing need to harness technology and create innovative media tools for verification. Social media platforms and news outlets focus on creating systems dedicated to fact-checking in

collaboration with independent organizations. Among these systems are crowdsourced fact-checking tools such as FactCheck.org, FactCheckEU, Citizen Evidence Lab, First Draft, Snopes.com, PolitiFact, and online fact-checking tools and browser extensions like "NewsGuard" and "InVID WeVerify". Besides, social media platforms use algorithms and automated systems that limit misinformation speed by relying on machines and human fact-checkers. However, using new media tools greatly depends on how journalists embrace technology and use it in their daily news and information gathering.

To sum up, in discussing the implication of social media on journalism, Ahmad (2023) asserts that the surge in information flow, amplified by social media, exerts substantial pressure on journalists to discern sources and sift through misinformation. Ahmad argues that "*digital journalism demands new skills, such as mastery of technology and data analysis*" (2023, p. 24). He believes that the lack of these skills endangers the validity and reliability of information online. Ahmad's perspective highlights the dual role of journalists: embracing digital tools and online platforms to reach wider audiences while unwaveringly upholding the tenets of responsible journalism. He illustrates that "*journalists must master technology skills, be flexible in creating innovative content, and be ethically responsible in spreading the news*" (2023, p. 26). This includes rigorous fact-checking, source verification, and the preservation of a clear distinction between news and opinion.

## **1.2. Social Media and the Challenges of Information Overload in Morocco's News Landscape**

Morocco has a rich and diverse media landscape, where different types of news outlets coexist and compete to attract the audience. The Moroccan news media landscape comprises various types of news outlets, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television channels, and online social media platforms. These outlets cover a wide range of topics and use new communication technologies to cater to different types of people, based on accessibility, language preferences, gratification and general interests. In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as a major

source of news and information for many Moroccans, especially the young generation, who tend to spend much of their time interacting with content on these platforms.

According to a study by DataReportal, Morocco had 33.18 million internet users in January 2023, with 21.30 million social media users, 17.30 million Facebook users, 21.30 million YouTube users, and 9.27 million TikTok users (DataReportal, 2023). These figures underscore the significant role that social media plays in shaping the country's news consumption habits. Journalists in Morocco increasingly rely on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to engage with their audiences and stay informed about the evolving needs and interests of the public. Social media platforms provide a vast array of perspectives and sources of information, enabling journalists to track emerging stories, engage in real-time reporting, and interact directly with the public. However, these new advancements present opportunities and challenges; due to the increasing reliance on social media, newsrooms grapple with the pressure to report quickly while ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the information they disseminate. Nowadays, Moroccan journalists must adapt their practices and integrate digital tools, using them as essential resources for identifying potential news stories, monitoring trends, and offering continuous updates.

In addition, due to the availability of social media platforms to all internet users, news providers are abundant and an increasing flow of information in Moroccan society. Considering recent social and media developments in Morocco, Saad Eddine Lamzouwaq (2019) argues that advances in technology, access to the internet and national and international political upheavals allow online news outlets to expand increasingly. He believes these factors allow new news outlets to emerge on all levels: global, national and local. While this expansion appears advantageous, hence more news outlets would mean more representation of social events and more democratic participation in news production, Lamzouwaq argues that the availability and plurality of news providers consequently results in the abundance of information online and the abundance of news perspectives. This means that amidst the constant need

for information and the constant rivalry between news providers to present news, social media platforms allow information to flow in floods, which sometimes may obscure the truth and result in misinformation.

Parallel to Lamzouwaq's analysis of the news media landscape in Morocco, Benchenna and Marchetti (2021) present an overview of how news media in Morocco migrated to the web and radically shifted the news market. This issue has been previously referred to in this study as Platformization. Benchenna and Marchetti provide a comprehensive analysis of how news media outlets emerged in Morocco and express common risks and challenges faced by the Moroccan news media landscape. The researchers illustrate how digital news outlets expanded to social media and explore how digital media platforms revolutionised the dissemination of news and information in Morocco. However, while digital media continues to grow, it is important to regulate their news production patterns and adhere to ethical journalistic norms and principles.

Moving forward with this debate, the Minister of Youth, Culture, and Communication, Ben Said (2023), argues the news media market in Morocco is chaotic, with the number of Moroccan online newspapers exceeding 1200. Ben Said believes it is time to amend the Press and Publication Law of 2016 to regulate electronic media. He emphasised that new conditions must be set for establishing online newspapers and that online news media should adhere to the conditions of entrepreneurship and be recognised as journalistic enterprises. Today, the major challenge to the Moroccan news landscape is the abundance of news providers and the intrusion of non-journalists into journalism.

In conclusion, Moroccan journalism is a complex and dynamic field, where different types of news outlets coexist and compete, and where different challenges and opportunities arise and evolve. Within this rapidly changing landscape, social media has become a potential source of news and information for many Moroccans. Social media platforms offer new opportunities and benefits to news producers and consumers, as well as new challenges and risks to both. In seeking the objective of this study, it was important to discuss the Moroccan news landscape before moving into

the study's theoretical framework. New advances in technologies as well as new changes in the Moroccan media landscape, dictate journalists to opt for new strategies in data collection and verification.

## **2. Theoretical Framework of the Study**

In investigating journalists' attitudes and perceptions concerning information gathering and verification, this study is underpinned by the Uses and Gratification Theory, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, Source Credibility Theory and the Platformization framework. Uses and Gratification theory was developed in the mid-20th century by scholars such as Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973). This theory posits that media audiences are not passive receivers of information but are engaged in selecting and consuming content to satisfy specific needs and desires. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory, also known as the Diffusion Theory, was developed by Everett M. Rogers and introduced in his 1962 book, "Diffusion of Innovations" (Rogers E. M., 1962). This theory provides insights into how new ideas, technologies, innovations, or practices spread and are adopted within a society or a social system. The source credibility theory, as propounded by Hovland, Janis and Kelly in 1963 (Umeogu, 2012), investigates how communication's persuasiveness is affected by the perceived credibility of the source of the communication. It states that a communicator's positive characteristics influence the receiver's acceptance of a message.

Additionally, Platformization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) refers to the process by which digital platforms mediate and organise economic, social, and cultural interactions. In journalism, this concept highlights the reliance on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram for disseminating content, gathering information, and engaging with audiences. These platforms serve as intermediaries, fundamentally altering the gatekeeping role historically held by traditional news organizations (van Dijck, poell, & De Waal, 2018). Their algorithms determine the visibility and prioritisation of news stories, influencing public discourse and shaping the agenda-setting function of journalism. Platformization encapsulates the increasing dependence of media industries on digital platforms for

distribution, audience engagement, and revenue generation. The shift to platform-centric journalism has implications for both the production and reception of news, challenging traditional journalistic practices and introducing new paradigms for credibility and audience interaction. Understanding these dynamics is critical for analysing how Moroccan journalists navigate the complex interplay between social media and journalistic integrity.

Extending these frameworks and theories to journalism, journalists play a dual role as creators and consumers of content and media. This study assumes that journalists' attitudes and perceptions toward information gathering and verification are shaped by their specific information-seeking motives, personal goals, and professional values. It also acknowledges that journalists' decisions about credibility and trustworthiness, besides how to verify information, and what stories to prioritise are influenced by their quest for gratification and the innovativeness of their information-gathering strategies. This framework aims to uncover the intricate interplay between the journalistic role as information gatekeepers and the journalists' trust, gratification-seeking and innovativeness, shedding light on the evolving landscape of news production and consumption in the digital age. The theories used in this framework offer a lens to understand the dynamic interplay between journalists' preferences, technological advancements, and journalistic practices.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to comprehensively investigate the challenges and opportunities inherent in utilising social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, within the context of Moroccan journalism, with a particular emphasis on information gathering, fact-checking, and content verification. This study specifically focuses on Moroccan journalists and explores the strategies they employ for content gathering and verification, especially during breaking news and critical events.

### **3.2. Research Questions**

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What do Moroccan journalists employ as the primary strategies for gathering news content on social media platforms?
2. How do Moroccan journalists verify the credibility and accuracy of information on social media?
3. What challenges and obstacles do Moroccan journalists encounter when using social media as a source of information, and how do they address these challenges?
4. To what extent does the immediacy of social media impact Moroccan journalists' news reporting practices and their ability to ensure the reliability of the information they disseminate?

These research questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Moroccan journalists navigate information on social media, shedding light on the challenges posed by social media in news reporting and the impact of immediacy on journalistic practices.

### **3.3. Methods**

To address the research questions, this study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing structured interviews with 21 Moroccan journalists, 11 male and 10 female with experience ranging from 1 to 13 years. Based on respondents' preferences, the interviews were presented as self-administered questionnaires for 17 participants and as phone call or video call interviews with 4 participants. For the self-administered questionnaires, respondents were presented with questions in standard Arabic and were asked to read and answer these questions using Arabic, English or French which were later on translated into English. As for the interpersonal interviews, the 4 participants were phone-called and interviewed in Moroccan Darija and their speech was transcribed and translated to English.

All respondents were asked the same questions in the same order and participants' answers were transcribed and translated to English using Clipto.AI and coded using MAXQDA software. Interview questions were first

sent to all 17 participants using LinkedIn while other participants were communicated via WhatsApp and phone numbers. Because of some privacy concerns, some participants preferred using Google Forms and requested anonymity in reporting their responses, so a Google Form link was used to suit participants' preferences. Generally, the interviews consisted of open-ended questions that aimed to elicit participants' views and experiences on the following topics:

- Attitudes toward online news gathering.
- Obstacles and challenges in news and information gathering.
- The tools and methods used to verify the accuracy and reliability of information.
- The challenges and difficulties faced in the fact-checking and verification process.
- The ethical and professional standards followed in reporting urgent and breaking news.
- The impact of misinformation and misinformation on journalistic practices.

### **3.4. Case Study**

Interview questions include general questions on media habits, information gathering and information verification practices as well as specific questions concerning news stories that emerged in the aftermath of the Al Haouz earthquake that occurred on September 8, 2023, in Morocco. This event was chosen for this study because it triggered a wave of misleading information on social media and other platforms, posing challenges for journalists who had to report on the disaster and its aftermath. This event was urgent and required journalists to engage with different information urgently, be it fake or true, and present adequate and accurate information to people.

To elicit participants' attitudes toward this event, a list of misinformation stories was presented to the participants, comprising nine news headlines that were widely shared on social media. These news stories were directly connected to the events and are:

- [Video of Rescuing a Baby from the Rubble](#)

- [Sheltering Victims of the Earthquake in Cristiano Hotel](#)
- [Fall of an Aid Plane in Azilal](#)
- [Free Toll services](#)
- [Damage to the Kingdom's Dams due to the Earthquake](#)
- [Tsunami Waves in the Casablanca Region](#)
- [Power Outage in Al Haouz Regions](#)
- [Sending World Cup Containers by Qatar](#)
- [Preventing Aid from Reaching Earthquake Victims](#)

The participants were presented with these news items and were asked to share their attitudes toward information verification during the breaking news event. They were also asked to share their insights regarding citizens' susceptibility to misinformation in this context.

#### 4. Results

The study sample consists of 21 Moroccan media professionals, with a nearly equal gender distribution of 11 males and 10 females. Participants work across various media platforms, including 3 in newspapers, 9 in digital news, 3 in radio, 3 in television, and 3 as freelancers, reflecting a diverse engagement with both traditional and modern forms of journalism. Participants engage with a variety of news topics, including political news, sports news, social news and celebrity news. The sample consists of both novice and experienced participants (Range 1-13 years/ Mean: 4.14 years), with the average experience leaning toward early-career professionals.

*Table 1: Sample Description*

<b>Nationality</b>	Moroccan
<b>Number of Participants</b>	21
<b>Sex</b>	Male=11, Female=10
<b>Type of Media</b>	Newspaper (3), Digital News (9), Radio (3), Television (3), freelance media (3)
<b>Areas of Focus</b>	Coverage and Reporting (9), Report Writing (6), Investigation (6)
<b>Experience Range</b>	1-13 ( $\bar{x} = 4.14$ )

The main findings of this study reveal that social media platforms play a vital role in information gathering and verification processes. 14

participants stated that they use social media to check the accuracy and reliability of content. All 21 participants confirmed that they use social media to debunk and verify falsity for the public when they notice misinformation. **Table 2** illustrates participants' preferences, when it comes to social media usage while **Table 3** indicates participant's media habits concerning information gathering and content verification.

Participants' speeches were thoroughly analysed to understand the nuances of their references to social media, specifically examining which platforms they emphasized and preferred when discussing every topic in the interview. This analysis aimed to uncover patterns in platform preference. It examined whether participants favoured Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, and how these choices shaped their views and behaviours.

**Table 2: Social Media Reference Frequency**

Social Media Use	Number of Participants	Frequency
Facebook	15	71.42%
YouTube	8	38.09%
X	2	9.52%
Instagram	1	4.76%
TikTok	1	4.76%
No Reference to a Specific Platform	7	33.33%

The results are presented as frequencies that illustrate participants' reference to a specific social media platform while discussing social media in general. Participants in this study seem to focus more on Facebook and YouTube in news reporting and information gathering. Even though other platforms were mentioned, Facebook remains the most relied upon. The table shows that Facebook (71%) and YouTube (38%) are the primary tools for audience engagement, checking public interest, and verifying information.

**Table 3: Data Collection and Verification Behaviours**

<b>Question 1</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you use social media platforms to collect information?	Yes	17
	Sometimes	4
	No	0
<b>Question 2</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you face any problems when using social media platforms to collect information?	Yes	8
	No	13
<b>Question 3</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you use any software or websites to trace events on social media platforms?	Yes	6
	No	15
<b>Question 4</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you use social media platforms to investigate the credibility and accuracy of news?	Yes	14
	Sometimes	7
	No	0
<b>Question 5</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Are you currently a member of a data audit or fact-checking group?	Yes	10
	No	11
<b>Question 6</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you rely on any software or websites to verify information?	Yes	12
	Sometimes	0
	No	9
<b>Question 7</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you interact with fellow journalists to verify information?	Yes	18
	Sometimes	2
	No	1
<b>Question 8</b>	<b>Answers</b>	
Do you check information for citizens when you notice misinformation?	Yes	21
	Sometimes	0
	No	0

Even though participants rely on social media in their journalistic processes, only 14 participants rely on social media platforms to check the credibility of a news story. Only 6 participants rely on additional software or websites to trace public interests on social media. 12 participants rely on software or websites to verify news stories. These websites are majorly Google Reverse Image Search, FactCheck.org, Snopes, and official state websites. As for debunking misinformation, all participants agree upon the importance of debunking misinformation for citizens during misinformation eruptions and critical events.

Additionally, participants express similar thoughts regarding existing challenges to the profession of journalism and the new obstacles social media brings about. **Table 4** indicates participants' perspectives on the challenges journalists face in the new digital age. On top of these challenges, misinformation and the intrusion of non-journalists in the news production process seem more paramount. Intrusion refers to the practice of interference, obstruction, or influence that disrupts the ability of journalists to gather, report, and disseminate trustworthy news and information. This intrusion can take various forms that are discussed further in the discussion section.

**Table 4: Current Challenges to news reporting and news production**

Challenges	Frequency	Number of Participants
The spread of misinformation	100%	21
Intrusion of non-journalists	42%	9
The Abundance of Information	14,2%	3
Lack of Awareness and Ignorance	14,2%	3
The continuous demand for information	4,7%	1
Time Constraints	4,7%	1

To sum up, the findings highlight the crucial role of social media in gathering and verifying information, with Facebook and YouTube being the primary platforms. Participants accentuate the importance of social media in news reporting and information verification but they believe that

information obtained from social media should not be treated as absolute truth.

## 5. Discussion

In the context of this study, participants widely understand the cruciality of social media platforms as potential sources of information, yet they express varying attitudes concerning news on these platforms. All participants in this study use social media to collect data and also present data but to some varying degrees. 17 journalists out of 21 use social media platforms with the direct intention of collecting information while the rest rely on social media platforms to target potential news stories. Some participants stated that social media helps distinguish newsworthy topics and analyse public interactions with information on these topics. They use platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to follow and interact with different news sources, such as professionals, social activists, volunteers, eyewitnesses, experts, celebrities, and public influencers. Considering participants' attitudes toward news on social media, some participants are circumspect when it comes to reliance on information on these platforms. They believe that most news stories that circulate on these platforms are less trustworthy and should not be considered true without checking the credibility of their sources.

In this discussion section, the key findings of this research are compared to existing literature on journalists' online data collection and data verification strategies. This section summarizes key findings from the qualitative data collection procedure while focusing primarily on these two aspects: the use of social media as a news source and data verification strategies in the age of misinformation. In the end, this study presents some misinformation case studies to understand the influence of social media on journalism in Morocco, highlighting key factors behind susceptibility to misinformation and discussing Moroccan journalists' approach to real-time reporting and data authentication during breaking news.

## 5.1. Participants' Data Collection and Verification Strategies during Breaking News

Data collection and data verification are crucial stages in the making of news. They are essential for maintaining the accuracy, credibility, and integrity of journalistic content. Journalists rely on a combination of data collection practices, rigorous fact-checking, and verification techniques to ensure that the information they report is accurate, credible, and reliable. As mentioned in the previous sections, data collection and data verification have been fundamentally revolutionized and platformized with new media and communication technologies. In this section, the focus is to delve into participants' data collection and data verification strategies pinpointing key journalistic practices to deal with information, as well as new emerging challenges.

Speaking of data collection, participants in this study agree upon the fact that the first stage in data collection is to understand the public perspective on what news is worthy of reporting.

Journalistic work begins with careful research to understand the event or topic to be covered. This includes gathering information from a variety of sources and verifying its credibility. Then, a thorough analysis of the collected information is done to understand the context and relationships between the different elements. (Participant 11)

Once a topic is selected, information on this topic is gathered and verified. One of the participants summarizes this process as follows:

Gathering information for news reports is based on several stages, starting with research, data analysis, and using interviews to check eyewitnesses and obtain diverse perspectives. The accuracy of information must be stressed and all information should be organized appropriately and clearly before writing the news story (participant 5).

In this study sample, participants express similar thoughts regarding data collection. Participant 3 adds that *“social media can help journalists understand what topics are newsworthy. When internet users interact with*

*an issue this means that this issue can be an important news story.”* Some participants integrate social media platforms into their data collection practices because they can allow them to pinpoint newsworthy stories without displacing or sending professionals to the field. Participant 3 argues, “*I just keep track on hashtags and I rely on my network of friends and coworkers to understand what issues are more important.*” However, while social media platforms simplify tracking events as they occur and allow for instant interaction with news stories, it is still important for journalists to simultaneously monitor information from various sources, online and offline, to potentially identify trustworthy information.

As for emergencies and breaking news stories, one of the participants argues that social media allows journalists to “*communicate directly with relevant authorities and specialists for additional analysis and clarification*” of information (Participant 5). However, another participant believes that “*despite the utility of social media in searching for content and gathering data, it is still important for news producers to stick to sending journalists into the field, especially during breaking news*” (participant 3).

Additionally, social media platforms today are abundant with all types of information. Participant 10 argues that “*the abundance of information and the availability of communication platforms for everyone [allows] for the possibility to publish anything*”. As mentioned earlier, much research on this issue illustrates that information inundates online platforms, particularly amid emergent news events and crises (Garrison, 2000; Hornmoen, et al., 2017; Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, & Følstad, 2018). Under critical circumstances, a fervent race ensues among journalists and media consumers alike; each media user is striving to report breaking news rapidly, as news is becoming a source of profit and revenue due to the monetisation of social media. This competition allows for news and information to spread in large quantities and from several sources; but, as a consequence, social media becomes superabundant with news about events, news that can either be either true or fake. So, with every news event, misinformation comes in bulk and circulates across a variety of platforms.

With the abundance of information and the spread of misinformation, it is much more difficult for journalists to rely solely on social media. In these situations, as one of the participants argues, it is essential to *“return to the origin of the news and the first source of any information and attach the largest number of evidence that confirms or denies any claim”* (participant 13). Diversifying sources and tracking news stories to their origin means that journalists must put much effort into their practices during breaking news and harness technology to engage more actively with online information.

As for data verification, only 9 participants in this study used tools to verify news content. Most participants prefer verifying breaking news by comparing data from multiple sources. These include official statements, press releases, eyewitness accounts, images, and videos. Checking for inconsistencies helps confirm credibility. Among the strategies that were mentioned in this study is the diversification of sources, mainly through checking multiple news sources and tracing original content. Participant 1, for example, argues that the best strategy to verify the information is *“by ascertaining three different sources that are geographically and editorially distant”* and *“relying first on official news agencies, official reports, then reliable news sites”*.

Collaborating with fellow journalists is also an important strategy for verifying information. 18 participants confirmed that they collaborate with other journalists when gathering data, and 2 participants illustrated that they sometimes collaborate while only one stated they he/she doesn't collaborate with other fellow journalists. In the case of breaking news, it is crucial to engage directly with multiple sources, including experts in the field, and try as much as possible to check the background of information providers. Based on the findings of this study, relying on social media solely during breaking news might result in the spread of misinformation even among trustworthy journalists and media experts.

Additionally, 15 participants believe that it is important to check official sources and official reports first before dealing with any other source of data. During breaking news stories, it is always important to rely on

eyewitnesses and check authorities and official reports. When participants were asked about how they balance between accuracy and immediacy during breaking news, all participants affirmed that accuracy comes first. In this regard, one of the participants argues:

My role as a journalist in reporting breaking news is to provide basic and correct information as quickly as possible. I collect information from a variety of sources, such as officials, eyewitnesses, and experts, and verify its authenticity before it is published. I use various media, such as television, radio, newspapers, websites, and social media, to convey breaking news to the public. My goal is to provide people with the necessary information to make informed decisions and raise awareness of important events that affect their lives. (Participant 13)

Journalists must not share news stories they are suspicious about. If they do, it is important to refer to that during reporting and indicate that the given information might be false. Participant 16 argues that journalists must balance between immediacy and accuracy by *“quickly checking reliable sources, using cautious terminology to avoid conveying unconfirmed information, while providing basic details and pledging to update information over time to maintain news accuracy.”* This is to say, when collecting data, especially during breaking news events, journalists must ensure to provide only reliable information and offer follow-up news stories with additional information once they verify them.

To sum up, effective data collection and data verification strategies ensure and improve the quality and credibility of the news and information that are produced by journalists and media outlets. During breaking news events, journalists must be the first to report news and provide enough information on events. When discussing the balance between immediacy and accuracy in dealing with breaking news, all participants argue that accuracy should be put first. Immediate reporting of news without fact-checking goes against the ethical principles of journalism. In essence, the findings of this study reaffirm existing research findings on journalistic roles in the new digital age. (Obalanlege, 2017; Farid, 2023).

## 5.2. Participants' Reaction to Misinformation Eruption During Al Haouz Earthquake

As the digital news landscape continues to evolve and the consumption of online content escalates, distinguishing between credible and deceptive information has become increasingly challenging. The spread of misinformation in society not only threatens the integrity of information but also poses profound challenges to societal harmony. Quite recently, there has been a significant amount of misinformation in Morocco, more interestingly during critical events. In critical situations, such as disasters, the dissemination of accurate and reliable information is crucial for informed decision-making and community support. However, during critical events, the spread of misinformation usually intensifies. In such times, people are more susceptible to believing and sharing unverified news stories, as they seek to make sense of their surroundings.

Morocco is not immune to the problem of misinformation. During sensitive events and breaking news situations, a huge number of misinformation proliferate, more particularly on social media. In this section, the focus is to explore participants' interaction with misinformation and breaking news regarding the event of the Al Haouz earthquake. In the wake of this event, a flurry of misleading information has surfaced, sowing confusion and triggering mass fear among Moroccans. During this event, journalists and media outlets had to verify and corroborate the authenticity, origin, and context of the news and information they came across. Unfortunately, during this disaster, a lot of journalists have also fallen prey to misinformation, especially those who were reinforced with visual evidence. While social media has been deemed tremendously useful for news reporting and informing society during this event, it is also responsible for the spreading of misinformation.

Speaking of the Al Haouz earthquake, all participants agree that "*social media was useful in informing the public about current updates and also maintaining communication with the affected people*" (participant 1). The role of social media platforms following the earthquake, or during crises in general, is assessed as highly significant by participants. These

platforms are invaluable for communicating information about the situation on the ground. They facilitated fast and instant communication with the audience, enabling viewers to receive immediate updates and share their experiences.

Social media also played a crucial role in providing data about humanitarian needs, particularly in remote areas where access was challenging; thus, social media's role in this case was to shorten the distance between aid providers and those in need. Participant 9 argues that "*it would not have been possible to see the suffering of the people in the areas affected by the earthquake without social media*". Besides, these platforms were instrumental in raising awareness, mobilizing social support, and revealing the extent of the disaster and its impact on affected populations. However, participants acknowledged the dual nature of social media. Participant 1 argues that "*social media sites are more vulnerable to misinformation and misinformation and therefore not a reliable source*" (Participant 1). Participants emphasized the need for careful verification of information due to the potential spread of rumours and false news.

The widespread spread of misinformation during the earthquake can be attributed to a multitude of factors. **Table 5** illustrates some common triggers and stimuli of misinformation during breaking events based on participants' perspectives.

**Table 5: FACTORS INCREASING THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION DURING SENSITIVE EVENTS**

Factors Fuelling the Surge of Misinformation Amid Critical Events	Number of Participants	Frequency
Emotional susceptibility	10	52,3%
Lack of awareness	7	33,3%
Insufficient media literacy	5	23,8%
Accessibility to media production tools	3	14,2%
Curiosity	3	14,2%
Dependence on social media for news	2	9,5%
Creating buzz and personal Profit	2	9,5%

The most significant factor fuelling the surge of misinformation is emotional susceptibility, this includes fear, sympathy, anger and curiosity. Speaking of the earthquake, one of the participants reasons that during critical situations:

People get scared and they get more scared when they deal with unfathomable issues. The earthquake had no prior signs, it just happened. The spread of misinformation also just happens, it happens like an earthquake that sometimes doesn't give any prior signs. Because of fear, news at that time, be it true or false was easily shared and accepted as truth.

(Participant 3)

In addition to fear and emotional susceptibility, the lack of awareness and media literacy skills also have a great influence on how misinformation spreads. When people have no prior knowledge about an issue and are less knowledgeable about how media works, it is more likely that they become susceptible and vulnerable to misinformation. Therefore, illiteracy, ignorance, and the frequent reliance on social media as news sources amplify the spread of misinformation and make people more vulnerable to it. However, illiteracy, curiosity, ignorance and emotional susceptibility are not the only factors behind spreading misinformation; there are intentional factors at play, where some individuals may spread rumours knowingly to support personal agendas, and political motives as well as to create buzz and benefit from clickbait.

Additionally, sometimes the blame for the spread of misinformation is put on social media platforms themselves. With advances in technology, media production is no longer limited to highly qualified professionals. Social media provides simplified tools that can make creating and spreading misinformation much easier. The ease of access to media production on social media platforms, coupled with people's desire to click and share, exacerbates the surge of misinformation. New features in social media today can even forge audio-visual materials of fake events with the help of artificial intelligence (AI). Algorithms can contextualize these materials and suggest them to viewers which makes them go viral. This is the case for all

misinformation stories that were suggested for analysis in this study. They have spread widely and all of them were supported with forged or decontextualized visual proofs. In dealing with such materials, journalists have to verify and corroborate the authenticity, origin, and context of these materials and share their results with their audience. During the earthquake in Al Haouz, numerous news outlets and media professionals took debunking misinformation as a priority.

In a news article entitled: “Debunking Morocco’s earthquake misinformation: Sorting fact from misinformation”, by Imane Lechheb (Lechheb, 2023), the author shows a compilation of misinformation that erupted in the aftermath of the earthquake. These misinformation articles range from False evacuation alerts that were claimed to be reported by Hespress to Fake videos of buildings collapsing and ruined ships. In this article, Lechheb debunks numerous misinformation stories that were widely spread at that time. More news outlets have engaged in this debunking of misinformation. Another example is MAP, the Moroccan Press Agency, which kept debunking misinformation stories as they appeared. MAP puts effort into sorting out the truth from the lies (MAP, 2023). The agency kept sorting various news stories and pinpointing their accuracy and origin to their audience. On social media, there have been also numerous efforts by non-journalists to debunk misinformation. It was noticed that whenever a misinformation story is proven to be false, several media pages, especially on Facebook, and individuals re-shared this news adding hashtags like misinformation, misinformation story, or misinformation SOS.

As for the study sample, during the earthquake, participants reacted to the influx of news and information by engaging directly with relevant officials, civil society associations, and trusted news sources in the field. *“Coordination has been made with local authorities and humanitarian agencies to obtain accurate information and live updates. Emphasis has been placed on providing comprehensive and objective coverage to provide the necessary information to the public”* (Participant 5). As for data collection at that time, participants contend that they diligently sought out information and contacted authorities and residents in the affected region

before sharing any news story. In the wake of the earthquake, numerous journalists were dispatched to the scene to gather information and coordinate with local authorities and officials. Discussing misinformation eruptions, several respondents indicated exposure to multiple misinformation stories. Meanwhile, participants believe that the presence of compelling visual content, such as videos, played a significant role in influencing individuals' perceptions of misinformation. 10 participants mentioned that the videos that were depicting the rescue of an infant from the rubble, appeared convincing and were challenging for them to verify.

***Picture 1: the rescue of an infant from the rubble in Al Haouz after 3 days of the earthquake***



(Newsline, 2023)

To sum up, the surge of misinformation poses significant challenges to Moroccan society, particularly during critical events like the Al Haouz earthquake. Despite the invaluable role of social media platforms in providing real-time updates and facilitating communication during this event, they can also contribute to the spread of false information. In addition to social media, emotional susceptibility, fuelled by fear and curiosity, emerges as a primary factor driving the proliferation of misinformation on these platforms. As for the role of journalists during this event, participants illustrate that efforts to combat misinformation during critical events necessitate collaborative debunking initiatives by media outlets and rigorous fact-checking practices by journalists and media

professionals. Participants emphasized the importance of verifying information from reliable sources, engaging with local authorities, and prioritizing accuracy over immediacy in reporting. All of these practices are essential to mitigate the impact of misinformation and ensure informed decision-making and community support during crises.

## **6. Conclusion**

The main findings of this study reveal that social media platforms play a vital role in the information-gathering and verification process of Moroccan journalists. The 21 participants in this study illustrate that they use social media as a source of news, eyewitness accounts, images, videos, and other data that can help them report on events. They also use social media as a tool for fact-checking, cross-referencing, and contrasting the information they obtain from different sources, such as official statements, press releases, and traditional media outlets. However, this study also highlights the challenges and risks that social media entails for Moroccan journalists. These include issues of information abundance, time constraints, the continuous demand for news, intrusion of non-journalists on the field, and misinformation. Participants express their concerns about the proliferation of misinformation, rumours, propaganda, and misinformation on social media as the primary challenge to news production in this digital era. They also acknowledge the difficulties of verifying the authenticity, origin, and context of the information they find on social media because of the nature of social media that allows different news and information to spread instantaneously.

This study contributes to the existing literature on online data collection and data verification by focusing on a specific case study of the Al Haouz earthquake in Morocco, which has not been researched before. It provides insights into the perception and practices of Moroccan journalists during critical events, which are usually accompanied by a surge of misinformation. As this study shows, the role of journalists during crises is not only to inform people but also to debunk misinformation for them. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the pivotal role of journalists as

gatekeepers of accurate information, serving to empower the public with verified, credible news during times of uncertainty and crisis.

This study, however, is not without limitations. While the qualitative approach used in this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions and practices of Moroccan journalists during critical events, there are several limitations to consider. Firstly, the use of self-administered questionnaires may limit the depth of responses and the opportunity for clarification or probing by the interviewer. Direct interaction with interviewers could have provided richer data and allowed for a better understanding of respondents' perspectives. Additionally, the sample size of 21 journalists may not be fully representative of the entire population of Moroccan journalists, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, while this study focuses on the specific case of the Al Haouz earthquake, the findings may not apply to other contexts or events, limiting the external validity of the research. Finally, this study does not examine the actual content and quality of the news and information that the journalists produce and disseminate on social media, nor the impact and reception of their reporting by the audience and the authorities. These are some of the areas that future research can explore and expand on.

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