



UNIVERSIDADE
CATÓLICA
PORTUGUESA

**THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN INSTITUTIONAL
COMMUNICATION FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES
FACTANZA MEDIA CASE STUDY**

Internship Report submitted to Universidade Católica
Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture Studies,
specialization in Management of the Arts and Culture

By

Giulia Valentina Paglia

Faculty of Human Science

September 2025



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ABSTRACT

In an era of information fragmentation and declining trust in traditional journalism, institutions face growing challenges in engaging younger audiences. This internship report addresses this problem by investigating the role of social-native alternative media in institutional communication, focusing on *Factanza Media* as a case study.

The research is informed by debates in media and culture studies, particularly around alternative media and the shifting bases of communicative legitimacy in the digital age. Within this framework, Factanza is interpreted not only as a news provider but as a cultural actor that builds trust by adopting the language, aesthetics, and values of platform-native publics.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with members of the Factanza team, two campaign case studies developed with NPOs (CESVI and WeWorld) and an audience survey targeting social media users aged 18–35. This triangulation allowed for both an internal analysis of editorial strategies and an external assessment of audience perceptions.

Findings show that Factanza's accessible formats and visually driven storytelling are effective in raising awareness and simplifying complex issues. Yet a persistent gap emerges between symbolic participation and concrete civic action, reflecting the phenomenon of slacktivism.

Ultimately, the thesis concludes that Factanza exemplifies both the potential and the fragility of alternative media: capable of reshaping the symbolic grammar of public discourse and reconnecting institutions with younger audiences, yet constrained by platform logics that privilege visibility over long-term civic engagement.

Keywords: alternative media, institutional communication, digital-native platforms, social storytelling, Gen Z, branded content, cultural engagement.

RESUMO

Num contexto marcado pela fragmentação da informação e pela crescente desconfiança no jornalismo tradicional, as instituições enfrentam dificuldades significativas em comunicar-se de forma eficaz com os públicos mais jovens. Esta dissertação procura compreender de que modo os meios de comunicação alternativos, nativos das redes sociais, podem desempenhar um papel estratégico na comunicação institucional, tomando a Factanza Media como estudo de caso.

O enquadramento teórico baseia-se nos debates em torno dos media alternativos e das transformações contemporâneas da legitimidade comunicativa no espaço digital. A partir desta perspetiva, a Factanza é analisada não apenas como um veículo de notícias, mas como um ator cultural que constrói legitimidade ao adotar a linguagem, as estéticas e os valores próprios dos públicos digitais.

Metodologicamente, recorreu-se a uma abordagem de métodos mistos, que incluiu entrevistas semiestruturadas com membros da equipa da Factanza, a análise de dois estudos de caso de *branded content* em parceria com ONGs (CESVI e WeWorld) e um inquérito a 105 utilizadores de redes sociais entre os 18 e os 35 anos. Esta triangulação metodológica permitiu cruzar a análise interna das estratégias editoriais com a perceção externa dos públicos.

Os resultados evidenciam que os formatos acessíveis e a narrativa visual da Factanza são eficazes na sensibilização e na simplificação de temas complexos. Contudo, revela-se uma lacuna persistente entre a participação simbólica e a ação cívica concreta, fenómeno frequentemente identificado como *slacktivismo*.

Conclui-se, assim, que a Factanza ilustra simultaneamente o potencial e a fragilidade dos media alternativos: consegue reconfigurar a gramática simbólica do discurso público e aproximar as instituições das novas gerações, mas permanece condicionada pelas lógicas das plataformas digitais, que privilegiam a visibilidade em detrimento do envolvimento cívico duradouro.

Palavras-chave: media alternativos; comunicação institucional; plataformas digitais nativas; narrativa social; Geração Z; *branded content*; envolvimento cultural.

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Every meaningful journey comes with its share of challenges and rewards, and these past two years have been no exception.

I feel the need to leave a few words of gratitude: this achievement is the result of the support of many people. I cannot mention them all, but I will try to summarize, let’s see if I have learned how...

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Thanks to Lorenzo, Tato—call him as you wish: you are my number one supporter, my light in dark moments, my energy. We went through this journey together, and Lisbon and Madrid will forever feel a little like our home.

Finally, my deepest thanks to my family: without your sacrifices, this path and the experiences that came with it would not have been possible. You are part of this achievement.

Ai miei nonni e alle mie nonne. Mi sarebbe piaciuto raccontarvi i miei piccoli grandi successi di persona: spero che siate fieri di me.

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Introduction

In July 2024, I began my internship at Factanza Media, an Italian editorial startup founded in 2019. Factanza is a native social media news platform that delivers concise, visually engaging, and accessible news tailored to younger generations, particularly Millennials and Gen Z. Its innovative approach, rooted in digital-first communication strategies, aligns with my academic and professional interest in understanding two things: on the one hand, how news is produced, communicated, and consumed by young generations; on the other hand, how cultural values are built and spread in today's digital society.

This research is therefore situated at the intersection of Media and Culture Studies. It considers Factanza not simply as a case study in journalism, but as a model of cultural programming in the digital age. The central challenge for cultural managers - whether in a museum, a school or a non-profit organization - is to engage audiences and demonstrate value. Factanza's case allows us to observe this challenge through three lenses that are core to cultural management: audience development, strategic partnerships with institutions and NPOs, and sustainable innovation in precarious ecosystems.

My fascination for this company stems from the realization that everything I know about the world comes from the information I consume, which makes me keenly aware of the power and, at the same time, of the limitations of news as a force shaping society.

The research does not focus exclusively on Factanza's business model or content style, but rather on its function as a cultural and communicative bridge. Through a combination of theoretical framing, qualitative interviews, case study analysis, and a quantitative audience survey, the study aims to understand whether these platforms can enable more inclusive, transparent, and engaging forms of institutional communication, while also preserving their editorial independence and credibility.

Theoretical framework

Journalism has undergone profound changes in recent decades: the decline of print, the rise of platform-based media, and the growing fragmentation of audiences. In this context, alternative media emerged as cultural intermediaries, attempting to address mainstream journalism's shortcomings while experimenting with new models of sustainability and audience engagement.

Historically, alternative media have been rooted in counter-hegemonic practices (Downing 2001; Atton 2002), later redefined as more professionalized but still critical forms of media (Sandoval & Fuchs 2010). This shift makes them relevant for cultural management: rather than oppositional activism alone, they can be seen as experimental cultural organizations that operate within digital ecosystems, testing new ways to build communities, articulate values, and create public relevance.

The tradition of Culture Studies strengthens this perspective. Stuart Hall's work on representation and encoding/decoding highlights how media are never neutral, but actively shape meaning, power relations, and identity. Factanza's editorial model, based on visual and participatory storytelling, can be read in light of Hall's insights on how audiences negotiate meanings rather than passively consume them.

Nick Couldry (2003; 2010) extends this framework by conceptualizing media as ritual spaces: practices that organize how societies construct shared realities. Factanza's use of Instagram and digital narratives resonates with Couldry's idea of media rituals, creating a participatory cultural space where young people feel both informed and represented.

At the same time, Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields helps illuminate the structural dynamics at play. Alternative platforms like Factanza enter the journalistic field with limited economic and symbolic capital, yet they accumulate cultural capital (through mastery of digital storytelling), social capital (by cultivating engaged online communities), and symbolic capital (through gaining legitimacy among younger

audiences). This dynamic mirrors the challenges faced by cultural institutions today, which must navigate fragmented publics, resource scarcity, and contested legitimacy while still demonstrating cultural value.

For this reason, the theoretical framework combines Media Studies with Cultural Sociology and Cultural Management concerns, articulated through three key dimensions. Firstly, audience development. For cultural managers, the challenge is not just to reach people but to sustain meaningful engagement. Factanza does this by using accessible language, visually compelling formats, and interactive tools such as polls or Q&A sessions. These practices create a sense of participation and community, encouraging younger audiences to reflect on complex issues (e.g., climate change, gender inequality) without feeling alienated by institutional jargon.

Secondly, strategic alliances. Cultural organizations increasingly rely on partnerships to amplify impact. Factanza collaborates with NPOs, organizations and institutions (as in the campaigns with WeWorld and CESVI), translating institutional goals into youth-friendly narratives. These alliances are instructive for cultural managers: they show how partnerships can produce innovative cultural products, while also requiring careful negotiation to preserve editorial independence and credibility.

Thirdly, sustainability. Like many cultural initiatives, Factanza operates in a precarious ecosystem where financial viability is uncertain. Its reliance on branded content as a revenue model raises both opportunities and risks: it enables independence from traditional media funding but also tests the limits of audience trust. This tension exemplifies a broader concern in cultural management: how to design operational models that balance innovation, autonomy, and long-term resilience.

In this sense, Factanza can be read as a hybrid cultural actor, whose practices of editorial production, symbolic mediation, and organizational innovation reflect broader transformations in the management of culture in the digital age.

Research aim and methodology

The internship report presents Factanza and the social, historical and cultural context in which it arises, at the same time it provides a detailed description of my experience within it. Specifically, the research aims to explore how media like Factanza operates as new communication channels for institutions and NPOs, particularly in terms of accessibility, credibility, and cultural resonance. The central research question is:

How do native social media news platforms like Factanza Media operate as alternative media, and how effective are they in supporting institutions reaching younger generations?

To answer this question, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines theoretical analysis with empirical investigation. First, a literature review provides the conceptual framework, outlining current debates around youth news consumption, the evolution of alternative media, and the changing dynamics of institutional communication in the digital age.

This theoretical foundation is complemented by a qualitative component in the second part, consisting of semi-structured interviews with members of Factanza's editorial and branded content teams. These conversations offer insights into the platform's internal strategies, its approach to partnerships, and the editorial values guiding its work, especially in relation to social and civic messaging.

In addition, the empirical component includes two case studies of branded content campaigns developed with NPOs (CESVI and WeWorld), which also form the basis of the audience survey. Distributed through a snowball sampling technique, the survey targeted Italian social media users aged 18–35, asking them to evaluate these campaigns in terms of credibility, usefulness, ethical coherence, and their ability to translate institutional messages into culturally relevant content.

By combining these methods, the research moves from abstract frameworks to concrete evaluation, linking internal editorial choices with external audience reception and exploring the broader cultural role of Factanza as an alternative media actor.

Structure of the internship report

The report is divided into two main sections that build on each other. The first part establishes the theoretical and contextual foundations, tracing how news consumption among younger generations has shifted (Chapter 1), how alternative media have developed as counter-hegemonic and innovative platforms (Chapter 2), and how Non-Profit Organizations and institutions are adapting their communication strategies to the logic of social media, often by partnering with such platforms (Chapter 3). Together, these chapters set the stage for understanding why Factanza matters as both a media and cultural actor.

The second part moves into the empirical analysis of Factanza Media. It begins with methodology (Chapter 4), followed by a presentation of the organization's trajectory and my internship experience (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 analyses Factanza's editorial identity and cultural positioning, while the final chapter (Chapter 7) examines two institutional campaigns and evaluates their reception through a survey. This progression allows the report to move from external context to internal dynamics, and finally to an assessment of Factanza's cultural and communicative impact.

The conclusion will reflect on Factanza Media's effectiveness as an alternative platform for institutional communication targeting younger audiences. The final assessment will consider its strengths in engaging users and translating complex messages into accessible formats, as well as the challenges it faces in balancing editorial independence, ethical consistency, and reliance on social media dynamics.

PART I – Literature Review

This first section provides a theoretical framework to better contextualize Factanza Media, the primary case study of this research. The literature review is structured into three interrelated chapters, each of them building upon the other to offer a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary information landscape.

The first chapter focuses on news consumption in the digital era, addressing key questions: How do people consume news today? Where do they access it? What changes have occurred in recent years? To answer these, the chapter draws on insights from major reports such as the Digital News Report, Censis Reports on Communication, and AgCom Reports, alongside contributions from scholars including Hallin & Mancini, Chadwick, and Castells. By analysing these sources, this section outlines the evolving media habits of audiences, the shifting dynamics of trust, and the emerging trends that define modern news consumption.

Building on this foundation, the second chapter explores a specific response to these evolving needs: alternative media. The chapter first provides a historical and conceptual overview of alternative media, tracing their role as counter-hegemonic forces in journalism. It then narrows its focus to a specific model of alternative media: content hubs and news editorial startups. These digital-native platforms have emerged to address the demand for accessible, engaging, and independent news. The analysis examines how these platforms operate in Italy, their business models, and the strategies they adopt to maintain credibility and sustainability. Finally, a comparative perspective at the European level highlights how different markets have responded to similar challenges, offering a broader view of the alternative news ecosystem in the digital age.

The third chapter shifts the focus to the communication strategies of institutions, NGOs, NPOs, and humanitarian associations in the digital age. As these organizations increasingly rely on digital platforms to inform, engage, and mobilize their audiences, understanding their evolving communication practices is essential to

contextualize Factanza Media's potential role as a bridge between institutions and younger publics.

This chapter explores how these actors navigate the challenges of visibility, credibility, and engagement in a fragmented media landscape. It examines the strategic use of social media, the adoption of journalistic and storytelling practices, and the emergence of branding as a tool for building trust and sustaining support. By investigating both the opportunities and limitations of digital communication, this section highlights the growing need for innovative intermediaries, such as Factanza, that can translate institutional messages into accessible, compelling narratives for the new generations.

Chapter 1 - News Consumption Habits in the digital era – worldwide perspective

An informed citizenry is essential for a functioning democracy, as political awareness enables individuals to monitor and assess their representatives (Dahl 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Traditionally, this role was fulfilled by newspapers, radio, and television, but the rise of digital platforms has drastically reshaped how news is produced and consumed (Calise & Musella 2019).

The internet and social media have introduced *new media diets* (Rullo 2021), offering immediacy, interactivity, and accessibility but also raising concerns about the reliability of information (Gerbaudo, 2019). With digital platforms now a primary source of news, half of internet users in the U.S. receive updates via social media before traditional outlets (Matsa & Shearer 2018), and 45% of Europeans regularly access news through these channels (Newman et al. 2020).

This chapter examines how these shifts have influenced people news consumption, with a focus on young generations', first analysing global trends before focusing on the Italian context.

These transformations are not merely technological. The decline of trust in mainstream journalism has eroded the symbolic authority traditionally attributed to legacy media, generating what scholars describe as a ‘legitimacy vacuum’ in the media field. Younger audiences are not simply migrating for convenience; they are actively searching for new forms of communicative legitimacy based on authenticity, transparency, and lived experience

To provide context, we will begin by examining data from the *Digital News Report 2024*, the latest annual report from the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford, which offers insights into global trends and the preferences of young audiences in the digital news landscape. In particular, three major trends will be explored:

- The increasing dependence on social media for news
- The growing preference for video formats among younger audiences
- Challenges related to trust and misinformation in digital environments

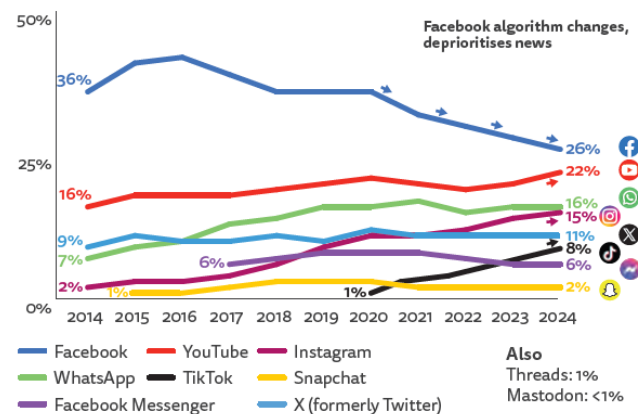
This data will set the stage for understanding the rise of alternative news media as a response to the changing ways younger audiences consume news today.

A. Increasing dependence on social media for news

The rise of social media as a primary source of news reflects a broader shift in how audiences, particularly younger demographics, engage with information. The *Digital News Report 2024* reveals that a substantial portion of internet users now turn to platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for news, highlighting social media’s role in reshaping news distribution and consumption patterns (Reuters Institute 2024, 6). As it is possible to see in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Proportion that used each network for news in the last week – selected country*

Source: Digital News Report 2024



Q12b. Which, if any, of the following have you used for news in the last week? Base: Total sample in each country-year in UK, USA, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Australia (2014-24), Brazil, and Ireland (2015-24) = 2000.

Facebook's role as a news source has diminished over time, with its reach dropping by 16 percentage points since 2016. This decline is part of a larger trend where users' attention is spread across a growing number of social media platforms, rather than concentrated on a few.

Whereas ten years ago, only Facebook and YouTube had a significant presence (over 10%) in news consumption, today many more platforms are widely used, often simultaneously (and many of these are owned by Meta).

Platforms that focus on video, like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, have gained importance for news, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, which established new viewing habits. To address increasing competition, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have adapted by focusing on keeping users on their platforms rather than directing them to external publishers. This shift involves prioritizing video and exclusive content formats.

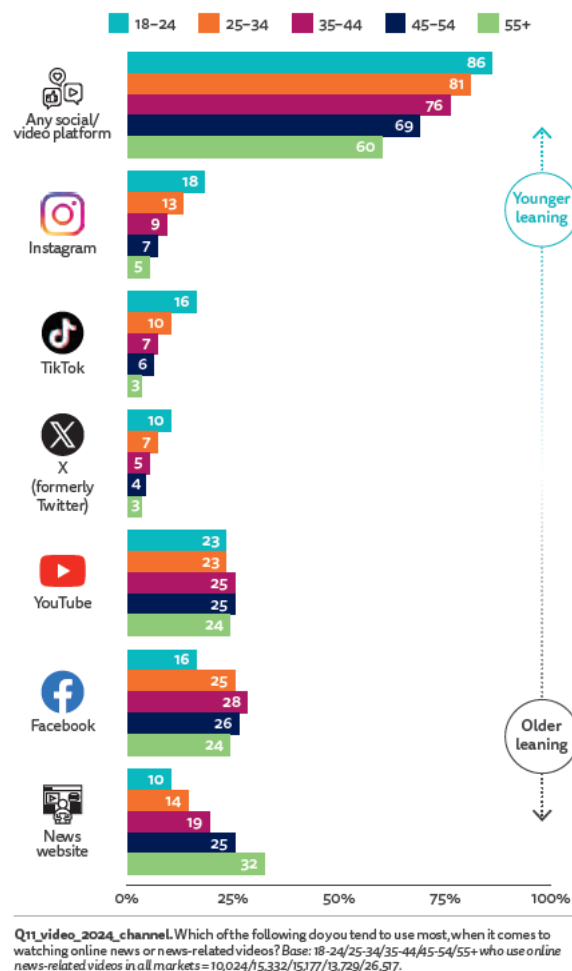
B. Increasing preference for video formats among the youngest

The shift towards social media as a primary news source is particularly pronounced among younger generations, who prioritize platforms that offer accessible and engaging content.

For the age group up to 35 years old, social/video platforms are the primary sources for online news videos. Specifically, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok are popular choices among younger users, with the majority of 18-35-year-olds preferring Youtube, followed by Instagram and Tiktok. In contrast, traditional news websites have a much lower preference among these age groups, with only 10% of 18-24-year-olds and 14% of 25-34-year-olds indicating it as their main platform for news videos. As it is possible to see in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Proportion that say each is their main online news video platform by age group – all markets*

Source: Digital News Report 2024



This trend highlights a shift among Gen Z and Millennials towards visually driven, community-based news sources, with video networks increasingly prioritizing "recommended content" over posts from friends.

This approach appeals to younger users who are more open to content from a diverse range of sources, beyond just the accounts they follow directly. This openness reflects a generational redefinition of what counts as legitimate information. Rather than relying on institutional authority, younger audiences attribute credibility to immediacy, relatability, and transparent acknowledgment of mistakes. This trend confirms the erosion of traditional symbolic authority and the emergence of a *legitimacy vacuum* (Dobrev & Gotsopoulos 2010), in which new forms of communicative legitimacy are sought. As highlighted by the *Next Gen News Report 2023*, younger users value content that appears authentic and corrigible, often privileging lived experience over conventional journalistic credentials. (Next Gen News Consumption report 2023, 14).

Additionally, The Digital News Report highlights three primary reasons why people turn to social video for news. Firstly, many users, particularly younger ones, see social video as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional media.

The unfiltered, often raw nature of user-generated content, like videos from bystanders, is perceived as less biased and more credible. Secondly, social video is highly convenient; it's embedded in platforms where users already spend their time, with algorithms that personalize content to match their interests, delivering short, easy-to-watch clips.

Lastly, users value the variety of perspectives that social video offers, allowing them to explore diverse viewpoints and delve into specialized topics that mainstream media may overlook.

While most people still consume a combination of text, video, and audio for news, blending both traditional and alternative sources, the growing reliance on social

media feeds shifts the focus from the source to the convenience and diversity provided by these platforms.

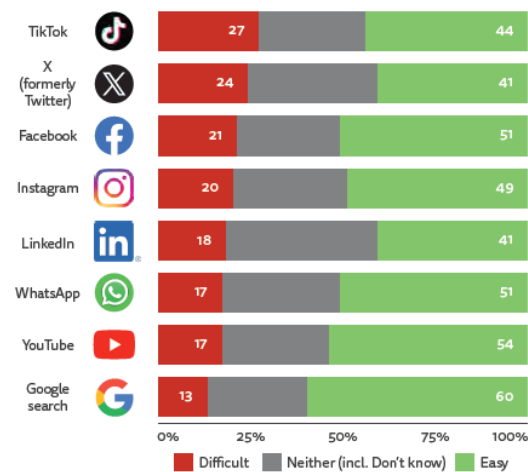
This poses a challenge for traditional publishers, who must find effective ways to engage younger audiences on social media video platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, rather than relying solely on their own websites or apps.

C. Trust and Misinformation on Social Media

The Digital News Report reveals that platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook are perceived as more difficult environments for assessing news credibility, with 27% of users on TikTok, 24% on X, 21% on Facebook and 20% on Instagram, indicating that they struggle to identify trustworthy news on these platforms. In comparison, platforms like Google Search and YouTube are seen as more reliable sources, with lower difficulty rates of 13% and 17%, respectively (Digital News Report 2024, 18). As it is possible to see in Figure 3.

Figure 3: *Proportion that find it difficult to identify trustworthy news on each platform – all markets*

Source: Digital News Report 2024



Q6_platform_trust. Still thinking about trust, how easy or difficult is it for YOU to tell apart trustworthy versus untrustworthy news and information on each of the following platforms? Base: All that say they use each platform, ranging from Google search = 92,185 to LinkedIn = 61,224. Note: Respondents in India and Hong Kong were not asked about TikTok.

These concerns about distinguishing real from fake news are prevalent across regions, with 59% of respondents expressing unease about their ability to separate authentic news from misinformation on social media. As is it possible to see in Figure 4.

Figure 4: *Proportion concerned about what is real and what is fake when it comes to news online*

Source: Digital News Report 2024



This widespread anxiety is indicative of a global trend, where the fast-paced, unfiltered nature of social media contributes to an environment where misinformation can thrive, and users feel less confident about the accuracy of the information they encounter (Digital News Report 2024, 17).

In parallel, the Next Gen News Consumption Report (2023) sheds light on how younger generations are redefining credibility. Unlike older audiences, younger users are more likely to trust content that feels relatable and authentic, valuing “lived experience” and personal transparency over traditional journalistic credentials. . In other words, we are witnessing not the disappearance of legitimacy, but its reconfiguration: younger audiences relocate trust away from institutional authority toward experiential authenticity and accountability (Suchman 1995; Jakobsson 2023).

This means they are often drawn to influencers and independent creators who share similar backgrounds or openly admit and correct mistakes, which builds a sense of trust and connection. (Next Gen News Consumption Report 2023, p. 19). The decline of symbolic authority in legacy journalism has thus created what Dobrev and

Gotsopoulos (2010) call a *legitimacy vacuum*, a structural gap in which new digital-native actors can claim credibility through alternative resources such as transparency, immediacy, and peer-to-peer recognition.

The implications of this shift are significant for news producers and platforms. As young people increasingly expect transparency, they look for content that is not only informative but also open to accountability and correction. This expectation has led to a deeper connection with creators and platforms that prioritize direct, honest communication. For traditional outlets, the challenge is therefore twofold: not only adapting to digital formats, but also confronting a new symbolic order of legitimacy in which institutional credentials no longer guarantee trust.

These insights underscore the need for a media landscape that acknowledges the unique preferences of younger users, who seek convenient, diverse perspectives and are simultaneously wary of misinformation across digital platforms. They also prepare the ground for understanding why platforms like Factanza could emerge as cultural mediators, filling the legitimacy gap left by mainstream journalism.

News Consumption Patterns Among Younger Audiences

After examining the key insights from the *Digital News Report*, supplemented by findings from the *Next Gen News Consumption Report*, I would like to conclude this section by highlighting essential factors to consider when discussing news consumption among young audiences.

While the *Next Gen News Consumption Report* may not be as broadly representative as the *Digital News Report*, it offers valuable, focused insights into how younger generations interact with and engage in news consumption.

The Report identifies five primary modes through which young people consume news. These modes are not mutually exclusive or strictly sequential. Similar to the five senses, each mode operates independently but can also intersect and impact one another.

1. *Sift*: younger audiences prefer simple, low-effort methods to stay informed amidst the overwhelming amount of available content. This mode is characterized by passive news consumption, where young users scan and filter for relevant updates without investing significant time or attention. This phase often serves as a gateway to deeper engagement.

2. *Substantiate*: in this mode, young people seek to verify and confirm news that has captured their interest. This self-directed verification process allows them to reach their own conclusions about the truth of information, reflecting a preference for autonomy in fact-checking.

3. *Study*: when a topic stimulates their interest or fosters their personal or professional growth, young audiences are willing to invest more time in detailed exploration. This involves actively seeking out content that deepens their knowledge, such as articles, videos or discussions, that educate, inspire or offer new perspectives.

4. *Socialise*: social networks play a crucial role in this mode, as young people share links, information, and content within their groups, creating a sense of belonging and social validation. This socialization of news enables young users to connect with like-minded peers and to integrate news into their social interactions.

5. *Sensemake*: this mode involves the critical processing of complex topics. Young audiences seek resources and perspectives that help them interpret and contextualize information, often balancing different viewpoints to develop a comprehensive understanding and form well-rounded opinions.

These modes illustrate the ways in which younger generations interact with news, demonstrating a preference for quick, visual formats that integrate easily into their daily routines.

The popularity of short video content, frequently accessed on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, reflects a desire for rapid, easily digestible information.

Furthermore, the emphasis on self-directed verification and social sharing highlights a community-oriented, participatory approach to news consumption.

Combined with the broader data from the Digital News Report 2024, these insights offer a more nuanced understanding of how young people engage with news and underline the importance of adapting content to align with their unique preferences and consumption habits.

1.2 News Consumption in Italy – from TV to Internet

The Italian media landscape has undergone significant transformations over the past decades, shifting from a system historically dominated by television and print media to one increasingly cantered on digital platforms. The transition has been shaped by broader trends in media consumption, technological advancements, and economic challenges facing traditional news outlets.

However, rather than witnessing a full replacement of older media by digital platforms, Italy presents a case of coexistence and adaptation (Sallusti 2020).

The rise of digital media has profoundly altered how news is produced, distributed, and consumed, leading to an increasingly hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013). Traditional outlets have responded by integrating digital strategies rather than being fully replaced.

A clear example is radio, which has successfully expanded through digital streaming and podcasting, extending its reach across multiple platforms. Similarly, television has adapted by shifting towards on-demand streaming services and integrating with social media platforms, blurring the boundaries between old and new media.

At the same time, news consumption habits have become increasingly fragmented, with audiences displaying nomadic behaviours, shifting across different

platforms depending on their needs, interests, and levels of digital literacy (Sallusti 2020).

This media hybridization suggests that, rather than a linear transition, Italy's media system is evolving into a complex interplay between traditional and digital platforms, where legacy media reconfigure their formats to remain relevant.

To fully grasp how Italy's media system has evolved in the digital era, we will now analyse key historical trends, starting with an overview of the country's media structure and its evolution over time. This will be followed by a brief examination of longitudinal data from Censis reports, which have tracked shifts in media consumption from 2000 to today. The section will conclude with key findings from the Reuters Digital News Report 2024, highlighting how younger generations are reshaping the future of news consumption.

1.2.1 The Anomaly of Italian Journalism: From Advocacy to Infotainment

Italian journalism has long been considered by scholars (Forgacs 2000; Bergamini 2006) an anomaly within Western media systems. Unlike the Anglo-American model, which traditionally emphasizes journalistic neutrality and a clear separation between press and politics, the Italian press has historically functioned as an instrument of political advocacy and ideological alignment. This distinctiveness is deeply rooted in the country's historical, political, and economic development.

Since the 19th century and the Risorgimento, newspapers in Italy have played an active role in political mobilization rather than focusing solely on objective information (Hallin & Mancini 2004). The delayed development of capitalism and democracy compared to other Western nations further shaped the structure of the media system, fostering a high degree of political parallelism and state intervention (Rizzuto 2019). The rise of mass parties in the early 20th century reinforced this trend, as newspapers became closely tied to political factions rather than market forces (Sorrentino & Splendore 2022).

Additionally, the Italian press has historically suffered from a weak readership base, particularly due to high illiteracy rates in the early 20th century and persistent socioeconomic disparities between the North and South (Castronovo-Tranfaglia 1994; Morcellini 2000). This contributed to the coexistence of "elite" quality newspapers and more partisan, ideological publications, limiting their penetration among the broader population (Forgacs 2000; Muraldi 2014).

Scholars such as Forgacs (2000), Morcellini (2000), and Bergamini (2006) have identified three key characteristics of the Italian media system: strong political parallelism, weak market structures, and historical dependence on the state. These factors have influenced the evolution of journalism in Italy, shaping a system that has gradually transitioned from political advocacy to commercialized infotainment. The following section provides an overview of this transformation, highlighting its roots and contemporary implications.

1. Structural Proximity Between Media and Politics

Italian journalism has historically been intertwined with political power. Newspapers traditionally served as instruments for political mobilization rather than purely informational tools (Rizzuto 2009). This trend intensified in the 19th and 20th centuries, when political parties directly owned newspapers, such as *L'Unità* (Communist Party) and *Il Popolo* (Christian Democracy). This organizational link meant that media outlets were often aligned with political ideologies rather than market-driven readership demands.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) classified Italy within the Mediterranean or pluralist-polarized media model, highlighting its high political parallelism and delayed democratization process. The transition from Fascism to democracy further reinforced this close relationship between politics and journalism, as mass parties used the press to cultivate consensus (Mazzoleni 2021). Additionally, the weak autonomy of the press and reliance on state funding have further hindered the development of an independent media market (Muraldi & Safradini, 2009).

2. *Economic Weakness and Low Readership*

The Italian newspaper industry has historically struggled with low readership levels, particularly due to high illiteracy rates and socioeconomic inequalities. Unlike other European countries, where popular newspapers helped drive media expansion, Italy experienced a division between elitist "quality" newspapers and tabloid-style publications aimed at specific segments of society (Castronovo-Tranfaglia 1994; Morcellini 2000).

Despite the rise of commercial television in the late 20th century, the printed press remained weak. The state-run broadcaster RAI dominated the television landscape, limiting competition in the media sector. Furthermore, the economic dependence of newspapers on public subsidies and political parties prevented them from developing a strong, independent financial model (Forgacs 2000; Muraldi 2014).

In this context, Rizzuto (2023) highlights how the Italian press maintained an "editori impuri" (non-pure publishers) model, in which media owners wielded influence across various economic sectors, prioritizing political influence over market-oriented journalism. As a result, Italian journalism developed an intertwined information dynamic where newspapers served as political tools rather than independent news sources (Rizzuto 2009).

3. *The Rise of Infotainment and Commercialization*

From the 1980s onward, Italian journalism underwent a significant transformation due to the rise of commercial TV channels. The expansion of Berlusconi's Mediaset group and the privatization of media introduced a market-oriented approach, shifting journalism toward soft news, entertainment, and audience-driven content (Rizzuto 2019).

The 1990 *Mammì Law* marked a turning point, requiring private broadcasters to provide live news programming. This regulatory change reshaped the Italian media landscape, pushing journalism toward infotainment. The increasing adoption of visual

storytelling, sensationalized narratives, and emotional reporting became key strategies to capture audience attention (Thussu 2007; Santos 2009).

Rizzuto (2023) notes that, for the first time in history, news became economically lucrative due to the rise of commercial TV. Between 1979 and 1984, advertising investments doubled, yielding positive repercussions for the media industry while reinforcing a shift toward entertainment-focused reporting (Sorrentino & Splendore 2022). Simultaneously, technological innovations such as digitalization and the rise of online media altered how news was produced and consumed. The growing reliance on search engines and social media platforms further reshaped journalistic practices, fostering a hybrid model that merges traditional reporting with digital strategies (Splendore 2017).

1.2.2 The Evolution of Media Consumption in Italy Through Censis Reports

Censis, founded in 1964, is a leading Italian research institute that has published the Annual Report on Communication in Italy since 2002. This series, initially in collaboration with Ucsi, the Italian Catholic Press Union, analyses media consumption trends, providing industry professionals with empirical data and forecasts. The reports primarily use quantitative surveys on a representative sample, occasionally integrating qualitative methods. However, they lack methodological transparency beyond basic survey descriptions, limiting deeper insights into media motivations. Despite this, their statistical reliability makes them a key resource for understanding Italy's evolving media landscape.

By analysing these reports from the early 2000s, we can trace the gradual decline of print media, the continued dominance of television, and the steady rise of digital platforms.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Italy remained a television-centric media system, where television was the dominant means of communication for 97.2% of the population (Censis 2005). Other mainstream media, such as radio (70.1%) and newspapers (54.6%), also played significant roles, though print media had already begun to show signs of decline. Between 2001 and 2005, the penetration of all media

types decreased, with newspapers experiencing the sharpest decline (-3%), a trend that would continue in the following decade. Meanwhile, the internet experienced the highest growth rate, increasing by 15.6 percentage points in the same period. However, during these years, internet usage was still largely limited to professional contexts, with its integration into daily life and mass communication remaining relatively weak (Censis 2006).

The third Censis Report (2004), titled *Young and Media*¹ was the first to highlight generational differences in media consumption. It revealed that younger audiences (under 30) were early adopters of digital platforms, showing a clear shift away from traditional media. The report suggested that high education levels and digital literacy were strong predictors of early engagement with the internet, leading to an increasingly personalized media diet among younger generations. At the same time, television continued to be the most widespread medium, and despite declining newspaper readership, young Italians displayed a broad consumption of diverse media formats, often combining traditional sources with new digital ones (Censis 2004).

In 2006, the fifth Censis Report *2001–2005: Five Years of Media Evolution and Revolution*², introduced a new analytical framework, placing greater emphasis on longitudinal comparisons over time. This report confirmed the emergence of digital media while reinforcing television's stronghold. The expansion of mobile technology, particularly cellular phones, contributed to shifts in communication habits, foreshadowing the future importance of mobile internet (Censis 2006).

Analysing the evolution of news consumption over the five-year period, which is the primary focus of this research, it is notable that, with the exception of newspapers, all media sources experienced growth. This decline in newspaper readership at the start of the new millennium raised early concerns about the future of print journalism. The study confirms a strong reliance on television as the primary source of information, positioning it as the dominant "window to the world" for Italian

¹ The original title is *Giovani e Media*

² The original title is *2001-2005. Cinque anni di evoluzione e rivoluzione nell'uso dei media*

citizens. By 2005, television remained the main source of news for 81% of Italians, followed by newspapers, radio (16.1%), the internet (6.8%), and mobile phones (1.8%) (Censis 2006).

Among younger audiences (under 30), all media sources saw increased usage, with the most significant growth observed in online news consumption, which surged by 12.4 percentage points. This indicates that younger generations were beginning to diversify their news consumption habits, incorporating digital platforms alongside traditional media. However, despite this shift, television continued to dominate the Italian information landscape during this period.

A key insight from this period is that the transition to digital was not a replacement of traditional media but rather an integration process. New platforms adapted characteristics of older media, exemplified by the endurance of radio despite technological evolution. Furthermore, the report noted that audiences were becoming increasingly nomadic, engaging with different media based on context, interest, and technological competence (Sallusti, 2020). This aligns with Chadwick's (2013) hybrid media system theory, which describes the coexistence of traditional and digital platforms in shaping public discourse.

Digitalization and the Shifting Media Landscape (2006-2009)

Between 2006 and 2009, digitalization accelerated, bringing further transformations to Italy's media system. The sixth Censis Report *The Media Consumption Habits of Italians in the European Landscape*³ (2007) provided a comparative analysis of media consumption across four European countries: Italy, France, Germany, and Great Britain. The findings revealed that Italy lagged behind its European counterparts in terms of internet penetration, highlighting the country's slower adoption of digital technologies. While internet usage had shown steady growth, it remained significantly lower than in Germany and the UK. The report attributed this delay to structural factors such as digital infrastructure gaps, lower levels of digital literacy, and a media culture still largely dominated by television. At

³ Th original title is *Le diete mediatiche degli italiani nello scenario europeo*

the same time, traditional media, particularly television, continued to hold a central role in the Italian media system, more so than in the other countries considered.

The seventh Censis Report focused specifically on young audiences, comparing their media habits with those of their European peers. As illustrated in the sixth report, Internet penetration had increased across all age groups, confirming the progressive digitalization of Italy's media system. However, when comparing national internet penetration rates, Italy (with 42.5%) was ahead only of Spain (+2.6 percentage points) but still significantly behind France (-5 percentage points), Germany (-13.6 percentage points), and the UK (-19.6 percentage points).

Among younger audiences (14-29 years old), however, the picture was quite different. Italian youth displayed a much stronger affinity for digital media, with an internet penetration rate of 83.7%, second only to the UK (87.9%). Italy's young population also surpassed Germany (82.1%) and France (69.9%), which surprisingly ranked below Spain (72.9%). This trend suggested that, despite Italy's overall slower digital transition, its younger generations were at the forefront of media innovation.

By 2009, the eighth Censis Report, *Media among crisis and metamorphosis*⁴, acknowledged a media environment undergoing rapid change. The financial crisis had exacerbated existing structural weaknesses in the Italian media industry, particularly for traditional media such as print newspapers and radio. Meanwhile, digital platforms were consolidating their role, with a growing number of users migrating to online news sources.

A key concept introduced in this report was the *media pyramid*, which illustrated generational differences in media consumption. The report highlighted that while older audiences still relied heavily on traditional media, younger generations had a more diversified media diet. Under-30s displayed a strong preference for digital content, particularly internet-based news, while over-30s remained attached to television and print journalism. This generational divide underscored the growing

⁴ The original title is *I media tra crisi e metamorfosi*

importance of digital media literacy and the increasing role of social media in news consumption.

The reports from 2006 to 2009 outlined a critical phase in Italy's media transformation. While digitalization was progressing, television remained dominant, and the country's overall internet penetration lagged behind major European economies. However, Italian youth emerged as early adopters of new media, suggesting that future media consumption patterns would increasingly shift towards digital platforms. These findings reinforce the idea that Italy's transition to a digital media ecosystem was characterized by continuity rather than rupture. Traditional media adapted rather than disappeared, and the younger generation's media habits became a key indicator of the future trajectory of the Italian media landscape.

This insight provides an essential foundation for the present research, which focuses on how new digital-native platforms are responding to these evolving consumption patterns.

2010-2020

The 9th Censis Report (2011) marked a turning point in analysing the impact of the internet on Italians' media consumption. It introduced the concept of mass self-communication (Castells 2009), emphasizing how digital platforms enabled individuals to become both producers and consumers of content. Internet penetration surpassed 50% for the first time (Censis 2011), while the use of search engines as an information source grew, demonstrating the transition toward personalized access to news.

Despite these trends, television remained dominant, with 97.4% of the population still using it. Newspapers continued to decline, while mobile internet usage increased, signalling the early stages of a shift toward on-the-go news consumption. The digital divide persisted, with younger and more educated individuals being the primary adopters of online information sources (Censis 2011).

The 10th Censis Report (2012), *We Are the Media: The Beginning of the Biomedial Era*⁵, reinforced this shift by introducing the notion of biomediation, where individuals saw themselves reflected in the media they consumed.

The 11th Censis Report (2013), *The Digital Evolution of the Species*⁶, provided a crucial analysis of Italians' access to information, which is central for the present research. It confirmed that television remained the leading news source (86.4%), followed by radio (55.7%) and newspapers (39.2%) (Censis, 2013). However, search engines (46.4%) and social media (37.6%) gained significant ground, reflecting the growing influence of algorithm-driven platforms in news distribution.

This period also saw a crisis in print journalism, with newspaper readership continuing to decline. While newspapers remained relevant for older audiences, younger Italians increasingly turned to Facebook, YouTube, and blogs for news. The Censis report highlighted a critical lack of editorial gatekeeping in digital spaces, raising concerns about misinformation and the credibility of online news sources.

By 2015, the 12th Censis Report introduced the concept of disintermediated communication, emphasizing the shift from traditional editorial control to personalized, on-demand news consumption. Television remained central (96.7%), but algorithmic news sources such as search engines and social media gained more influence (Censis, 2015).

The 13th Censis Report (2016) confirmed television's continued dominance (97.5%) while acknowledging the steady rise of online platforms. Younger Italians increasingly relied on search engines (68.7%) and Facebook (71.1%), surpassing traditional news sources among the under-30 population (Censis, 2016). This reinforced the generational divide in media consumption, where younger users adopted digital platforms, while older generations remained attached to traditional media.

⁵ The original title is *I media siamo noi: l'inizio dell'era biomediativa*

⁶ The original title is *L'evoluzione digitale della specie*

The 14th and 15th Censis Reports (2017-2018) marked a turning point in digital media penetration, describing Italy as a fully digital society. Internet penetration reached 78.4%, with two-thirds of Italians using social media for news consumption. However, despite this shift, the mainstream media (TV and traditional journalism) remained the most trusted sources of information, highlighting a paradox: while digital platforms provided accessibility, they struggled with credibility issues (Censis, 2018).

By 2020, the 16th Censis Report confirmed that television remained the most widely used information source (59.1%), followed by Facebook (31.4%) and search engines (20.7%). Interestingly, the influence of news aggregators and algorithm-driven platforms increased significantly, surpassing traditional newspapers as primary sources of information among younger generations (Censis, 2020). This period also saw a return to mainstream news sources, particularly during politically turbulent moments, reflecting the persistence of legacy media in times of uncertainty.

Throughout the 2010s, Italy's media landscape underwent a profound transformation, with digital platforms playing an increasingly central role in information consumption. However, rather than fully replacing traditional media, this shift led to a hybrid system where old and new media coexisted. Television retained its dominance, while social media and search engines reshaped how younger Italians accessed news. This evolving scenario highlights a dual trend: while digitalization expanded access to news, mainstream media remained the primary trusted sources of information, revealing the complexity of the Italian media ecosystem as it entered the new decade.

1.2.3 Contemporary trends in news consumption

Having examined the historical roots of Italy's media and information system and analysed media consumption trends over the first two decades of the 21st century, we now turn to the most recent developments shaping the country's news landscape. Censis' reports have consistently highlighted the growing role of younger generations

as early adopters of digital platforms, driving the shift toward online and mobile-first news consumption.

Building on this foundation, this section explores the latest insights from the Digital News Report 2024, focusing on three key trends: the increasing dependence on social media as a primary news source, the growing preference for video formats, and the persistent challenges surrounding trust and misinformation. Additionally, the analysis will incorporate Italy's position in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, offering a broader perspective on the structural challenges affecting journalism in the country.

1. Increasing Dependence on Social Media for News

In Italy, social media has become a dominant news source, particularly among younger audiences. Platforms like Instagram (14%), TikTok (9%), and YouTube (20%) have overtaken traditional outlets in popularity among Italians under 35 (Digital News Report 2024, 91). TikTok, in particular, resonates with younger users for its dynamic and visually engaging content, while Instagram and YouTube continue to thrive due to their versatility in hosting both short-form and long-form news content. Traditional platforms, including television and newspapers, have seen significant declines, with only 13% of Italians engaging with print newspapers weekly, a sharp drop from 2018 levels (Digital News Report 2024, 91).

Digital-native outlets such as Fanpage and Il Post have capitalized on this shift by leveraging social platforms to engage younger demographics. Fanpage, in particular, emerged as the leading online brand in 2022, reflecting its ability to align with the needs of a digital-first audience.

2. Growing Preference for Video Formats

Video consumption plays a central role in Italian news habits, particularly among younger audiences who prioritize platforms that offer visually compelling, easily digestible content. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have adapted by emphasizing short-form video formats, which are increasingly favoured by

users under 35. This aligns with global trends but has particular significance in Italy, where traditional media outlets have been slower to adopt video strategies.

For example, TikTok's rise as a news source underscores the growing importance of algorithms in curating personalized video content. YouTube, on the other hand, remains a popular choice for both long-form and short-form news consumption, appealing to users who seek a mix of entertainment and in-depth reporting. The shift toward video has left traditional outlets struggling to compete in a fast-paced, video-driven media environment.

Among the preferred emerging formats, podcasts have gained significant traction in the Italian media landscape, with 32% of Italians reporting having listened to one in the past month, according to the Digital News Report 2024. Younger, well-educated audiences dominate this medium, attracted by its flexibility and depth. News podcasts, distributed across platforms such as Spotify and YouTube, offer a personalized and on-demand format that complements other forms of digital consumption. This growth underscores the diversification of media formats in response to evolving audience preferences.

3. Trust and Misinformation

Trust in the Italian news media remains low, with only 34% of respondents expressing confidence in the reliability of news sources (Digital News Report 2024, 91). Social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook are particularly challenging in this regard, with 27% and 21% of users, respectively, reporting difficulty in identifying trustworthy news. Younger audiences, while highly active on these platforms, are especially vulnerable to misinformation due to their reliance on unfiltered content.

Traditional news brands like Corriere della Sera and ANSA (one of the most important Italian news outlet) retain higher trust levels compared to digital-born outlets like Fanpage and Il Post, which are still establishing their credibility. The rapid spread of misinformation on social media has made trust a key concern, as users increasingly turn to platforms where editorial oversight is minimal.

Overall, Italy's evolving media landscape reflects a dynamic interplay between traditional and digital platforms. Younger audiences are driving a significant shift toward social media and video formats, reshaping how news is consumed and disseminated. However, challenges related to trust, misinformation, and financial sustainability persist, underscoring the need for innovative approaches to meet the demands of a changing audience.

An interesting aspect highlighted by the report, is Italy's position in the [World Press Freedom Index 2024](#), produced by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The index evaluates press freedom across 180 countries based on a comprehensive methodology that includes five contextual indicators: political, economic, legislative, social, and security conditions. Each country receives a score derived from a questionnaire completed by journalists, researchers, and media experts, supplemented by data on abuses and attacks against journalists.

Italy ranks 46th globally with a score of 69.8, categorizing its press freedom situation as "problematic", on a scale ranging from Good to Satisfactory, Problematic, Difficult, and Very Serious. This position reflects various structural and political challenges faced by journalists and media in general, such as:

1. **Political Influence:** Journalistic independence is often undermined by political pressures, with cases of interference in judicial reporting through restrictive laws.

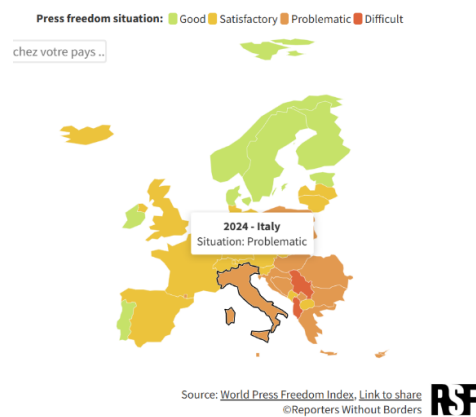
2. **Media Ownership Concentration:** The dominance of a few large media companies reduces diversity and increases potential conflicts of interest.

3. **Safety Concerns:** Journalists are frequently targeted by threats from organized crime groups and extremist factions, particularly in the southern regions. In comparison, Northern European countries like Norway and Finland lead the index with scores exceeding 90, demonstrating robust press freedom environments. In contrast, Southern and Eastern Europe face more substantial challenges. Italy's position highlights its struggle to align with the higher standards of press freedom seen in much

of Western Europe, where media independence and journalist protection are better institutionalized.

This index is critical as it offers a benchmark for understanding the health of media ecosystems worldwide. For Italy, the "problematic" categorization underscores the ongoing need for legislative reforms, greater journalist protections, and initiatives to reduce external influences on editorial content. As is it possible to see in Figure 5.

Figure 5: [*World Press Freedom Index 2024*](#)



This is particularly relevant in the context of increasing mistrust in traditional news media, pushing younger audiences to alternative sources like social media, which present their own credibility challenges.

This first chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of how news consumption patterns have evolved globally and, more specifically, in Italy. The analysis of international reports (Reuters Institute 2024; Next Gen News Report 2023) and longitudinal data from Censis demonstrates that the shift towards digital and social platforms is not merely a matter of convenience or technological adaptation. Rather, it reflects a structural transformation in the foundations of communicative legitimacy.

The erosion of trust in mainstream journalism has undermined the symbolic authority once held by legacy media, producing what scholars describe as a *legitimacy vacuum* (Dobrev & Gotsopoulos 2010). In this vacuum, younger audiences redefine

credibility around authenticity, transparency, and lived experience, favoring creators and platforms that embody these qualities over institutions that rely on traditional professional credentials.

These trends therefore do not simply describe “changes” in media habits; they constitute the structural preconditions for the emergence of new digital-native platforms. The rise of Factanza must be read within this broader context: it is not a contingent product of technological innovation but a cultural response to a profound demand for alternative forms of legitimacy and symbolic authority in the digital public sphere.

In the next chapter, we will turn to the history and theory of alternative media, examining how these actors have historically positioned themselves as responses to legitimacy crises in the media field, and how Factanza fits within this trajectory.

Chapter 2 - Alternative Media

Even within a single area of alternative media there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives).

(Atton 2002: 8)

We live in a world of mediated experiences, where the power and centrality of mainstream media are pervasive. At the same time, alternative spaces of communication are gaining increasing importance as tools for representing public and private ideas and actions, as well as catalysts for stimuli and debates. (Bailey et al. 2008, 15)

This chapter explores the concept of alternative media through a critical lens, drawing on the work of scholars such as Sandoval, Atton, Bailey, Cammaerts, Carpentier, and others who have extensively contributed to the academic debate on the nature, function, and impact of these media. The objective is not only to define what constitutes alternative media but also to critically assess their role within contemporary media landscapes, questioning their relationship with mainstream media and the challenges they face in maintaining their distinctiveness and independence, which does not necessarily imply a non-profit status.

The first section provides a historical overview of alternative media, tracing their evolution and transformation over time. This contextualization is crucial to understanding how these media have been shaped by broader political, social, and technological shifts, as well as how their functions and objectives have changed in response to different historical moments. Following this, a brief section will examine the various definitions proposed by scholars, highlighting the key debates and tensions surrounding their conceptualization.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the chapter then shifts to a more specific discussion of how alternative media are understood within the present

research. Here, the focus is on defining the specific scope of alternative media in relation to the case study analysed.

Finally, the last section of the chapter introduces the specific alternative media movement that constitutes the core of this research: the emergence of social-native editorial startups (or content hubs) in Italy in recent years. These new media ventures, which have developed outside traditional journalistic institutions, offer a unique case study for examining how alternative media operate in the digital age.

2.1 Historical roots of alternative media

Alternative media have historically been associated with media activism, where journalists and independent media producers directly engage in political and social movements (Pickard 2007, 16). Unlike traditional journalism, which often prioritizes neutrality, alternative media is typically advocacy-driven, openly challenging dominant narratives (Hamilton 2000, 373).

The origins of alternative media can be traced back to the early days of the printing press, when pamphlets and independent newspapers played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and political discourse. In the 18th and 19th centuries, radical and revolutionary newspapers emerged across Europe and the United States, often in direct opposition to government censorship and elite-controlled media. Key examples include the radical press of the French Revolution and abolitionist newspapers in the U.S., which provided counter-narratives to dominant discourses (Pickard 2007, 14).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, labour presses and socialist publications became central to alternative media movements, aiming to mobilize working-class populations and advocate for labour rights (Hamilton 2000, 361). Although many of these early publications struggled financially and faced government repression, they played a vital role in fostering dissent and shaping political debates.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a surge in underground newspapers, community radio stations, and politically engaged publications. In the U.S., outlets like *The Village Voice* and *Berkeley Barb* became key voices for countercultural movements,

addressing civil rights, anti-war protests, and feminist activism (Pickard 2007, 17). In Europe, student movements and left-wing political groups used alternative media to disseminate anti-establishment perspectives and organize grassroots activism.

This era also marked the expansion of community radio stations, which provided platforms for local storytelling, public engagement, and participatory media practices. Unlike commercial broadcasters, which prioritized advertising and entertainment, these stations played a key role in representing marginalized communities and politically sensitive topics (Downing 2001, 52).

The rise of the internet transformed alternative media, removing traditional barriers to entry for independent journalism. Digital platforms and social media allowed activists, independent reporters, and non-traditional media organizations to reach global audiences without relying on legacy media structures (Atton 2002, 25).

One landmark moment was the creation of the Indymedia network in 1999, during the anti-globalization protests in Seattle. This initiative provided an open publishing platform for citizen journalists and activists, illustrating the power of decentralized, non-commercial media production (Pickard 2007, 19).

In the 2000s and 2010s, alternative media continued to expand through investigative journalism platforms, hyperlocal news sites, and fact-checking organizations. This growth was largely driven by declining public trust in mainstream media and the financial struggles of traditional journalism.

However, the digital era also blurred the boundaries between alternative media and disinformation. Some outlets identifying as “alternative” became vectors of manipulation and fake news, especially in polarized political contexts (Holt et al. 2019, 5). This complicates the conceptualization of alternative media and reinforces the need for critical definitions that distinguish emancipatory journalism from ideological propaganda.

2.2 An attempt to define alternative media

Alternative media is a broad and multifaceted concept that has been defined in numerous ways depending on historical context, political stance, and media format. According to scholars (Downing 2003; Pickard 2007) it is a slippery term, with multiple meanings that are difficult to categorize. What define what “alternative” means? Albert (2006) argues that alternative media is defined by those who identify themselves as such; by claiming to be alternative, they actively shape the parameters of what constitutes alternative media. This perspective highlights the fluid and self-referential nature of the term, making it difficult to establish a single, universally accepted definition.

At its core, alternative media is generally understood as media that challenge the structures, content, and production models of mainstream media. However, scholars have debated the precise definition and scope of alternative media, particularly in relation to its role within democratic societies and its potential for media pluralism (Pickard 2007, 12).

One commonly accepted characteristic is its opposition to the dominant, commercialized media landscape. Traditional mass media, often controlled by large conglomerates, tend to align with market-driven interests, reinforcing dominant ideologies and limiting diverse representation (Atton 2002, 4). Alternative media, on the other hand, operates outside these mainstream channels, seeking to amplify underrepresented voices and foster participatory media production. These platforms provide spaces for marginalized communities, grassroots activists, and independent journalists who aim to challenge dominant narratives (Downing 2001, 44).

A key debate in Alternative Media Studies revolves around whether alternative media should be defined by its content or by its organizational structure and production methods. Atton (2002) argues that alternative media should not be defined solely by its content but also by its production and dissemination practices. Unlike mainstream journalism, which follows professionalized, often hierarchical structures, alternative media tends to adopt more democratic, open, and participatory models (Atton 2002,

8). Citizen journalism, community-run radio stations, and open publishing platforms fall within this broad category due to their non-institutionalized structures and commitment to grassroots storytelling.

However, this participatory model has been critically assessed by scholars such as Sandoval & Fuchs (2010), who argue that participation alone is not a sufficient criterion for defining alternative media. While participation is often associated with progressive, leftist movements, it has also been widely adopted by conservative and reactionary groups (Sandleman 2010; Downing 2001; Holt 2019). This complicates the assumption that participatory media inherently fosters democratic and socially progressive agendas.

One of the key contributions of alternative media is its role in increasing media pluralism. Traditional news organizations often fail to represent diverse viewpoints, particularly those from marginalized communities. Alternative media provides spaces for voices that are underrepresented in mainstream journalism, offering perspectives on issues such as race, gender, environmental justice, and social movements.

Another important aspect is political diversity. Alternative media outlets exist across the ideological spectrum, from left-wing investigative journalism platforms to right-wing populist news sites (Cushion et al. 2021). While some scholars argue that alternative media fosters critical media consumption and encourages audiences to question dominant narratives, others warn that it can also contribute to political polarization when used to spread ideologically driven misinformation (Holt et al. 2019).

2.3 Defining alternative media in the context of this research

From the previous discussion, it is evident that alternative media is a vast and constantly evolving category. For the purpose of this research, the definition will not focus on ideological distinctions (left-wing vs. right-wing) but rather on the emergence

of independent digital-native platforms that position themselves as alternatives to mainstream journalism.

Among the various theories that have arisen and developed around these types of media, it is crucial for the present research to mention the critical theory of Sandoval and Fuchs (2010).

The two authors identify three key limitations of defining alternative media solely through participation: marginalization and sustainability issues, participation as a tool for repressive agendas and the limits of the participatory model.

Firstly, many alternative media outlets remain financially unstable and struggle to reach broad audiences due to limited resources and distribution channels. The "alternative ghetto" phenomenon (Comedia 1984) highlights how media that reject capitalist structures often face isolation, making it difficult to challenge dominant narratives effectively. Secondly, while often associated with progressive activism, participatory media is also employed by conservative and reactionary movements. Platforms like Townhall.com illustrate how right-wing groups use grassroots media tactics to mobilize supporters. Additionally, corporate social media platforms exploit participatory content for profit (Smythe 1981), showing that bottom-up production does not necessarily equate to progressive or emancipatory media. And, lastly, many media outlets that challenge mainstream narratives but operate within professionalized structures are often excluded from the definition of alternative media. For instance, publications such as *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Z Magazine*, and *New Left Review* provide critical perspectives yet do not rely on participatory production models. This raises the question of whether alternative media should be defined primarily by its internal organization, or rather by its ability to challenge dominant ideological and economic frameworks.

In response, Sandoval & Fuchs (2010) propose shifting the definition of alternative media from participatory models toward critical media, a perspective that aligns closely with the approach taken in this research. According to this framework,

alternative media should primarily be defined by its ability to challenge dominant power structures and advocate for social transformation.

Under this model:

- Content takes precedence over organizational structure: alternative media should be identified by its critique of corporate media, neoliberalism, and hegemonic ideologies rather than by whether it adheres to a participatory production model.
- Professionalized and commercialized outlets can still be alternative: media platforms such as *Adbusters* and *Mother Jones* demonstrate that alternative media can adopt professionalized structures and even accept advertising while maintaining a critical editorial stance.
- Hybridization between mainstream and alternative strategies: Herbert Marcuse's concept of "working against the established institutions while working in them" (Marcuse 1964) applies to alternative media strategies. Rather than existing in complete opposition to mainstream media, alternative outlets must find ways to navigate and challenge dominant structures from within.
- Ultimately, alternative media cannot be defined solely by participation, nor should it be confined to progressive movements. It is a dynamic category that encompasses various forms of media, from community-run grassroots initiatives to professionalized critical journalism. The definition should remain flexible, recognizing that alternative media operates within, against, and beyond mainstream systems.

In this context, the work of Pierre Bourdieu offers a valuable framework to understand how emerging digital-native media platforms position themselves within the broader media field.

His concept of *field* describes journalism as a structured social space where actors compete for legitimacy through the accumulation of various forms of capital: economic (financial resources), cultural (literacy, knowledge, style), social (networks and relationships), and symbolic (recognition, prestige). (Bourdieu 1993) Editorial

startups can thus be understood as position-takings within this field. Their “alternativeness” is not only ideological but structural: lacking the consolidated economic and symbolic capital of legacy media, they must develop alternative resources to achieve recognition.

In practice, this means transforming cultural capital (mastery of digital storytelling codes), social capital (the capacity to build and mobilize online communities), and symbolic capital (authenticity and perceived independence in the eyes of young audiences) into the basis of their legitimacy.

Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* is particularly useful here: digital-native startups succeed when their formats and languages resonate with the dispositions and expectations of younger generations. The adoption of visual, interactive, and accessible forms of communication is not a superficial choice, but an alignment with the cultural habitus of their publics, which in turn reinforces symbolic legitimacy.

This perspective highlights how alternativeness is never static: it is a position constantly renegotiated within the field through symbolic struggles. Editorial startups differentiate themselves from mainstream outlets by foregrounding authenticity and proximity, while simultaneously adopting hybrid strategies that allow them to survive in a competitive media economy. Their role is therefore not simply to “stand outside” of the system but to engage in ongoing contests over legitimacy, redefining the criteria by which journalistic authority is recognized.

This discussion is crucial for understanding Factanza Media and other emerging digital-native news startups. Factanza does not conform strictly to traditional definitions of alternative media but exemplifies a new generation of platforms that, by leveraging digital engagement, challenge mainstream flows of information and position themselves as cultural agents in the journalistic field.

2.4 The Rise of Editorial Startups in Italy: An Alternative Media Movement

As we understood from the previous chapter, the information system in Italy has evolved rapidly. One of the most significant developments in this scenario is the rise of content hubs or social-media-native editorial startups: news platforms that organize information into predefined clusters and distribute it primarily through social media (Stagni 2021). This phenomenon has developed primarily in the last five years, founded by young entrepreneurs, for young generations, with the ambition of bridging the generational gap in news consumption, which had been largely identified by AGCOM (2023). Unlike legacy media, which has struggled to engage younger audiences, these new platforms have been specifically designed to fit the content consumption habits of digital-native generations, leveraging social media as their primary mode of distribution.

To better understand their position within the broader Italian news ecosystem, it is essential to outline the existing categories of online news providers:

- Traditional publishers: These include print-based media (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (radio and television). Online, they operate primarily through their proprietary websites but have increasingly expanded their presence across multiple digital platforms, including social media. The most relevant players in terms of online reach (Audiweb, 2024) include RCS MediaGroup, Mediaset, GEDI Gruppo Editoriale, RAI, Mondadori, and Monrif Group.

- News agencies: These organizations focus on structured news dissemination via their dedicated platforms. The most prominent in Italy include ANSA, AdnKronos, Askanews, Agi, ItalPress, Dire, Radiocor, and LaPresse.

- Digital-only publishers: This segment has seen significant growth over the past 10-15 years, with key outlets such as Fanpage, Citynews, Il Post, HuffPost, The Post Internazionale, Linkiesta, Open, Nanopress, and Bloglo emerging as major players. While they primarily distribute news through their websites, some (most notably Fanpage) have leveraged social media to reach a broader audience, generating substantial engagement. However, apart from large media groups like Ciopeople (Fanpage's parent company) and Citynews, these outlets still trail behind traditional

publishers in terms of unique users. One exception is Il Post, which has successfully adopted a reader-supported model, now generating more revenue from subscriptions than advertising: indeed, by the end of 2023, 75% of the newspaper's total economy revenue was represented by the number of subscribers (Il Post 2024).

- News aggregators: Also known as “feed readers”, these platforms aggregate and distribute news from various sources, functioning as automated online news roundups. The most notable aggregators include Google News, Apple News, Microsoft News, Reddit, Feedly, Informazione.it, and Diggita.com.

- Independent journalists and influencers: Individual content creators, including journalists, commentators, and influencers, use blogs, newsletters, and social media pages to disseminate information and analysis. A key example is Francesco Costa, deputy editor of Il Post, who has built a significant audience through his personal social media presence.

In this evolving landscape, what defines a social-media-native editorial startup, and how does it fit within the existing news ecosystem?

A social media-native editorial startup is a media company (a term often used for self-definition) that originates on a social platform and distributes its editorial content primarily through social media, targeting younger audiences. These startups differentiate themselves from legacy media and digital-native publishers through their structural dependence on external platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), which provides both opportunities and challenges.

Content hubs share the following characteristics:

- Concise, visually engaging formats (e.g., news “bites,” visual explainers, Instagram stories).

- Multimedia storytelling, integrating articles, videos, interviews, podcasts, and external links to offer a diverse, interactive news experience.

- A strong presence across multiple platforms, particularly Instagram and Spotify, but also expanding into live-streaming platforms like Twitch.

Content hubs can be categorized into two main types: sector-specific hubs, which focus on specialized topics. Examples include *GeoPop* (science news) and *Freeda* (gender equality and women's issues); and generalist hubs which cover a wide range of topics, including politics, economics, and current affairs. Examples include *Will Media*, *Torcha*, and *Factanza Media*, which provide concise, fast-paced news coverage tailored to the digital ecosystem.

The first major success story in Italy was *Freeda*, a social-first publisher launched on Facebook in 2016. However, the industry fully took shape in the following years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of digital news consumption (Calise 2021). Of the seven leading social-first editorial startups in Italy, five were founded after 2020, illustrating the sector's rapid growth.

When analysing the presence of these startups across Italy's four major social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok), the two largest players by Instagram follower count are *Geopop* (3.5 million followers), *Freeda* (1.7 million followers) and *Will Media* (1.7 million). Followed by *CNC Media* (1 million), *Factanza* (900.000 followers), *Torcha* (700.000 followers), and *Starting Finance* (600.000). However, follower counts alone are an imperfect measure of impact: startups increasingly highlight engagement and monthly reach, with *Factanza*, for example, claiming an audience of 15 million unique users per month.

Despite their growing influence, content hubs face several challenges that may impact their sustainability and credibility in the long run. One major issue is transparency and credibility, as many platforms lack clear authorship and proper attribution of sources, raising concerns about the reliability and accuracy of the information they provide. Without established editorial guidelines, distinguishing between verified news and misleading content can become increasingly difficult (Rullo, 2022).

Another critical challenge is algorithmic dependence. As digital platforms increasingly rely on recommendation systems, news selection is often shaped by user preferences rather than journalistic standards (Carlson 2018; Menczer 2021). This reliance on algorithm-driven visibility makes content hubs vulnerable to changes in platform policies and ranking mechanisms, potentially affecting their reach and engagement. As Calise (2019) points out, in a media environment dominated by platform-controlled algorithms, news producers risk losing control over the distribution of their content, becoming increasingly subject to external technological forces.

Additionally, there is an ongoing tension between editorial control and platform control. Engelmann et al. (2021) highlight that when journalists and media producers prioritize engagement metrics over editorial judgment, news production aligns more with audience-driven demand than with journalistic relevance. This shift reinforces the formation of filter bubbles, where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives (Keskin 2018). Rullo (2022) further shows how algorithmic segmentation exacerbates this, challenging the capacity of content hubs to provide balanced and comprehensive coverage.

From a theoretical perspective, these challenges can be read through Bourdieu's notion of the journalistic field. Editorial startups enter a space dominated by legacy actors who control economic and symbolic capital. Lacking such resources, startups must accumulate alternative forms of capital: cultural (mastery of digital-native storytelling codes), social (community building and relational networks), and symbolic (authenticity and trust in the eyes of younger audiences). Their position is thus structurally precarious, yet strategically distinctive.

This analysis also brings into focus the issue of sustainability. Many Italian startups rely on hybrid business models that combine branded content, consultancy, educational projects, and live events. In line with Sandoval and Fuchs (2010), such professionalization does not necessarily compromise their alternative orientation. On

the contrary, hybridity allows them to survive within the constraints of the platform economy while preserving symbolic legitimacy. Their “alternativeness” should therefore be seen less as a refusal of commercial activity and more as a form of strategic repositioning within the field: one that privileges symbolic capital over institutional authority.

In this evolving context, content hubs operate as both innovators and vulnerable actors. They broaden participation, diversify public discourse, and provide cultural proximity to younger generations, yet their autonomy is always conditioned by structural dependence on external platforms and market pressures. Their very survival hinges on their ability to transform authenticity and community recognition into resources of legitimacy, while negotiating precarious balances between visibility and credibility, editorial mission and business sustainability.

In summary, the rise of editorial startups in Italy illustrates how alternative media are redefining the journalistic field: they contest dominant logics, accumulate new forms of capital, and negotiate their legitimacy through hybrid strategies of sustainability. However, their structural dependence on platforms and their precarious economic base also reveal the limits of their autonomy. These dynamics are crucial to this research, because they not only shape the identity of Factanza as a cultural actor but also frame the broader communicative ecosystem in which institutions, NGOs, and associations must operate. It is to these organizations, and to the challenges they face in engaging digital-native audiences, that the next chapter now turns.

Chapter 3 - NPOs, NGOs and humanitarian associations: Communication practices

The term "non-governmental organization" (NGO) refers to groups that operate independently from the government, are voluntary in nature, and are dedicated to promoting the common good, such as human rights, gender equality, and environmental protection. These organizations work on various issues at local, national, and international levels. Since the end of the Cold War, NGOs have emerged as the primary organizational form of civil society. In this role, they engage in communication to achieve multiple objectives: raising awareness about key social issues, influencing political and business actors to change their practices, securing funding, and enhancing their public image.

For many scholars, understanding the link between NGOs and communication is crucial to analysing the organizational foundations of activism, the extent to which the media accommodate advocacy messages, and the impact of new technologies on the creation and dissemination of advocacy materials. (Powers 2014, cited in Starbird 2019)

For the purpose of the research, the focus will not be on differentiating between NGOs, NPOs, and humanitarian associations. Instead, the key aspects to consider are that we are referring to voluntary, non-profit organizations that operate with the primary goal of addressing social and cultural issues.

Effective communication is a fundamental pillar for institutions, NGOs, NPO's and associations, enabling them to inform, engage, and mobilize their stakeholders and the community they serve. Whether the goal is to raise awareness, advocate for a cause, fundraise, or provide humanitarian aid, organizations must adopt effective communication strategies that allow them to reach and interact with their target audiences. Traditionally, NGOs and institutions relied on press releases, public events, newsletters, and face-to-face interactions. However, these methods often fail to reach their intended audiences, particularly younger generations who primarily consume

information through digital and social platforms (Liberali 2018, 15). Research shows that NGOs that do not adapt to the dynamics of digital media risk losing engagement opportunities and failing to mobilize supporters effectively (Nah & Saxton 2012, 29).

The rapid rise of digital media, particularly social media, has significantly transformed how these organizations operate. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram offer unprecedented opportunities to expand outreach, build communities, and encourage participation in social causes (Albanna et al. 2022, 4). Social media not only provide cost-effective communication channels but also facilitate real-time interaction with audiences, allowing NGOs to share information, respond to public concerns, and foster dialogue (Nah & Saxton 2012, 298). However, while these platforms present new opportunities, they also introduce significant challenges. Organizations must navigate issues related to credibility, transparency, and the ability to convert online engagement into real-world action. The need to craft compelling narratives that resonate with digital audiences, particularly younger generations, requires NPOs to rethink their communication strategies, moving beyond traditional one-way messaging to dynamic, participatory interactions (Liberali 2018, 12).

This chapter will explore how institutions, NGOs, and associations communicate in a digitalized world, with a focus on the strategic use of social media. It will also examine the barriers these organizations face, such as digital fragmentation, audience engagement challenges, and trust issues, particularly in reaching younger audiences. These considerations will lay the groundwork for the next part of this research, which will analyse how digital-native platforms like Factanza can serve as a bridge between institutions and younger generations, helping organizations refine their communication strategies for greater impact.

3.1 How social and cultural association communicate in a digitalized world

The communication strategies of NGOs, NPOs, and humanitarian associations have significantly evolved with the rise of digital media. Digital tools, especially social media, have become central to social organizations communication strategies,

enabling them to disseminate information, engage with stakeholders, and mobilize communities in innovative ways (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012).

In addition to their role in advocacy and direct communication, NGOs have increasingly adopted journalistic practices, producing news content, photojournalism, and multimedia storytelling to document social issues and crises. This shift reflects a broader trend where NGOs are not just intermediaries between news organizations and communities but are themselves news creators, shaping public discourse and influencing global narratives (Wright 2019, 2)

Social media platforms offer cost-effective, real-time, and interactive communication channels, allowing organizations to transition from one-way messaging to two-way dialogues with supporters. Research identifies three primary functions of social media for NGOs (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012):

1. Information dissemination: NPOs use social media to share updates, reports, advocacy messages, and crisis alerts. This allows them to maintain continuous engagement with their supporters while educating the public on social issues.
2. Community engagement: By leveraging platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, NPOs build relationships through interactive discussions, storytelling, and participatory campaigns. This fosters a sense of belonging among supporters and enhances their emotional connection to the organization (Given et al. 2013)
3. Action mobilization: Social media serves as a call-to-action platform for petitions, donations, and volunteer recruitment. Many organizations now integrate crowdfunding tools and real-time fundraising strategies into their digital communication efforts (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012)

Different social media platforms⁷ serve distinct purposes within a non-profit organization communication strategy, each offering unique advantages for engaging different audiences. Twitter is often utilized for real-time updates and advocacy efforts, allowing organizations to quickly disseminate information and engage in policy discussions. Facebook is particularly effective for community-building and long-form content sharing, providing a space for NPOs to foster relationships with supporters and maintain ongoing conversations. Instagram and TikTok have emerged as key platforms for visual storytelling, helping organizations reach younger audiences through dynamic, visually engaging content. Meanwhile, LinkedIn serves as a networking and professional outreach tool, enabling NGOs to connect with potential partners, donors, and stakeholders in a more formal setting (Nah & Saxton 2012). While these platforms offer NGOs unparalleled opportunities for engagement, they also require strategic content curation to ensure message consistency and audience alignment. NGOs must tailor their content to fit the expectations of different platforms and audience demographics, ensuring effective digital presence and engagement (Wright 2019, 3).

While these platforms offer NGOs unparalleled opportunities for engagement, they also require strategic content curation to ensure message consistency and audience alignment. Crafting platform-specific content that resonates with different demographics is essential for maintaining an effective and coherent digital presence.

Beyond social media engagement, NGOs have increasingly adopted journalistic approaches, creating their own news content, photojournalism, and investigative reports. This reflects the growing media-making role of NGOs, allowing them to document crises and shape public discourse (Wright 2019, 2).

Digital storytelling has emerged as one of the most effective ways for NGOs to connect with their audience on an emotional level. Research indicates that, firstly, organizations that integrate storytelling techniques into their social media strategy

⁷ These data represent the most recent findings available in the sources consulted; however, they may be somewhat outdated. As of today, Twitter and Instagram have emerged as the most popular platforms, particularly in terms of real-time updates, advocacy, and audience engagement.

experience higher engagement and supporter retention. Secondly, user-generated content, including testimonials from volunteers and beneficiaries, creates authentic narratives that build trust and credibility. And lastly, short-form videos, live streaming, and interactive posts enhance audience immersion, making people feel more involved (Given et al. 2013, 5).

For instance, organizations like charity: water have successfully leveraged digital storytelling through high-quality visuals and personal impact stories, fostering deep emotional engagement with their donor base (Given et al. 2013, 7).

As NGOs compete for attention in the digital space, branding has become an essential tool for differentiating their mission, building credibility, and ensuring long-term engagement. Research (Stride & Lee 2010) suggests that effective branding enhances public trust and donor loyalty, establishes organizations as authoritative voices within their sector and ensures that messaging remains consistent and impactful across different demographics. However, over-commercialization of NGO branding can lead to scepticism among supporters. To address this, organizations focus on value-driven messaging, transparency, and ethical communication.

The shift from traditional to digital communication has fundamentally transformed how NGOs, NPOs, and humanitarian organizations engage with stakeholders, tell their stories, and mobilize support. By leveraging social media, digital storytelling, branding, and data-driven communication, these organizations can expand their reach, enhance engagement, and maximize their impact.

However, while digital communication presents significant opportunities, NGOs must navigate complex strategies to maintain credibility, adapt to audience needs, and ensure message effectiveness. The next section will explore the challenges and barriers NGOs face in digital communication, including credibility issues, information overload, and the struggle to effectively engage younger audiences.

3.2 Challenges in NGO and NPO Communication: Visibility, Branding, and Alternative Media

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs) face significant challenges in making their work known and engaging supporters in an increasingly crowded digital space. The shift from traditional communication methods, such as newsletters, press releases, and public events, to digital and social media has created both opportunities and barriers. While social media provides NGOs with new ways to reach audiences, they must navigate visibility issues, branding challenges, and the struggle to create engaging content with limited resources (Liberali 2018).

One of the primary obstacles these organizations face is gaining visibility in an oversaturated media landscape. Traditional media outlets have reduced their coverage of humanitarian and advocacy issues, making it harder for NGOs to secure mainstream media attention (Wright, *NGOs as News Organizations*, 3). While digital platforms offer an alternative, many NGOs lack the expertise or resources to fully exploit them. Historically, nonprofit organizations struggled to use websites as interactive engagement tools (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007). The advent of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has made real-time engagement easier, but many NGOs still struggle to create compelling content that resonates with younger audiences (Lovejoy & Saxton, *How Nonprofit Organizations Use Social Media*, 337).

To address these challenges, many NGOs have turned to corporate-style branding strategies to build credibility and differentiate themselves from similar organizations (Stride & Lee, *Branding in the Non-Profit Sector*, 107). Strong storytelling, visual consistency, and partnerships with digital influencers have helped expand their reach. However, concerns about over-commercialization persist, as audiences may perceive polished marketing campaigns as prioritizing brand image over social impact (Stride & Lee, *Branding in the Non-Profit Sector*, 116).

As mainstream media coverage declines, NGOs increasingly rely on alternative and digital-native media to engage audiences (Wright, *NGOs as News*

Organizations, 2). Some collaborate with independent news platforms specializing in investigative journalism, while others create their own content through blogs, podcasts, and video-sharing platforms. Engaging with digital-native platforms such as Factanza has also proven effective in translating complex social issues into accessible content for younger demographics. Additionally, NGOs are exploring immersive storytelling through virtual and augmented reality to capture public attention and enhance advocacy efforts (Wright, NGOs as News Organizations, 8).

Beyond broadcasting their message, NGOs are adopting participatory media strategies to involve their audiences directly. Encouraging supporters to share personal stories, participate in awareness campaigns, and contribute to grassroots journalism initiatives fosters deeper engagement and strengthens community trust (Given et al., Social Media and Community Knowledge, 5).

Ultimately, while social media and alternative media offer new opportunities for NGOs to expand their reach, maintaining engagement requires strategic content creation and thoughtful branding. The challenge lies in balancing visibility, authenticity, and effective communication within the constraints of limited resources. Organizations that successfully integrate digital strategies while maintaining credibility will be best positioned to sustain long-term engagement and impact.

PART II – Factanza Media

This second part of the thesis focuses on Factanza Media as a case study to explore how digital-native media platforms can reinvent journalism, reframe institutional communication, and build new forms of trust and engagement with younger audiences.

Factanza is an Italian media startup that has gained visibility through its ability to simplify complex news topics using accessible formats designed for social media. Through a combination of editorial innovation, ethical branding, and civic-oriented communication, the platform has carved out a unique role within the digital information landscape.

Drawing on my internship experience, as well as interviews conducted with members of the Factanza's team, I will analyse how the platform operates internally, how it monetizes its content without compromising credibility, and how it collaborates with institutions and NGOs to make socially relevant messages resonate with Gen Z and Millennial audiences.

This section is divided into four chapters. The first presents the methodology I used for the report in detail. The second focuses on Factanza's editorial model and my internship experience within the branded content team. The third analyses the platform's cultural positioning, examining its approach to ethical storytelling and socially relevant campaigns and, finally, the last chapter analyses Factanza's collaborations with NGOs and institutions, assessing how public-interest messages are adapted to engage younger audiences and their impact.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to investigate the role of Factanza Media as a case study for evaluating how alternative media can enhance institutional communication toward younger audiences. Following the theoretical foundation established in Part I, the methodology presented here bridges the conceptual background with the empirical research developed in the following chapters.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative tools. The design includes semi-structured interviews with members of the Factanza team, two in-depth case studies of NGO collaborations, and a survey aimed at assessing audience perception and reception. Summary tables (Figures 6, 7, and 11) provide an overview of the interviews, case studies, and survey framework.

The choice of a mixed-methods design is not only practical but also theoretically grounded. As Denzin (1978) first outlined, triangulation allows researchers to validate findings by approaching a phenomenon from multiple angles, thereby reducing the limitations of any single method. In Culture and Media Studies, this is particularly important, since meaning is co-constructed across different levels of production, text, and reception. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) similarly emphasize that mixed-methods designs provide a more “complete” understanding of complex social realities, precisely because they integrate the strengths of both qualitative depth and quantitative breadth.

In this study, triangulation is applied in three ways: semi-structured interviews capture the production of meaning within the organization, offering insight into Factanza’s editorial identity and strategic choices; the case studies analyse the cultural and communicative strategies of the campaigns, focusing on how institutional messages are reframed for younger audiences; and the survey examines audience reception, testing whether these narratives resonate and influence perceptions of

NGOs. Together, these perspectives provide a holistic view that would not be achievable through a single method.

This integration is consistent with the concerns of Arts and Culture Management. Audience development, strategic alliances, and sustainability are multidimensional challenges involving organizational intentions, cultural practices, and public responses. A mixed-methods approach makes it possible to connect these layers, offering cultural managers a framework to evaluate not only outputs but also the processes and impacts that underpin them.

The goal is to understand how Factanza operates internally and how it is perceived externally in the context of institutional and civic communication, while also exploring the information habits of younger audiences. By linking editorial choices with audience reception, the research positions Factanza within a broader cultural landscape as a hybrid actor of alternative communication.

4.1 Research Question and Objectives

Research Question

How do native social media news platforms like Factanza Media operate as alternative media, and how effective are they in reaching younger generations?

This question addresses the potential of alternative media platforms to act as mediators between institutional actors and younger generations, who primarily consume information via social and digital platforms. It explores whether platforms like Factanza, which are characterised by immediacy and accessibility, can bridge the communication gap through engaging formats, civic narratives, and credible branded content.

Research Objectives

To answer this research question, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To understand how young audiences consume news and interact with alternative media formats;

2. To evaluate how Factanza communicates institutional topics through branded content, with a focus on transparency, credibility, and ethical storytelling;
3. To explore how these messages are perceived by young users in terms of trust, relevance, impact and civic engagement;
4. To assess whether Factanza's storytelling formats and collaborations with non-profit organizations can have cultural or social impact.

4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain insight into Factanza's internal logic, mission, and strategic decision-making, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with key members of the editorial and partnership teams.

These interviews were designed to address Research Objectives 2 and 3: evaluating how Factanza communicates institutional topics through branded content, and exploring how these messages are perceived by young users in terms of trust, relevance, and civic engagement.

The interviews were conducted in Italian via Zoom between March and April 2025, in Italian, and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. While the core structure ensured consistency across interviews, space was left for follow-up questions and elaboration based on each participant's role.

The summary table below (**Figure 6**) outlines the interview participants and the primary focus of each conversation.

SUMMARY TABLE – SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEWEE	ROLE DESCRIPTION	FOCUS OF QUESTIONS
Alice Giusti - Head of Contents	Oversees the platform's editorial line, cultural vision, and long-form content development	Mission and identity, internal editorial strategy, values and narrative approach
Maria Russo - Project Manager and Producer	Coordinates the implementation of campaigns and tracks audience reception and impact	Community engagement, cultural projects (two case studies), ethical alignment
Giorgia Viviani - Branded Content Manager	Manages relationships with clients and coordinates branded content projects with NGOs	Factanza positioning, branded partnerships, narrative coherence, transparency and ethical alignment

Each interview was structured around three thematic blocks:

1. Editorial vision and positioning
2. Branded content and institutional collaborations
3. Cultural and civic impact

4.3 Case Study Overview

Two branded content campaigns produced in partnership with non-profit organization will be analysed in Chapter 6 to explore how Factanza merges storytelling and civic purpose. Although the detailed analysis is reserved for the case study chapter, a brief overview is provided below.

The projects were selected for their relevance to the research question, their use of hybrid formats, and their institutional value. They represent two different editorial strategies in engaging young users with civic topics. As it is possible to see in **Figure 7**.

SUMMARY TABLE – CASE STUDIES

PROJECT TITLE	CLIENT	FORMAT	DATE OF PUBLICATION
<i>Amal</i>	WeWorld	Mini-documentary + social activation	February 2025
#climatechangedoesntexist	Cesvi	Installation + social activation	February 2024

4.4 Survey Design and Implementation

To address Research Objectives 1, 3, and 4 (understanding news consumption patterns, exploring audience perception of Factanza, and assessing the perceived cultural and civic impact of institutional communication) a survey was designed and distributed using a snowball sampling technique. The questionnaire targeted Italian social media users aged 18–35, reflecting both the core audience of Factanza and that of similar digital-native platforms.

The survey remained open for one week, from Sunday 17 May to Sunday 24 May 2025, and collected a total of 105 responses. It was carefully structured to be accessible and relevant to a wide demographic, regardless of whether respondents were familiar with Factanza.

The survey is divided into sections. The first explores general attitudes toward news consumption on social media. The second includes questions about the familiarity and perception of Factanza. The third focuses on the impact and reception of specific branded content campaigns, ensuring that even those unfamiliar with the

platform could evaluate the clarity, relevance, and perceived impact of the presented materials.

The survey was organised as follows, reflecting the logic and objectives of the research:

Alternative Media, Young People and Institutional Communication

I'm conducting a research project on how young people (like you!) perceive new media platforms such as Factanza, especially in relation to institutional communication (here intended as the communication of non-profit organizations).

Your answers will help me evaluate how effective these platforms are in creating cultural impact and improving communication between institutions and younger generations.

It's completely anonymous and will take less than 5 minutes, I promise.

Thank you so much!

Giulia

Section 1 – About You

- **How old are you?**
 - 18–22
 - 23–28
 - 29–35

- **What gender do you identify with?**
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say

- **What is your current situation?**
 - Studying

- Working
 - Studying and working
 - Looking for a job
 - Other
- **How much time do you spend on social media each day?**
(Note: WhatsApp is also considered a social media platform)
 - Less than 1 hour
 - 1–2 hours
 - 2–3 hours
 - 4 or more hours

Section 2 – News Consumption on social media

- **Do you get informed through social media?**
 - Yes, every day
 - Yes, often
 - Rarely
 - Never> go to section 7

Section 3 – Awareness of Factanza

- **Do you know Factanza Media?**
 - Yes> go to section 5
 - No> go to section 4

Section 4 – Similar Platforms

Even if you don't know Factanza, you may follow similar platforms. The following questions aim to understand your opinion on this type of communication.

- **Do you know or follow any of the following platforms?**
 - Will Media

- Torcha
 - VDNews
 - Il Post
 - No, none of them
 - Other...
- **In your opinion, do these platforms help raise awareness among young people on social or political issues?**
(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much)
 - **In your opinion, do they make complex or socially relevant topics easier to understand (e.g., environment, climate crisis, rights, cultural issues)?**
(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much)

Go to section 7

Section 5 – Perception of Factanza

- **On which platform(s) do you follow Factanza?**
 - Instagram
 - TikTok
 - LinkedIn
 - I don't follow them actively
 - Other (WhatsApp, Telegram, Newsletter)
- **How much do you trust the information you find on Factanza's channels?**
(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Completely)
- **How would you describe Factanza's tone of voice?**
(You can choose multiple)
 - Ironic
 - Engaging
 - Informal
 - Neutral

- Simplistic
- Superficial
- Journalistic
- Peer to peer
- Other...

Section 6 – Institutional Collaborations and Cultural Impact

- **Do you think Factanza helps raise awareness among young people on social and political issues?**

(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much)

- **Do you think it makes complex and socially relevant topics easier to understand (e.g., environment, climate crisis, rights, cultural issues)?**
 - Yes
 - No
 - It depends on the topic

Section 7 – Projects in Partnership with Institutions

We are now at the end! Below you'll see two projects produced by Factanza in collaboration with non-profit organizations.

WeWorld x Factanza – Animated Documentary *Amal*

Take a look at these frames from the animated documentary “Amal” – WeWorld x Factanza. A short animated documentary that tells the story of a young Syrian girl who walks through the rubble of her city every day to reach school. The blue character accompanying her symbolically represents WeWorld: a constant presence that supports the journey of many children living in emergency contexts.

The project was created to give visibility to forgotten humanitarian crises, such as the Syrian one, and to reflect on the importance of access to education as a fundamental right. To watch the full 4:35-minute documentary, click [here](#).

Figure 8: *Amal 2025 – Factanza X WeWorld*



- **Have you seen this content on social media?**
 - Yes
 - No

- **After seeing this content, do you think it could help better understand forgotten crises like the Syrian one?**
(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much)

- **How would you describe the illustrated/narrative format (e.g., the symbolic blue character)?**
 - Clear and engaging
 - Too childish
 - Not suitable for the topic
 - Effective for addressing such a heavy theme
 - Other...

CESVI x Factanza – #ClimateChangeDoesntExist

Take a look at this image. #ClimateChangeDoesntExist Campaign – CESVI x Factanza. *An urban installation in Milan during Fashion Week, using irony to denounce the impact of climate change. This offline action was followed by a social media campaign featuring visual and educational content.*

Figure 9: #climatechangedoesntexist 2024 – Factanza X Cesvi



- **Have you seen this campaign online or in person?**
 - Yes
 - No
- **To what extent do you think this type of message can raise awareness on environmental issues among young people?**
(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much)

Comparison with Traditional Institutional Communication

- **Did this type of communication make you reflect more than a traditional institutional campaign (e.g., like the WWF post published in India in 2022)?**

Figure 10: *Tastes like Heaven* 2022 - WWF



- Yes, this made me reflect more
 - No, the WWF post was more effective
 - Both had the same impact on me
 - Neither made me reflect
- **Which of the two campaigns made you more willing to support or donate to the NPOs involved?**
 - CESVI Installation
 - WeWorld Documentary
 - Both
 - Neither
 - **Which one made you more curious to learn more about the organization's work?**
 - CESVI Installation
 - WeWorld Documentary
 - Both
 - Neither
 - **In your opinion, do these projects help increase the cultural and social impact of NGOs among young people?**
(Scale from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Absolutely)

Final Open Question

Do you think this type of communication is truly effective in bringing young people closer to the work of non-profit organizations and raising awareness on social issues? Why?

(Open text box)

The construction of the survey was based on the analytical framework summarised in the table below, which aligns each research objective with one or more analytical categories and sample questions.

Not all survey questions are included in the table; only those most significant for data interpretation. Where applicable, each category is also linked to the relevant scholarly reference introduced in the literature review.

As it is possible to see in **Figure 11**.

SUMMARY TABLE – SURVEY

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	ANALYTICAL CATEGORY	SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTION	REFERENCE FROM LITERATURE REVIEW
Understand media consumption patterns	News consumption habits	"How much time do you spend on social media each day?"	Reuters Digital News Report (2022)
	Platforms and information-seeking behaviour	"Do you use social media to stay informed?"	Newman et al. (2022)
Explore trust in Factanza and alternative media	Trust and engagement	"How much do you trust the information you find on Factanza's channels?"	Mazzoleni & Sfardini (2020)
Evaluate credibility and transparency of institutional communication	Transparency of branded content	"Do you think Factanza helps raise awareness among young people on social or political issues?"	Venturini (2019); Liberali (2018)
	Clarity of messaging	"Do you think it makes complex and socially relevant issues easier to understand?"	Liberali (2018); Powers (2014)

Investigate interest in institutional themes	Engagement and emotional resonance	"Did this type of communication make you think more than a traditional institutional campaign, such as this one by WWF, posted on Instagram in India in 2022?"	Jenkins (2006); Couldry (2012)
Measure perceived civic and cultural impact	Social and behavioural influence	"In your opinion, do these projects increase the cultural and social impact of NGOs among young people?"	Bennett & Segerberg (2012); Calise (2019)

This chapter has outlined the research design and methods employed to investigate how alternative media platforms like Factanza contribute to institutional communication strategies. Through interviews, a structured audience survey, and the analysis of two branded content case studies, the following chapters will explore whether these strategies can foster trust, engagement, and cultural relevance among young audiences. Chapter 5 will begin by exploring Factanza's editorial identity and long-form content initiatives.

Chapter 5 - Inside Factanza: Platform's Editorial Model and my Internship

5.1 Factanza from the Inside: Mission, Structure, and Business Model

Factanza is a digital media company founded in 2019 by Bianca Arrighini and Livia Viganò, two Italian students who met during their undergraduate studies. Conceived initially as a passion project on Instagram, Factanza responded to a clear gap in the media landscape: the absence of credible, accessible news content tailored to younger audiences on the platforms they use most. Unlike traditional media, which often fails to engage younger generations with relevant language, formats, and context, Factanza emerged with the explicit intention of rethinking how information is communicated in the digital age.

In its earliest phase, Factanza did not resemble a startup or an editorial business in the conventional sense. It began as a simple Instagram page curated by the two founders in their spare time, with no structured business model, team, or monetization plan. What differentiated the project from the outset was its format: short, visually engaging, and clear news summaries adapted for social platforms, with an emphasis on neutrality and educational value.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 marked a turning point for the project. The public's growing need for timely, understandable information significantly accelerated Factanza's visibility and influence. The platform gained traction not only among users but also among investors, leading to early funding proposals. After an initial, unbalanced offer was declined, the founders connected with Primo Ventures, which supported the company through its early stages. In September 2020, Factanza was formally incorporated as a company, and soon after, the team participated in a startup acceleration program that helped structure the business strategy. By mid-2021, Factanza secured its first round of structured investment and began to build its internal team and operations.

Today, Factanza is a fully operational media company employing around 18 people, with over 1.5 million followers across platforms. Its content is distributed daily via Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Spotify and other digital channels, reaching a predominantly Gen Z and Millennial audience. Its communication style is deliberately visual, direct, and inclusive, essential qualities for capturing and maintaining attention in fast-scrolling digital environments. This strategy can be read through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*: Factanza aligns its formats with the cultural dispositions of younger generations, privileging immediacy and peer-to-peer tones that resonate with their everyday media practices. In this sense, its success lies not only in innovation, but in symbolic tuning to the expectations of a fragmented and platform-dependent audience.

Business Model and Strategic Diversification

Factanza's business model has evolved over time to ensure economic sustainability and resilience. It is currently structured around three main pillars:

1. Branded Content: The core revenue stream remains the creation of sponsored content in collaboration with aligned brands. These partnerships are carefully curated to ensure consistency with the company's editorial values and tone. The content, though promotional, maintains the visual and informational style that characterizes Factanza's organic posts.

2. White-Label Production and Strategic Consulting: A growing portion of revenue comes from content production and consultancy services offered to companies aiming to communicate effectively with younger audiences. In this model, Factanza creates content that is published on clients' own channels, rather than on its own platforms.

3. Factanza Academy: Launched in 2024, this training initiative offers education on social media strategy and digital communication. Initially targeted at individuals (B2C), it has rapidly attracted interest from businesses (B2B) seeking to train internal teams or co-develop customized educational programs. The Academy reflects a broader mission to democratize access to up-to-date skills in a sector that evolves faster than traditional academic offerings. As noted by Bianca

Arrighini, the co-founder, in a recent interview “there’s a huge gap in training for content creation, universities simply can’t keep up”. (Made IT Podcast 2025) This reflects the company’s recognition of an emerging educational market aligned with its core competencies.

This diversification, while seemingly pragmatic, should be interpreted within the broader debate on sustainability in alternative media. As Sandoval & Fuchs (2010) note, financial viability is one of the central tensions of critical media: survival often depends on hybrid business models that oscillate between autonomy and dependence. Factanza’s reliance on branded content exposes it to potential ethical dilemmas, particularly when institutional collaborations involve sensitive social issues. The risk is that the imperative of revenue generation may compromise symbolic capital, such as authenticity, neutrality, and credibility, which constitutes its main resource in the journalistic field (Bourdieu 1993).

At the same time, initiatives like the Factanza Academy illustrate an attempt to reduce dependence on volatile advertising markets by investing in educational projects, thus transforming symbolic and cultural capital into financial sustainability. The question remains whether such diversification represents a structurally sustainable solution or a temporary adaptation to precarious platform economies.

Editorial Values and Approach to Information

From the outset, Factanza has pursued an editorial vision grounded in neutrality, accuracy, and clarity. In contrast to many Italian media outlets - which, as we have seen in the literature review, often reflect clear political alignments - Factanza seeks to provide factual information and leave the interpretation to its audience. This is particularly evident during electoral periods, where the company has focused on offering neutral, explanatory content on party platforms, candidates, and legislative processes. For example, last year, on the occasion of the European elections, Factanza produced a series of interviews with leading political figures, in which each candidate presented their electoral platform in a clear and straightforward way. The format, titled

*Who do you vote for*⁸, was highly successful and well-received for its immediacy and accessibility. As you can see in Figure 9.

Figure 12: Interview frame from Factanza's format *Who Do you Vote For*, featuring political leader and Italian former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte ahead of the 2024 European elections



Such practices can be understood as symbolic rituals (Couldry 2003): performances that reaffirm Factanza's legitimacy as a non-partisan actor in the eyes of its audience, despite the commercial logics underlying its business model.

This approach is supported by rigorous fact-checking practices. Content is verified through primary sources such as institutional reports, academic studies, and official statements, and is never based solely on third-party summaries or newswire articles. As Arrighini explains, “in a world as complex as ours, we cannot allow people to feel that they have nowhere to turn for trusted information.” (Made IT Podcast 2025) This philosophy responds directly to the erosion of trust in mainstream media, driven in part by sensationalism, misinformation, and the pressure of the click-driven digital economy.

Here again, Factanza's editorial authority rests less on traditional journalistic credentials than on symbolic production: the ability to transform credibility into cultural value by making information appear both accessible and authentic.

⁸ This is a translation from the Italian title: *X chi voti*

Organizational Culture and Leadership

One of the most distinctive aspects of Factanza's trajectory is the youth and non-traditional background of its leadership. Neither of the two founders had prior experience in journalism or corporate management before launching the company. Instead, they learned by doing, developing a leadership style that is collaborative, adaptive, and emotionally intelligent.

Managing a growing team, often composed of older and more experienced professionals, has posed challenges, particularly in a context where leadership models are often gendered or hierarchical. As Arrighini notes, "each of us (she is referring to herself and Livia Viganò, the other co-founder) had to build her own leadership style. We didn't see ourselves reflected in the dominant models, many of which were male-led and top-down." (Made IT Podcast 2025)

This conscious divergence from traditional corporate structures is reflected in the company's internal culture, where roles are often fluid, feedback is continuous, and the emphasis is placed on shared ownership and purpose. Over time, this has allowed the company to attract talent aligned not only with the mission, but also with the values of transparency and collaboration.

From a theoretical perspective, this leadership style can be interpreted as part of Factanza's organizational *habitus*. The collaborative rituals of daily feedback and fluid role definition reinforce symbolic capital internally (through cohesion and alignment) and externally (through authenticity and credibility). In contrast with the hierarchical models typical of legacy media, Factanza's leadership embodies a cultural logic that resonates with its young audience and supports its positioning in the wider media field.

Positioning in the Market and Competitive Landscape

Factanza is part of a broader generation of new Italian digital media, including outlets like Will Media, Torcha, and VD News, all of which emerged between 2019 and 2021. However, Factanza has carved out a distinct niche by focusing on a younger

demographic, prioritizing accessibility over opinion, and maintaining an informational tone rather than an editorial one.

Despite overlapping in mission with other players, Factanza distinguishes itself through its editorial consistency and its design-first communication strategy. Rather than perceiving other outlets as threats, the founders view competition as a natural and beneficial aspect of a healthy media ecosystem.

Challenges and Future Perspectives

As with many media ventures, Factanza faces a number of systemic challenges. The fragility of digital media business models, especially those reliant on advertising, requires constant adaptation and diversification. While the company closed 2023 with a profit, the 2024 forecast reflects a temporary loss due to significant investment in the Factanza Academy, a strategic bet on long-term growth and differentiation.

The founders remain cautious about replicating outdated models from traditional publishing. As Arrighini notes, “we cannot copy structures that are already broken. Old-school editorial models are bloated and inefficient. New media must diversify, through branded content, education, consulting, maybe even subscriptions.” (Made IT Podcast 2025)

Looking ahead, Factanza is focused on consolidating its position as a trusted source of information for young Italians, while expanding its services to institutional and corporate partners. Possibilities for future growth include acquisitions, partnerships, and international expansion, though the priority remains building a sustainable, independent, and high-impact media company capable of navigating the rapidly evolving information landscape.

From a critical perspective, however, the reliance on diversification raises important questions: to what extent can branded content and consultancy sustain Factanza’s independence without eroding the symbolic capital of authenticity that underpins its value proposition? As the literature on alternative media emphasizes, the

tension between economic survival and cultural mission is structural, not incidental. Factanza's trajectory exemplifies this paradox, making its future a crucial case study in the sustainability of digital-native cultural organizations.

5.2 My Internship Experience: Working in the Branded Content Team

At the time of my internship application at Factanza, I was unsure about the specific role I wished to pursue. I was split between two main areas of interest: editorial content creation and brand partnerships. Initially, I lacked a clear understanding of how partnerships functioned within a media company and how such collaborations translated into revenue. My primary motivation was to enter a stimulating and youthful work environment that could expose me to the internal mechanisms of a fast-growing digital media organization. After conducting further research and gaining initial exposure, I became increasingly drawn to the strategic dimension of partnerships and decided to focus my internship in that area. From an analytical standpoint, this decision marked the start of a professional socialization process into Factanza's organizational *habitus*, aligning my dispositions with the field's expectations

Onboarding and Team Structure

I joined the branded content team, which at the time was composed of Livia Viganò, co-founder, COO and head of the department, Giorgia Viviani, Branded Content Manager, and Luisa D'Amico, Branded Content Specialist. The roles within the team were clearly delineated. While Livia was in charge of supervision everything, Giorgia was responsible for handling incoming partnership opportunities, both institutional and commercial, as well as developing new business channels. Luisa, on the other hand, primarily served as the account lead, managing the end-to-end coordination between clients, the editorial team, and the design department once a collaboration had been secured.

Working within this team required a strong understanding of Factanza's identity and editorial direction. One of the initial challenges I encountered was

internalizing this identity and applying it effectively in external communications with clients. In a media company where brand voice and values are central to every output, mastering the underlying editorial vision and mission was a critical prerequisite. As Factanza adheres to a strong and coherent editorial line, it was essential to be able to communicate to clients not only what kind of content we produce, but why and how we produce it. Conceptually, this internalization functioned as an induction into the newsroom's *habitus*: a shared set of dispositions that guide tone, framing, and format choices, thereby reproducing symbolic legitimacy.

Daily Structure and Workflow

The structure of my daily activities varied depending on project timelines and team priorities. However, a key recurring element was the morning editorial meeting, attended by members from all departments. These meetings were led by the Head of Content, who provided updates on the performance of published content. Subsequently, the Branded Content Manager and the Project Manager would brief the team on the status of ongoing collaborations, deadlines, and brand-related deliverables. This alignment phase was essential to ensure that all departments had a clear overview of each other's work.

The second part of the meeting was dedicated to idea generation and editorial brainstorming. Team members were encouraged to propose news items and original content concepts, provided these were supported by verified sources and aligned with Factanza's tone and values. This segment of the meeting was particularly valuable as it fostered interdisciplinary collaboration and analytical thinking, but it also required a high level of preparation and critical judgment. Contributions were expected to be relevant, well-contextualized, and framed in a way that could resonate with Factanza's audience. Interpreted as a ritual (Couldry, 2003), the meeting reaffirmed the boundaries of legitimate content, performing symbolic production that stabilizes the brand's credibility (symbolic capital) in the journalistic field.

Following the editorial meeting, I would usually attend a team-specific briefing to coordinate activities and assign tasks. The branded content team's workflow was

highly dynamic, with frequent adjustments based on deadlines and new opportunities. Typical tasks included preparing customized presentations for prospective clients, participating in calls with potential partners, drafting strategic content proposals, and contributing to brainstorming sessions for upcoming campaigns. Alongside these more strategic and creative responsibilities, I was also assigned operational and administrative tasks, such as organizing the digital archive, maintaining the internal mailing list and managing the preparation of final reports for our clients. The role involved a constant exchange of ideas and required both creative input and strategic clarity. Adapting to this environment required time, particularly in terms of learning to balance flexibility with precision, and creativity with consistency. In Bourdieusian terms, this equilibrium reflected the negotiation between field constraints (deadlines, client deliverables) and the internalized newsroom habitus.

Project Responsibility: Factanza Academy

After approximately two months of interning, I was assigned additional responsibilities within the Factanza Academy, an internal educational initiative aimed at training individuals and businesses on content creation and social media strategy.

Factanza Academy had been launched a few months earlier and was in a critical development phase. When the Academy's Project Manager left, I was asked by one of the co-founders to temporarily take over the management of the project until a replacement could be found.

This entailed overseeing a wide range of operational tasks, including publishing content across the Academy social platforms, managing user experience workflows via Kajabi (the platform hosting the courses), and coordinating with internal and external stakeholders. Although highly demanding, this experience was invaluable in expanding my skill set, especially in relation to platform management, technical implementation, and strategic planning. Balancing the Academy's activities with my ongoing responsibilities in brand partnerships required effective time management and prioritization. Analytically, the Academy exemplified the conversion of symbolic capital (editorial legitimacy) into economic capital

(education/consulting), a diversification path central to sustainability debates in alternative media.

Key Projects: Collaboration with institutions and NPOs

Among the various partnerships I was involved in during my internship, the most significant and relevant for the present research were those developed with institutions and nonprofit organizations (NPOs). These collaborations were particularly stimulating from both a strategic and editorial standpoint, as they required translating complex, often emotionally charged topics into engaging and accessible content for a young digital audience. In this context, Factanza's ability to balance clarity, creativity, and sensitivity became crucial.

One particularly emblematic collaboration was with AIRC (Italian Association for Cancer Research), a nonprofit organization dedicated to funding cancer research and promoting cancer prevention through education and public awareness. The partnership with AIRC was part of a biennial collaboration, which had proven to be effective and was continuously renewed. Prevention and science-related content is among the most appreciated by Factanza's community; however, they also present considerable communication challenges, especially when the goal is to engage younger audiences.

For this reason, the team worked extensively on identifying the right angles to approach these topics in a way that was both informative and relatable. The key was to design formats that were visually engaging, grounded in verified information, and, where appropriate, infused with a lighter, accessible tone, in order to normalize the discourse around prevention without diminishing its importance.

A clear example of this approach is the cover of the post titled "A short guide to checking your boobs", produced in collaboration with AIRC and published on Factanza's Instagram page, as can be seen in **Figure 13**. With over 23,000 likes and more than 2,000 shares, the post soon became highly engaging, precisely because of its provocative yet respectful tone and graphic immediacy. From a cultural

perspective, this format operationalizes symbolic production by recoding medical content into peer-to-peer language aligned with audience *habitus*.

Figure 13: *Instagram [post](#) from Factanza’s partnership with AIRC (October 2023).*



Another notable example of Factanza’s editorial strategy is the Instagram post created in collaboration with WWF Italia, published in November 2023 (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). The post, titled “*NotFixed*”, is a clear visual and narrative reference to the Netflix platform. It adopts the format of a streaming series, with each slide styled as an episode cover - complete with genre, rating, and a brief synopsis - to present real data on environmental crises such as deforestation, global warming, and biodiversity loss. As can be seen in Figure 14 and Figure 15.

Figure 14 (on the left): *Instagram [post](#) cover from Factanza’s collaboration with WWF (November 2023)*

Figure 15 (on the right): “*NotFixed*” Instagram post (slide 3): *Species extinction*



This strategy effectively transforms scientific content into a familiar and emotionally engaging format, lowering the barrier to access and understanding for younger, digitally native audiences. The opening image (Figure 4.2) introduces the post using Netflix-inspired branding and dramatic tone, while one of the internal slides (Figure 4.3) presents the topic of species extinction. Through a combination of impactful visuals and concise data, the post communicates a key message: what we are facing is not a work of fiction, but a real, ongoing catastrophe.

By reframing environmental degradation as a “*true story – drama*”, Factanza leverages pop-cultural codes to make complex ecological issues more relatable, urgent, and shareable.

Critically, such collaborations also foreground ethical tensions: while branded or co-branded campaigns support sustainability, they may risk instrumentalizing social issues; careful boundary-work is thus required to preserve authenticity (symbolic capital).

External Engagement: Events and Networking

Beyond content production and strategic development, my internship also included the opportunity to participate in industry events and networking initiatives, which offered valuable exposure to the broader media and communication landscape.

One of the most significant events I attended was “Arte e Cultura”, organized by Havas Media Group at the MUDEC – Museo delle Culture di Milano, in December 2023. The event served as the official presentation of the CSA Research Observatory report on cultural consumption in Italy and explored the intersection between brands, media, and cultural engagement.

The gathering brought together representatives from leading agencies, institutions, and cultural stakeholders, offering a platform for reflection on how communication strategies can amplify the social and educational value of art and culture. For Factanza, whose content often intersects with civic education, sustainability, and cultural commentary, the event represented a space of alignment and strategic opportunity.

Attending this event allowed me to better understand how branded content and cultural storytelling can intersect, and how emerging media players like Factanza are increasingly recognized as legitimate actors in spaces traditionally dominated by institutional or legacy media. It was also an important moment of visibility and dialogue with potential clients and long-term partners, reinforcing the company’s positioning within the evolving ecosystem of value-driven communication.

This internship represented a comprehensive learning experience, offering insight into the inner workings of a modern digital media company. From daily editorial alignment to strategic client development, and from platform management to content production, the internship at Factanza allowed me to develop analytical, technical, and interpersonal skills in a highly dynamic environment. It also clarified my professional interests, directing them toward the intersection of media, partnerships, and strategy. Concurrently, it generated ethnographic evidence to evaluate how alternative media organizations balance cultural mission and market survival, connecting micro-practices (rituals, habitus) to macro-level sustainability debates.

The following chapter will focus on the cultural value that Factanza brings to the contemporary media landscape. Drawing on a series of interviews conducted with members of the internal team, this next chapter will explore the company's approach to cultural impact, the editorial choices that shape its positioning, and some of the most significant projects developed with the intention of informing, educating, and engaging younger generations on key social and cultural issues.

Chapter 6 - Cultural content and Ethical Storytelling:

In recent years, Factanza has increasingly shifted from being “just” a news outlet to a cultural actor shaping narratives around key social issues. While its daily content focuses on current events and accessible information, Factanza’s broader ambition lies in fostering awareness, reflection, and long-term engagement.

This chapter explores how the platform’s editorial identity translates into cultural positioning, focusing on how values, storytelling formats, and audience interaction combine to create a meaningful media experience. It is based on internal insights gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with key members of Factanza’s team: Alice Giusti, Head of Content, Maria Russo, Creative Producer and Project Manager, and Giorgia Viviani, Branded Content Manager. These perspectives offer a behind-the-scenes understanding of how cultural intent is embedded in the platform’s editorial and narrative strategies.

Through selected examples and these insider reflections, the chapter examines the cultural impact Factanza aims to generate beyond social media virality.

6.1 Editorial Identity as Social-Cultural Positioning

Factanza’s editorial mission is not limited to simplifying information for younger audiences, it seeks to activate reflection and contribute to a broader cultural shift. As Head of Content Alice Giusti explains, “we don’t just want to inform passively; we want to give people tools to understand reality and think critically about it.”⁹ This aspiration reflects a deliberate positioning that blurs the lines between journalism, education, and civic engagement.

⁹ Alice Giusti (Head of Contents, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, February 2025.

At the core of this identity is the conviction that information is a cultural tool. The platform's signature formats such as visually engaging posts, swipeable explainer slides called "post carousel", and emotionally resonant language, are not simply about communicating fast; they are about making complexity accessible without trivializing it. This approach is particularly significant in the Italian media landscape, which Giusti describes as "often assuming too much background knowledge, without offering full context or summaries, Factanza works to fill that gap."¹⁰

Factanza itself defines its purpose with clarity and intent on its website (Factanza.com):

Our mission is to create a generation that is aware of what's happening in the world and equipped with the tools to make free and informed decisions. Among the thousands of events that take place every day, we select those we consider essential to understand the present and gain a complete picture of the world we live in. We stay constantly up to date on how social networks and digital platforms evolve, because we see them as key channels for reaching people and creating societal impact. We promote a model of information that is accessible but not simplistic - there is always a way to explain the complexity of our time without trivialising it. Doing so every day, to spread knowledge and critical thinking, is our mission.¹¹

From the beginning, Factanza has rejected the aesthetic and narrative conventions of mainstream journalism. Rather than following rigid news formats or institutional tones, it developed a voice that is visually driven, empathetic, and open to dialogue with its audience. "Our style is not journalistic in the traditional sense," Giusti adds. "We use social media codes, visual design, and emotional storytelling to build proximity with our community. We don't just report, we relate."¹²

This sense of proximity and dialogue is central to Factanza's cultural function. The platform builds a horizontal relationship with its followers, where interaction, feedback, and shared values inform the editorial direction. However, as Giusti clarifies, "the community can influence the topics, but not the values: those are part of our DNA."¹³ These values, such as progressivism, scientific development, inclusivity,

¹⁰ Alice Giusti (Head of Contents, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, February 2025.

¹¹ "Our Mission," *Factanza*, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.factanza.com/>

¹² Alice Giusti (Head of Contents, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, February 2025.

¹³ Alice Giusti (Head of Contents, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, February 2025.

empathy, gender equality, are embedded in Factanza's editorial line, and they clearly position the platform as politically aware, yet non-partisan.

In this sense, Factanza aligns with the definition of alternative media proposed by Holt et al. (2019), who describe such platforms as “self-perceived correctives” to mainstream narratives. Its non-traditional formats, emphasis on inclusivity, and editorial independence reflect an intentional critique of dominant media logics. The fact that it operates exclusively through social platforms, yet maintains strong internal editorial processes, further underscores its hybrid role. between content creator, cultural educator, and digital civic space.

Ultimately, Factanza's editorial identity is deeply intertwined with its cultural mission: not only to *inform*, but to *transform*. Through its tone, content strategy, and values, the platform fosters an active media literacy that encourages younger audiences to engage critically with contemporary issues; thus positioning itself not just as a media outlet, but as a cultural force.

6.2 Depth over Virality: Editorial Projects with Cultural Value

While Factanza's identity is strongly associated with its visually accessible and fast-paced content tailored for platforms like Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn, the team itself identifies a different kind of impact emerging from its longer editorial productions, such as podcasts, live events, and multi-phase storytelling campaigns. These formats enable the platform to move beyond the immediacy of social media and toward a slower, more reflective engagement that fosters emotional connection and deeper understanding.

According to Maria Russo, Creative Producer and Project Manager, this distinction is crucial to understanding Factanza's cultural mission: “Compared to our everyday content, productions like podcasts or long-form videos leave a much deeper impression. You have more time, more space, and more control over how you tell a

story. That allows us to treat the topic with the attention it deserves, and to create a stronger connection with the audience.”¹⁴

In her view, these projects are not only more memorable, but also more ethically meaningful. The nature of the format invites the editorial team to engage with sensitive topics in a more nuanced and responsible way, whether it involves collecting direct testimonies, working with mental health professionals, or building partnerships with researchers and institutions. “With longer formats,” she explains, “you can take care of both the emotional and the informative side of a topic. You can go deeper. You can shape how people feel about what they’re learning, not just what they know.”¹⁵

This emphasis on emotional resonance aligns closely with Factanza’s vision of media as a cultural tool. While short-form content plays a vital role in triggering awareness and initial engagement, it is often through slower storytelling that real sense-making occurs, a process particularly important for younger audiences, as noted in the Next Gen News Consumption Report (2023). These audiences tend to value authenticity, vulnerability, and coherence over traditional journalistic authority, especially when it comes to social issues such as mental health, gender, or identity.

Russo also notes that editorial projects offer greater editorial freedom than branded campaigns or reactive news coverage. They emerge internally, often from the creative energy of the newsroom itself.

“Many of these projects come directly from the team,” she says. “The podcast on university disease ¹⁶, for example, started from two journalists who brought up the topic in a meeting. It wasn’t assigned or commissioned; it came from a real, shared need.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

¹⁵ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

¹⁶ The podcast about university disease will be addressed in the following chapter.

¹⁷ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

This kind of bottom-up development not only strengthens internal ownership of the content but also increases its authenticity and coherence with the audience's lived experience. In Russo's words, "the way we work reflects the way people want to consume content today: in ways that feel personal, relevant, and rooted in real conversations."¹⁸

Another important aspect highlighted in the interview is how productions function as relational spaces. Whether it's a live event or a long-form podcast, these formats invite the audience into a shared reflective space, often extending beyond the screen. This is particularly true for community-facing formats like in-person talks or educational workshops, where Factanza's role shifts from broadcaster to facilitator of dialogue.

Productions are also seen as a strategic way to respond to the limitations of social media itself. "Social platforms are changing constantly," Russo observes. "We are always adapting to new formats and algorithms, but we also need to build content that lasts, that stays relevant, even outside the scroll. Editorial projects give us that space."

In this sense, Factanza's investment in long-form productions is both editorial and structural. It represents a deliberate effort to diversify formats, resist platform dependency, and assert narrative ownership in a media environment where attention is fragmented and often monetized.

Finally, these projects offer an opportunity for institutional alignment without dilution. When addressing sensitive topics, such as gender stereotypes, mental health, or education in conflict zones, Factanza often collaborates with non-profit organizations, research institutions, or cultural partners. These partnerships are framed not as external impositions but as shared missions: "We don't just accept a brief,"

¹⁸ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

Russo says. “We co-design the project, making sure it fits our tone, our values, and our way of telling stories.”¹⁹

These productions, in other words, are where Factanza’s editorial independence and civic responsibility converge. They allow the platform to embody its values through narrative form, and to engage the public not only as consumers of content, but as participants in a shared cultural conversation.

In the following two sections, we will explore two of Factanza’s most significant cultural productions to date: *The Typical Italian Man*²⁰, a multi-format exploration of masculinity and gender norms, and *How to Stay Underwater*²¹, a podcast series on university mental health. Both projects illustrate how long-form storytelling can be used not only to inform, but to shift perspectives and foster cultural change.

6.3 Case Studies – Storytelling that Resonates: Masculinity and Mental Health

From the previous chapter it is clear that, one of the key ambitions of Factanza’s editorial model is not only to respond to the rhythms of news consumption but also to contribute to cultural reflection over time.

While the platform’s short-form content such as posts, reels, and infographics, is central to its mission of accessibility and public engagement, Factanza sees every piece of content as a potential driver of cultural awareness. However, it is through longer editorial productions such as podcasts, video series, or live events, that the platform finds more space to explore complex issues in depth. These formats allow for greater narrative development and emotional nuance, making them particularly well-suited for fostering

¹⁹ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

²⁰ Original title: *Tipico Maschio Italiano*

²¹ Original title: *Come Stare Sott’acqua*

reflection, dialogue, and identification with the platform's core values of inclusion, empathy, and social responsibility.

In this section, two projects are analysed as emblematic case studies: *The Typical Italian Man*, a multi-format initiative addressing gender and masculinity; and *How To Stay Underwater*, a podcast series on university students' psychological discomfort. Both projects illustrate Factanza's approach to ethical storytelling and editorial independence, but also highlight the inherent challenges of producing meaningful cultural change.

6.3.1 *The Typical Italian Man: Performing Cultural Work Through Participation*

The project *The Typical Italian Man* (TTIM) was born out of a clear editorial and social need: to open up a space of reflection around masculinity, its pressures, stereotypes, and silences; (see figure 16). As Maria Russo, the project's creative producer, explains, "We often talk about toxic masculinity, but not all men are toxic. The issue is deeper: men are rarely encouraged to express emotions, and this emotional repression creates immense social pressure."²²

Figure 16: Instagram [post](#) cover titled "A real man can't fail"



²² Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

The urgency is reflected in data as well: men account for nearly 80% of suicides in Italy. TTIM was designed not only to raise awareness of these dynamics, but also to challenge them by engaging the community in direct, participatory storytelling.

The project deliberately avoids a prescriptive or accusatory tone. Instead, it aims to deconstruct masculinity through dialogue and collective reflection. To anchor the conversation in real experience rather than perception alone, Factanza began with a nationwide statistical survey, collecting data on how different generations of Italian men perceive themselves, their roles, and their emotional lives.

Building on this research, TTIM took the form of a four-part live event series, each event exploring a different theme:

1. Masculinity in relationships – How do societal expectations shape emotional intimacy, and how can we unlearn harmful dynamics?
2. The pressure to perform virility – What does it mean to constantly project strength, and how do we dismantle the myth of the “alpha male”?
3. Fatherhood and parenting – How can men express nurturing masculinity, and what role models do they have as sons and as fathers?
4. Regional stereotypes – In Palermo, the conversation focused on the persistence of hypermasculine Southern archetypes, which are often more rigid than their Northern counterparts.

Each event was hosted in carefully chosen venues that blended the informality of a community gathering with the intimacy of a live performance space. Participants were invited to reflect personally on the meanings and contradictions of masculinity in their own lives. Rather than being passive spectators, they became co-creators of meaning.

Each session included a moment where attendees responded to two prompts: the first asking them to name a stereotype they associated with being a man; the second, to write a personal wish or blessing for “the typical Italian man.” These anonymous and

sincere reflections became part of a collective archive that later inspired the theatrical script.

This interactive approach aligns with Nick Couldry's notion of *media rituals* as performative spaces where symbolic participation helps shape collective identity.¹ Instead of simply delivering a message, TTIM invited participants to inhabit the topic, challenge their assumptions, and connect emotionally with a broader cultural narrative.

The outcome of this process is not only reflective but also creative. The material gathered through the events and the survey became the foundation for a theatrical production developed in collaboration with the Milan-based collective Retropalco, known for its socially engaged dramaturgy. At the time of writing, the production is already in development and being offered to theatres and festivals.

As Russo emphasizes, the project's cultural goal is not merely to criticize dominant models of masculinity, but to offer a space for redefinition, to show that another way of being male is possible, and to make that conversation accessible and inviting: "We wanted to create a format where men could reflect on masculinity without being attacked. A space where it was okay to feel uncomfortable, to doubt, to ask questions."²³

A particularly significant outcome of the events was their gender balance: approximately 50% of attendees identified as male: a rare result in gender-focused cultural programming. This balance is itself a cultural signal, suggesting that the project's tone and structure succeeded in reaching a demographic often absent from or resistant to these conversations. As can be seen in Figure 17.

Figure 17: *Instagram [post](#) (slide 5) that shares the progress of The Typical Italian Man tour*

²³ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.



Maria Russo reflects on this result with cautious optimism: “We’re seeing more and more men who are curious, open to discussing these issues. But they need the right space; not a lecture, not a confrontation, but a shared moment of listening. That’s what we tried to create.”²⁴

The audience’s engagement extended beyond the events themselves. Many participants reached out afterwards via social media or email to share how the experience had stayed with them, how it had sparked conversations with partners, parents, or friends. This ripple effect is difficult to quantify, but it represents precisely the kind of slow cultural impact that Factanza aims to cultivate: one rooted not in reach or virality, but in reflection and resonance.

TTIM also represents an expansion of Factanza’s editorial approach toward applied cultural work. The next step in the project’s evolution is the development of a gender culture module for the Factanza Academy, targeting companies that want to foster more inclusive practices. In this sense, TTIM is not just content, it’s a media-to-education

²⁴ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

ecosystem, bridging journalism, community dialogue, artistic production, and civic training into a single model of cultural engagement.

6.3.2 *How to stay underwater: University Mental Health Podcast*

The second editorial case study is a podcast series dedicated to psychological distress among university students, a topic that had repeatedly surfaced within the editorial team. As described by Maria Russo, the issue emerged organically in newsroom meetings over time, reflecting a growing concern among the staff regarding the mental health struggles affecting young people, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

Eventually, two journalists took the lead on developing the project, gathering testimonies, consulting experts, and crafting a narrative format capable of approaching such a delicate topic with empathy and depth. The result was a podcast that sought not to provide solutions, but to legitimize vulnerability as a shared experience, offering students a mirror through which they could see their own challenges reflected and taken seriously. The podcast has been published on all major streaming platforms. As can be seen in Figure 18.

Figure 18: *Instagram [post](#) (slide 10) that launch the project*



The decision to use the podcast format reflects Factanza's sensitivity to tone and emotional context. As Maria Russo explains: "A podcast gives you a completely different emotional bandwidth. You listen to someone's story with your headphones, in a private moment. It's intimate. It's slower. You're not just reading a headline, you're absorbing someone's reality."²⁵

The podcast combined testimonies, expert interviews, and narrative voice-over, offering a rare and respectful insight into the lives of students navigating isolation, performance anxiety, and institutional apathy. In line with the *Next Gen News Consumption* Report (2023), which emphasises that Gen Z prefers "low-effort, relevant, and emotionally resonant" formats, the podcast addressed a topic that many young people recognised but rarely saw represented in media.

Moreover, recent academic literature supports this approach. A 2025 systematic review published in *PLOS Mental Health* found that podcast-based interventions are increasingly effective in improving mental health awareness, reducing stigma, and enhancing emotional resilience among listeners.

The study emphasised that podcasts can serve both as universal interventions and as targeted tools for at-risk populations, particularly due to their low entry barriers and high potential for emotional identification. As the authors argue, "the immersive, narrative nature of podcasts offers a unique opportunity to engage individuals in meaningful reflection and mental health education" (Carrotte et al. 2025).

This project also echoes Alice Giusti's view that Factanza's editorial work must go beyond information and lean into awareness-building: "Everything is political, not in a partisan sense, but in terms of values. Mental health is about recognising that your

²⁵ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

personal struggles are shaped by systems, education, class, gender. And giving people tools to understand that is cultural work.”²⁶

Like *TTIM*, the podcast does not aim to offer “solutions” but to legitimise vulnerability as part of public discourse. It bridges personal experience and collective recognition; what Hepp and Couldry would describe as “communicative figurations”, or the narrative structures through which people come to understand their place within a broader cultural framework.

Despite their depth and resonance, both projects confront an unavoidable reality: cultural change is slow, nonlinear, and uneven. Unlike social virality, which can be measured in views and likes, cultural impact unfolds across time and context; it is about shaping perception, not just behaviour.

As Giorgia Viviani, Branded Content Manager, points out: “You can see immediate social impact when people donate or share something. But cultural impact? That’s different. It’s long-term, and sometimes invisible. It means changing how people feel about a topic, how they talk about it with others. That takes time, repetition, and trust.”²⁷

This reflects what Pierre Bourdieu identified as the “slow efficacy” of symbolic production. Media, in this sense, does not operate like a hammer but like water, it reshapes attitudes gradually, through repetition, trust, and emotional resonance.

However, this slow pace is often at odds with the structural pressures of digital media. Factanza’s community is loyal, but algorithms do not reward slowness or complexity. Moreover, editorial projects are expensive, both in terms of labour and time.

²⁶ Alice Giusti (Head of Contents, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, February 2025.

²⁷ Giorgia Viviani (Branded Content Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, April 2025.

As Russo notes: “Productions require a lot of coordination: creative, editorial, logistical. They’re not scalable in the same way as social posts. But they are necessary if we want to do more than just report facts.”²⁸

Factanza’s approach thus navigates a fragile balance between scalability and significance, visibility and integrity. The platform relies on a hybrid model: short-form content for reach, long-form projects for depth, and educational programs for long-term engagement. This hybridisation reflects what Keskin (2018) describes as “media ecosystems”, where platforms, practices, and publics are interdependent and mutually shaping.

This chapter has demonstrated how Factanza leverages editorial formats not only to inform, but to generate cultural participation and reflection. The integration of emotionally resonant content, participatory methods, and long-form formats allows the platform to operate as a symbolic producer within a fragmented media environment.

Case studies such as "The Typical Italian Man" and "How to Stay Underwater" illustrate how theoretical concepts like media rituals (Couldry) and symbolic production (Bourdieu) can be actively applied to understand Factanza’s editorial impact. While challenges remain, particularly in terms of scalability and algorithmic tension, the chapter shows that cultural change, although slow, is possible when storytelling becomes both a relational and educational act.

In the next chapter, I will examine how Factanza further develops its civic purpose and cultural impact through collaborations with institutional and non-profit partners. These partnerships reflect a commitment to applying editorial values to real-world advocacy and engagement, reinforcing the platform’s role as a bridge between media production and social transformation.

²⁸ Maria Russo (Creative Producer and Project Manager, Factanza), interview by Giulia Paglia, Milan, March 2025.

Chapter 7 – Factanza and Institutions: Bridging the Gap with a Young Audience

This final chapter of the thesis brings together the key elements of the research and focuses on the empirical analysis of two branded content campaigns developed by Factanza in collaboration with non-profit organizations: CESVI and WeWorld.

The goal is to understand how these partnerships were structured, what editorial and strategic choices guided them, and to what extent they contributed to translating institutional messages into formats that could resonate with a younger audience. The campaigns, though very different in tone, format, and reach, share a common intent: to raise awareness on complex social issues by using the narrative tools and languages typical of alternative media.

The first part of the chapter will reconstruct the two collaborations in detail, analysing their communicative objectives and the editorial strategies adopted. These reflections are supported by qualitative insights from the interview with Giorgia Viviani and Maria Russo, who were directly involved in both campaigns and can provide internal perspectives on how such projects are conceived and managed.

The final section of this chapter will present the core of the analysis, bringing together two complementary sources of data: the results of the audience survey conducted for this research, and the performance insights of the campaigns themselves (views, impressions, engagement rates). By placing these elements in dialogue with the editorial intentions behind each campaign, it becomes possible to assess whether, and to what extent, these alternative formats have succeeded in reaching their communicative goals.

This analysis does not aim to evaluate success purely in terms of visibility or virality, but rather in terms of their capacity to inform, engage, and activate a generation often distant from institutional narratives.

7.1 Paid Partnerships with a Social Purpose: The CESVI and WeWorld Case Studies

Factanza's collaboration with non-profit organizations often departs from traditional branded content models. While still responding to commercial goals and often requiring significant production investment, these partnerships aim to balance editorial quality with social purpose. Their primary objective is to translate institutional messages into narratives that are accessible, engaging, and culturally relevant, without reducing them to purely promotional content.

This section analyses two emblematic campaigns developed with CESVI and WeWorld, which serve as central case studies in this research. These projects reflect Factanza's capacity to act as an editorial intermediary, combining journalistic tone, social values, and strategic storytelling.

Before exploring the campaigns in detail, it is important to briefly introduce the partner organizations. [CESVI](#) is an international humanitarian NGO based in Bergamo, Italy. Active since 1985, it works in over 20 countries providing emergency aid, supporting sustainable development, and promoting human rights, with a strong emphasis on climate action, food security, and migration.

[WeWorld](#), founded in 1999, is a global NGO focusing on the rights of women and children, particularly in education, gender equality, and protection in conflict zones. Both organizations share Factanza's commitment to communicating complex issues through value-driven narratives.

7.1.1 CESVI #ClimateChangeDoesn'tExist: From Climate Injustice to Urban Installation

The campaign "#ClimateChangeDoesn'tExist" was conceived in response to a global humanitarian emergency. In the summer of 2023, devastating monsoon floods in Pakistan displaced over eight million people, triggering hunger, poverty, and the spread

of epidemics. Despite contributing just 0.5% to global CO2 emissions, Pakistan bore the brunt of extreme climate events, a case that CESVI framed as a glaring example of climate injustice.

To respond to this crisis and raise awareness within the European public, CESVI, supported by the European Union, launched a broader humanitarian communication initiative. Factanza Media was selected as a partner for its ability to build value-driven editorial formats capable of engaging younger audiences. The campaign was developed in collaboration with Mirror Digital Agency, aiming to translate a complex, distant issue into an emotionally and symbolically resonant narrative for an Italian audience. The idea behind the campaign was to break the illusion that climate change is a distant issue, showing instead that its consequences are already affecting our everyday lives. "We wanted to find a way to talk about climate change that would be ironic, striking, and emotionally effective without falling into the traditional tones of NGO communication," explained Giorgia Viviani.

The campaign sought to denounce climate injustice through a bold and symbolic gesture: an on-field installation placed in via Paolo Sarpi, one of Milan's busiest streets, from February 20 to 25 2024, in the mid of the Milan Fashion Week. As it is possible to see in Figure 19.

Figure 19: *Installation Climatechangedoesn'texist*



The installation, announced in a launch reel with the question "If the Earth could speak, what would it say about us?", featured a red car crushed by fake hailstones, referencing the extreme hailstorm that hit Milan in July 2023. The hood read the slogan "CLIMATE CHANGE DOESN'T EXIST" in bold yellow letters, followed by the statement "IS ALREADY HERE". As can be seen in Figure 20.

Figure 20: Frame from Factanza's [reel](#) published on February 27th 2024



As announced on Instagram at launch, the installation was described as a way to break the illusion that climate change is a distant or abstract issue:

"Often when we hear about climate change, we think it's a problem far away in time and space. But the floods and hailstorms that happened in Italy just a few months ago remind us that the climate crisis is already here."

The post-campaign reel also revealed behind-the-scenes footage and featured reactions from visitors who encountered the installation in person, reinforcing the project's participatory dimension and emotional resonance.

This visual paradox created a strong emotional and cognitive effect, encouraging passersby to stop, reflect, and share. It was an example of what Maria Russo elsewhere

described as "a format that creates media attention and civic conversation at the same time."

The campaign involved the coordinated release of a wide range of editorial assets across social media platforms and other digital touchpoints. These included:

- Three Instagram reels, with a combined reach of over 795,000 unique users and more than 1.2 million video views
- Two sets of Instagram stories on different dates, with impressions ranging from approximately 12,700 to nearly 20,000
- Two podcast episodes within Factanza's "Vitamine" format, each listened to by over 7,400 users, with a completion rate above 70%
- LinkedIn content targeting a more institutional audience, which reached nearly 34,000 profiles with an engagement rate of 5%
- Amplification via Telegram and WhatsApp channels, with combined reach exceeding 14,000 views

In total, the campaign achieved:

- 897,591 unique accounts reached via Factanza's own channels
- 36,390 total interactions across formats

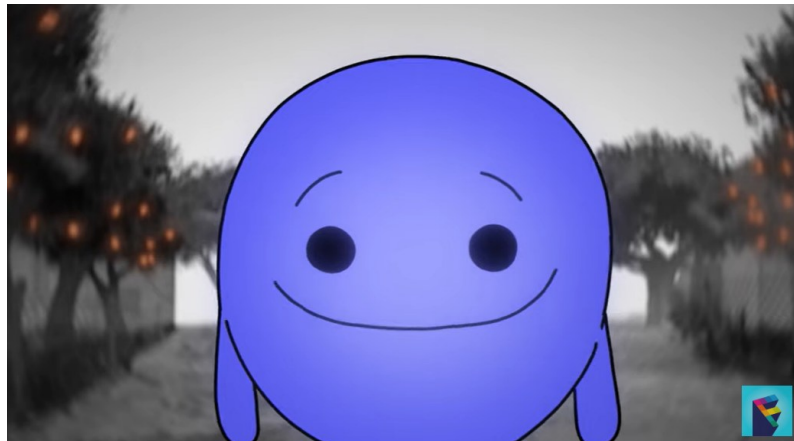
Further qualitative indicators: such as user-generated content and direct engagement with the installation, will be discussed in the next section.

7.1.2 WeWorld's Amal project: Storytelling Through Animation

While CESVI's campaign focused on public space and irony, WeWorld's project adopted a completely different strategy: a slow, emotional narrative told through animation.

The short film *Amal* follows the journey of a young Syrian girl from the moment she wakes up in a home marked by visible poverty and structural fragility. As she sets out for school, she walks together with a silent but constant blue presence through a cityscape visibly devastated by war. As can be seen in Figure 21.

Figure 21: *The blue guardian symbol of WeWorld, Frame from Amal*



One of the central challenges in the animation process was representing this destruction clearly without the use of narration or dialogue purely through visual cues.

Along her path, the girl sees a boy her age working with a crutch, suggesting the presence of child labor and the consequences of conflict. As can be seen in Figure 22.

Figure 22: *The boy working in the fields, Frame from Amal*



Soon after, she encounters a field marked with landmines, crossing it carefully as if it were a playground, where the game of hopscotch is ironically painted over the danger zone.

Eventually, she arrives at school, and the environment slowly becomes more colourful and hopeful. As can be seen in Figure 23.

Figure 23: : *WeWorld school built in Syria, Frame from Amal*



In the final scene, as she begins to write in her notebook, the camera rotates to reveal that she is now grown and stands before the classroom as a teacher: a narrative device used to signal that she has achieved her dream and reclaimed her future through education. As can be seen in figure 24.

Figure 24: *Final Scene, Key Frames from Amal Showing Her Transformation into a Teacher*



This partnership aimed to raise awareness about the educational crisis in Syria, a context in which war, displacement, and poverty have significantly hindered access to schooling.

Factanza was commissioned to conceptualize and produce a short documentary showcasing WeWorld's efforts and the broader structural challenges faced by children in the region. The project spanned approximately eight months, from July 2024 to March 2025, and involved a highly articulated, multi-phase production process.

Initial steps included internal brainstorming sessions with the editorial, graphic and partnership teams to define a creative direction that was both emotionally resonant and aligned with the client's values. The development then progressed through continuous collaboration with the client, sourcing illustrators and managing all phases of production and post-production.

The result is a four-minute animated film distributed through multiple channels, including Instagram, YouTube, and paid advertising.

The campaign totalled approximately 710,000 views across platforms:

- Trailer *Amal* (Instagram, TikTok, and campaign): 151,342 views
- Full video (Instagram, YouTube, and campaign): 558,535 views
- Landing page visits: 268

The campaign was also presented at an institutional screening in Brussels.

Although the two campaigns analysed in this chapter differ significantly in format, tone, and distribution strategy, both projects share a common ambition: to communicate complex issues in a way that resonates with younger audiences while preserving narrative depth and cultural relevance.

By focusing on storytelling rather than direct advocacy, these partnerships move beyond conventional branded content to occupy a hybrid space between journalism, education, and activism.

The last section, drawn on survey data and platform performance metrics, will examine to what extent these projects succeeded in achieving their communicative goals, in terms of awareness, engagement and impact.

7.2 Findings and Audience Perceptions

In order to assess the effectiveness of institutional communication supported by alternative media, this section presents and analyses the results of a survey conducted in May 2025 on young social media users.

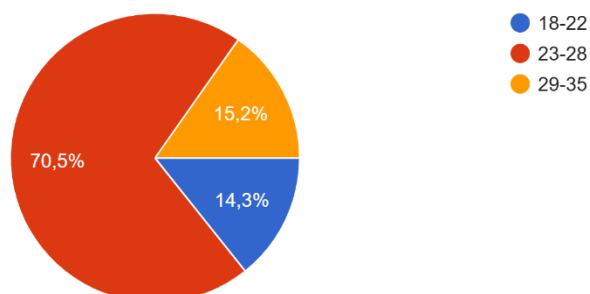
The survey was distributed online via Google Forms and collected a total of 105 valid responses from individuals aged 18 to 35 (with the majority - 74 respondents - aged between 23 and 28). The purpose of the survey was to evaluate how campaigns promoted in collaboration with Factanza were perceived by their audience in terms of clarity, engagement, emotional impact, and the potential to stimulate further action, such as donations or volunteering.

The questionnaire was structured primarily with clear and concise closed-ended questions, to suit the media habits and attention spans of a younger audience. This allowed for fast responses and easy navigation through the survey. A single open-ended question was included at the end to give participants space to express their views more freely and add depth to the findings.

The campaigns were presented in full to all participants, including those who were unfamiliar with Factanza prior to taking the survey, ensuring that every respondent was able to evaluate the content regardless of prior exposure to the platform.

The demographic breakdown of respondents is as can be seen in Figure 25.

Figure 25: *Demographic breakdown of respondents by age*



The majority of respondents identified as female (68 out of 105), while 37 identified as male.

In terms of occupational status, a plurality declared they were currently working (46), followed by students (29), and those who were both studying and working (27). Only three respondents reported being unemployed at the time of the survey.

When asked about time spent on social media each day, most respondents reported spending between two and three hours daily (54), with others reporting between one and two hours (25), four or more hours (22), and less than one hour (4).

The analysis unfolds in three main parts. First, it investigates the general relationship of the respondents with alternative media platforms, in order to frame the cultural context in which these campaigns are received. Second, it focuses on audience perceptions of the two specific campaigns, evaluating their visibility, tone, and perceived relevance. Finally, it provides a comparative analysis of the two campaigns, with special attention to the responses to the open-ended question, in order to understand their communicative impact and cultural effectiveness from the audience's point of view.

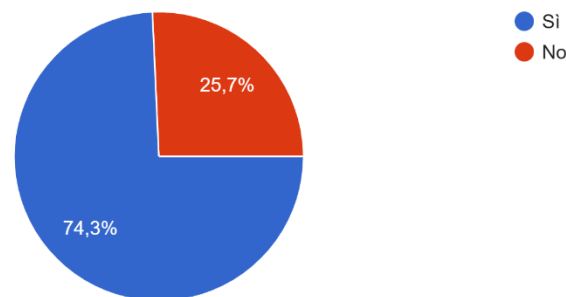
Ultimately, this section seeks to address the broader research question: Can campaigns promoted by alternative media like Factanza contribute to reconnecting institutions with a young audience, and if so, how effectively? At the same time, it also

anticipates a critical issue that will be explored in the following subsections: while awareness and emotional resonance are often achieved, translating them into concrete action remains a challenge - a tension widely discussed in the literature under the concept of *slacktivism*.

7.2.1 Engagement with alternative media platforms

One of the first questions posed to respondents was: *Do you know Factanza?* Responses indicate that the majority did, as can be seen in Figure 26.

Figure 26: Responses to the Question “Do You Know Factanza?”



These results confirm Factanza's strong presence among younger audiences, aligning with data from the Reuters Digital News Report 2024, which states that over 54% of Italians aged 18–24 use social media as their main news source, while trust in traditional institutional media remains low. As discussed in Chapter 2, this generational shift in media consumption underscores the urgency for institutions to adopt more relatable and digital-native channels of communication.

This context is further confirmed by a set of questions addressed to both those who were already familiar with Factanza and those who were not.

For respondents who knew Factanza, the platform was generally described as accessible and relevant: 73% assigned a score of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale when asked if

it helps raise awareness of social and political issues, and 69.2% agreed that it helps make complex topics more understandable, particularly those related to the climate crisis, rights, and cultural debates.

Interestingly, participants who were not familiar with Factanza but who were exposed to similar platforms such as Will Media, Torcha, or Il Post, expressed comparable views. Among these 27 respondents, over 85% gave a score of 3 or higher when asked if these platforms help raise awareness, and over 59% rated them 4 or 5 in their ability to make complex topics more accessible.

This alignment suggests that even among users unfamiliar with Factanza, there is a shared perception that alternative media platforms, when they blend editorial tone, emotional resonance, and visual clarity, can serve as effective news providers for the youngest.

As Giorgia Viviani explains: "We don't just do information, we try to offer an emotional entry point into topics that would otherwise feel distant. That's why we're perceived as something different, not just by those who follow us, but by the kind of language we use."

Her words echo the theoretical insights of Pierre Bourdieu, who speaks of media as agents of *symbolic production* capable of reshaping cultural perception over time (1993). Similarly, Nick Couldry describes alternative media as spaces of ritual participation where collective identities can be negotiated through emotionally charged storytelling (2003).

These data validate the idea that Factanza plays a dual role: as a simplifier of institutional language and as a cultural intermediary. As Giorgia Viviani explained in her interview: "What we try to do is offer information in a way that makes people feel closer to the issues, less distant, less abstract. And that's cultural work, even if it's slow."

In this light, the survey results do not merely reflect individual opinions but point toward an emerging media ecosystem in which platforms like Factanza contribute to a redefinition of public discourse. Rather than merely broadcasting institutional messages, they mediate them, embedding civic content within culturally familiar formats, such as reels, podcasts, and visual storytelling.

These findings set the stage for a more detailed exploration of how this symbolic trust translates into the perception of specific institutional campaigns, which will be the focus of the following section.

7.2.2 Institutional Campaigns in Focus: Perceptions of CESVI and WeWorld

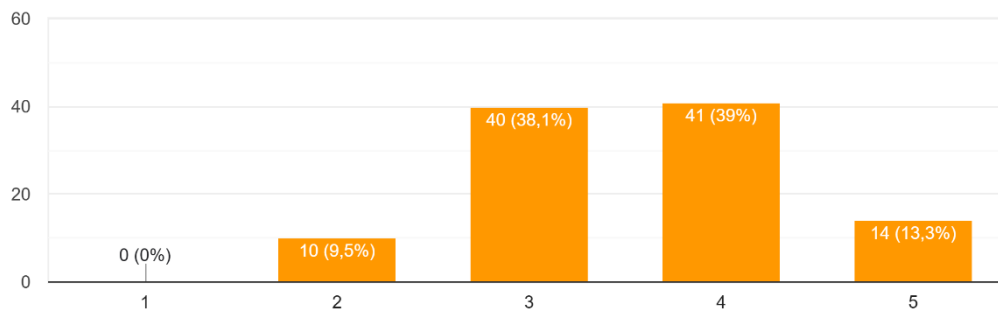
The second part of the survey asked respondents to reflect on the two institutional campaign presented in the previous section of the chapter: CESVI's #ClimateChangeDoesn'tExist installation and WeWorld's animated short *Amal*. The goal was to evaluate both campaigns in terms of visibility and clarity, and, especially, in term of perceived impact.

When asked whether they had previously seen the CESVI or WeWorld campaign, only 7 respondents recalled seeing *Amal* online or on social media, and 18 recalled having encountered the CESVI installation or related content. This suggests limited organic reach among the sample despite the campaigns' documented performance metrics, which reinforces the selective visibility of non-sponsored social content, even when amplified through partnerships.

In the case of *Amal*, participants were then asked: *Do you think a content like this can help understand forgotten crises like Syria?*

Most respondents gave intermediate-to-positive evaluations, as can be seen in Figure 27.

Figure 27: Responses to the question “Do you think a content like this can help understand forgotten crises like Syria?”



The illustrated narrative style of the video, especially the blue symbolic character representing WeWorld, was received with mixed reactions. While 46 respondents described it as “engaging and clear”, and 36 as “appropriate for handling such a serious issue”, a minority of 11 found it “too childish”, and 9 said it was “not suitable for the topic”.

These results suggest that the campaign's narrative ambitions, such as emotional storytelling and visual symbolism, were understood and appreciated by a majority, though a portion of the audience may find long-form or stylised content less immediately effective on fast-moving platforms.

The CESVI installation was evaluated more broadly in terms of recognition and symbolic power. Although only 18 participants had seen the campaign, the physical presence and ironic tone resonated with the few who did, aligning with the campaign's documented reach of 897,591 unique accounts.

According to the qualitative feedback, the CESVI campaign, though limited in organic visibility among respondents, was effective in creating a symbolic statement that drew attention both online and offline. The campaign’s broad amplification, including influencer posts and coverage by 17 press articles, 108 online mentions, and 18 radio/TV outlets, contributed to its higher visibility. In total, CESVI content achieved 2.7 million unique users reached and 1.7 million video views.

These numbers underscore how field activations, combined with digital coverage and institutional support (including EU funding), can significantly expand campaign reach. This highlights a key point in our comparative analysis: while WeWorld relied more heavily on sponsored distribution with fewer resources, CESVI benefited from stronger external backing and a multi-channel media strategy.

Ultimately, the CESVI campaign illustrates how a visually impactful, ironic approach can increase institutional resonance among younger audiences. However, these campaigns still navigate a fragile balance between emotional immediacy and sustained engagement, a point further explored in the next paragraphs. This gap between visibility and deeper conversion already anticipates the challenge theorized as *slacktivism*: campaigns may succeed in drawing attention but fall short of motivating costly forms of participation, such as donations or volunteering.

7.2.3 Comparing the Campaigns: Key Findings and Limits

To assess which of the two institutional campaigns was more effective in engaging young audiences, the survey included a set of comparative questions focusing on three key aspects: ability to stimulate reflection (awareness), encourage concrete action such as donations (conversion), and increase interest in the NGO's work (proximity).

When asked which campaign made them reflect more than traditional institutional communication, the responses were evenly distributed: 24.8% selected the CESVI campaign and another 24.8% selected the WeWorld campaign, while 41% said both had the same effect and only 8.5% said neither prompted any reflection

This suggests that both campaigns were generally perceived as capable of encouraging thought and awareness, but without a clear preference for one over the other in terms of depth or critical engagement.

However, when respondents were asked which campaign made them more willing to donate or support the NGO, the difference became clearer: 38.1% chose the WeWorld

campaign, whereas only 15.2% selected CESVI. Notably, 24.8% were influenced by both, while 21.9% felt neither had such an effect.

Similarly, in terms of the desire to learn more about the NGOs' work, the WeWorld campaign once again scored higher (41.9%), followed by "both" (21.9%), CESVI (13.3%), and "none" (22.9%).

These results indicate that, while both campaigns were effective in raising awareness, WeWorld's project generated stronger emotional engagement and a greater potential for follow-up action, at least at a declarative level.

However, it is important to consider the role of thematic and emotional variables when interpreting these results.

The WeWorld campaign focused on the Syrian educational crisis, using a symbolic and emotionally charged narrative that may have resonated more immediately with the survey audience. In contrast, CESVI addressed climate change, which is a topic that, although highly relevant, is often perceived as abstract or removed from everyday experience. This difference in thematic proximity likely influenced audience responsiveness.

Additionally, distribution and visibility played a significant role in shaping perception. Despite receiving some paid promotional support, the WeWorld campaign had limited circulation. Only 7 out of 105 respondents recalled having seen it. In contrast, 18 respondents had encountered the CESVI campaign, and its metrics were significantly higher: 2.7 million unique users reached, 1.7 million video views, 17 press articles, 108 online mentions, and 18 TV/radio features.

The WeWorld campaign, by comparison, reached 710,000 views (including 151,342 for the trailer and 558,535 for the full video), with 268 visits to the landing page. These figures reflect a gap between the campaign's narrative impact and its distribution potential.

The results suggest that the CESVI campaign, while less emotionally resonant for some, achieved greater public presence and media amplification. This aligns with Giorgia Viviani's observation: "With WeWorld we had to sponsor the video because it wasn't circulating organically. It was a strong piece, but didn't fit the rhythm of the platforms."

In contrast, CESVI's activation during Fashion Week and its use of physical installation allowed for greater cross-channel visibility. The campaign's focus on presence and media pickup compensated for its arguably less emotionally engaging theme.

The final open-ended question of the survey: *Do you think this kind of communication is effective in engaging young people with nonprofit organizations and raising awareness about social issues? Why?*, elicited a wide spectrum of responses that enrich and nuance the quantitative findings. These insights can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Positive insights

A majority of responses described this form of communication as effective, clear, and emotionally engaging. Many praised its immediacy, visual impact, and capacity to make complex issues more accessible: "I think it is very effective; communication on social is becoming more and more clear and frank [...]. Realities like Factanza are a necessary tool to bring young people closer to the work of nonprofit organizations often not even considered by young people themselves."

Another common thread was that relatability, rather than moralism, was seen as a strength: campaigns that "don't use guilt or pity" but rather "create emotion and invite reflection" were praised for being more in tune with younger audiences.

2. Conversion concerns:

At the same time, several responses echoed concerns already voiced by Giorgia Viviani in her interview, particularly regarding the gap between awareness and action. One respondent wrote: "I think it's definitely a way to make young people aware of the

existence of different social problems, but I don't think it's enough to actually make a difference.”

Others underscored that while these campaigns may spark interest, they often fail to generate concrete engagement such as long-term follow-up, activism, or donations: “The difficulty and challenge then lies in converting it into possible donations and concrete actions.”

This insight confirms a broader tension at the heart of institutional campaigns on social media: visibility and affect do not automatically lead to participation. As Viviani put it: “It’s easier to get attention for a second. Turning that into long-term engagement, into donations or action, that’s the difficult part.” Another respondent points out:

“They are effective and impactful because they are simple and immediately understandable [...].

However, I believe that these types of communications are really impactful when aimed at a target audience whose sensitivity to social issues is already active and present. Hardly a disinterested young person watching a documentary or a post on social media about a specific issue will delve deeper and get closer to the cause. Especially if it is content promoted by Nonprofits in need of support and donations; through this type of communication, these entities will only find real support from young people already previously interested in the issue.”

3. Critical perspectives

A smaller but significant group of responses was more critical, warning against over-simplification, emotional manipulation, or media saturation:

“No, serious topics should be treated with seriousness and real information, not catchy campaigns...”

“2 images do not change a person's mind. On social media you can find everything.”

This scepticism often reflects a generational media fatigue, where even visually powerful campaigns risk being lost in the constant flow of content, especially if they don't offer credible sources, depth, or concrete ways to act.

Synthesis: Between Promise and Limits

Taken together, these open responses confirm a key insight: communication strategies like those adopted by Factanza are generally perceived as culturally relevant and engaging, especially when compared to traditional institutional messaging. However, their effectiveness is conditional. They work best when:

- The narrative is symbolically powerful but not infantilizing.
- The distribution strategy maximizes exposure beyond the usual audience.
- The message is accompanied by clear calls to action or sustained opportunities for involvement.

While many young people appear receptive to this type of content, a consistent remain wary of its limits. The conversion gap from interest to action emerges as the central challenge for future campaigns, which represents a dynamic that digital media studies identify as the risk of *slacktivism* (Morozov, 2009; Rotman et al., 2011). This debate argues that low-cost actions such as likes, shares, or viewing emotionally resonant content may produce a “feel-good” effect without leading to high-cost participation like donations or volunteering. The responses in this survey empirically reflect this concern, situating Factanza's role within the tension between awareness and action. The open-ended responses gathered in this survey, for example, statements like “it makes people aware, but it's not enough to actually make a difference”, illustrate this tension in empirical terms. What emerges is a clear recognition of Factanza's cultural role as a translator and amplifier of institutional messages, but also of the structural limits imposed by the logic of social platforms, which often privilege visibility over sustained involvement. In this sense, Factanza's collaborations exemplify the paradox of contemporary digital activism: successful in raising awareness, but constrained by the very dynamics that risk reducing activism to slacktivism.

Conclusion

This research concludes that social-native editorial platforms like Factanza represent a crucial but inherently paradoxical evolution in the landscape of institutional communication. They are not merely digital translators of public-interest messaging; they are full-fledged cultural agents, capable of rearticulating institutional discourse within the codes, aesthetics, and values of platform-native audiences.

In our contemporary era, which is defined by media fragmentation, declining trust in traditional journalism, and the algorithmic filtering of information, these platforms offer promising alternatives. They succeed in making complex issues more relatable and more immediate, especially for generations that have grown up within the visual and affective logic of social media.

At the same time, the thesis also reveals that this cultural mediation is not without structural constraints. In line with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and fields of production, Factanza has accumulated a form of legitimacy that is deeply embedded in the specific digital habitus of younger, socially conscious, media-savvy users. This symbolic capital is not only aesthetic or reputational; it is relational. It arises from a shared language, a common affective tone, a mutual distrust of traditional authority, and a preference for immediacy over abstraction. Within this niche, Factanza operates with remarkable effectiveness. It earns trust. It invites participation. It "feels" authentic.

Yet precisely because this capital is so finely tuned to a particular cultural field, it struggles to travel. This is the point where the empirical findings of the thesis meet the theoretical insight of Bourdieu: the so-called "bubble effect" can also be interpreted as a sociological consequence of symbolic specialization. The more Factanza aligns itself with the values and aesthetics of its native audience, the harder it becomes to translate that authority across different publics, particularly those outside of its symbolic comfort zone. Its cultural legitimacy becomes field-specific and, therefore, structurally limited.

This dynamic has important implications for institutional communication. While NGOs and public actors increasingly turn to platforms like Factanza to reach younger demographics, the credibility gap uncovered in the survey data suggests that legitimacy gained on Instagram or TikTok does not automatically extend to institutional causes.

Many respondents praised the clarity and tone of the campaigns analysed, yet still questioned their depth, permanence, or effectiveness in inspiring real-world action. In Bourdieu's terms, the platform's symbolic capital is effective within the micro-field of social storytelling, but fails to convert into the broader field of civic influence, where trust, authority, and impact are measured differently. This difficulty in turning visibility into participation reflects the phenomenon of *slacktivism* already discussed in Chapter 7.

These insights invite us to reconsider what we mean by "impact" in civic communication. If awareness is high but action remains low; if engagement is emotional but fleeting; if visibility is strong but confined, then what kind of transformation is truly possible? The evidence suggests that Factanza does play a valuable role in reshaping the symbolic grammar of public discourse. It reconfigures how civic issues are framed, felt, and circulated. But its power lies more in symbolic reorientation than in behavioural conversion. It can shift perception, but it cannot alone restructure the fragmented public sphere in which it operates.

Ultimately, this central tension between editorial innovation and structural limitation, between symbolic authority and its transferability, is what defines the transformative yet fragile potential of platforms like Factanza. They are not "solutions" in themselves, but symptoms and agents of a broader cultural shift. Their success reveals as much about the desires and anxieties of a generation as it does about the changing nature of institutional legitimacy in the platform era. And this, in turn, demands new forms of strategic and ethical awareness from all actors involved: platforms, institutions, and audiences alike.

Strategic Implications and Recommendations

These findings point toward a broader set of strategic implications for all actors involved in the production, mediation, and reception of civic content in the platform era. If platforms like Factanza succeed in establishing a language that resonates with younger audiences, this does not imply that institutions can simply outsource communication and expect meaningful engagement to follow. The logic of these environments is more complex, more fragile, and more structurally constrained than it may appear from the outside.

For NGOs and cultural managers, this research offers a clear recommendation: entering these ecosystems requires more than adapting tone or format. It demands a deeper understanding of the social, symbolic, and algorithmic grammars that structure them. Strategic partnerships with alternative media must be based on clear expectations and differentiated goals.

Awareness campaigns, which prioritize reach and recognition, must not be confused with conversion campaigns aimed at prompting specific actions such as donations, participation, or mobilization. The former require visibility and aesthetic alignment; the latter demand trust, continuity, and accessible calls to action.

Campaigns that rely exclusively on emotional appeal or stylistic innovation may generate momentary interest, but are unlikely to sustain civic engagement if not anchored in a coherent and credible long-term narrative. To mitigate this, institutions should move from commissioning content to co-creating it, allowing for editorial formats that can blend performativity with substance, offering both the spectacle that algorithms reward and the intimacy that ethical storytelling requires.

For alternative media platforms, the central challenge lies in protecting the symbolic capital they have built while navigating increasing commercial pressures. The reliance on branded content, although currently necessary to sustain operations, risks

diluting editorial autonomy and undermining audience trust, especially when partnerships involve institutional or nonprofit actors.

To maintain cultural credibility, platforms like Factanza must treat their editorial mission as a strategic asset, not just a value statement. This may involve diversifying revenue streams to reduce dependence on sponsored content: educational programs like the Factanza Academy, subscription models, or service-based consulting for digital literacy are all viable paths. At the same time, these platforms must invest in metrics that capture cultural and civic impact, not just views or engagement, but retention, resonance, and recognition across different fields. Without such efforts, their role as trusted mediators could erode, and with it, their capacity to influence public discourse meaningfully.

Within the field of Management of the Arts and Culture, this research offers a concrete case study of contemporary cultural entrepreneurship, where editorial identity, platform strategy, and civic purpose intersect. Factanza can be understood not only as a media outlet, but as a hybrid cultural organization, one that engages in audience development, cultural branding, and strategic communication through platform-native tools. Its evolution from a small Instagram page to a company with editorial, consulting, and educational branches mirrors the challenges and opportunities of working in today's cultural industries.

At the same time, this case also challenges the traditional assumption that cultural work must be non-profitable or structurally precarious. For cultural managers, it offers a starting point for rethinking how cultural value is produced, sustained, and distributed in the platform era. Creating ethically resonant and socially relevant content is not enough: it must be supported by viable business models and strategic infrastructures. In this sense, the ability to navigate the political economy of platforms to understand how algorithmic systems, monetization logics, and attention dynamics shape both visibility and meaning is no longer optional. It is essential.

Rather than opposing cultural mission and financial sustainability, this research suggests that the two must be thought together. Cultural managers of the future will need to design ecosystems where symbolic capital and economic capital reinforce rather than undermine one another; building organizations that are not only culturally impactful, but also structurally resilient. This is not just an analytical insight; it is a call to action.

Limitations and future research

While this research offers relevant insights into the communicative potential of alternative media platforms, its limitations should not be seen merely as methodological boundaries. Rather, they reveal a set of productive tensions, structural dilemmas and unresolved questions, that open new avenues for further exploration. Framing these constraints as springboards for inquiry allows this study to contribute not only to existing knowledge, but also to future research trajectories.

The first tension concerns age segmentation. The survey sample focused exclusively on individuals aged 18-35, corresponding to Factanza's declared target audience. This choice, while strategic, left out younger users, who are among the most active and influential on visual-first platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These users often engage with media in ways that challenge institutional logic entirely: through remixing, irony, or fleeting trends. Future studies could adopt ethnographic and age-segmented methodologies (e.g., content diaries, digital ethnography) to examine how these adolescents experience, trust, or resist civic communication embedded in social media narratives.

Secondly, the research is situated within a single national context: Italy. While this allowed for cultural and institutional specificity, it limited comparative insight. Alternative media platforms evolve differently depending on national traditions, political climates, and media ecosystems. A promising direction for future research would be a comparative analysis across countries with distinct editorial cultures. For example, one could examine how Factanza (Italy), Código Nuevo (Spain), and die_chefredaktion (Germany) address the same civic issue, such as climate change or gender equity, and compare their respective capacities to bridge the awareness.

A third tension lies in regional disparity. The survey sample was disproportionately composed of respondents from Northern Italy, an area typically associated with higher levels of media literacy, institutional trust, and access to cultural capital. This regional imbalance limits the representativeness of the data, particularly in a country where historical divides between North and South significantly shape civic behaviours and media perceptions. Future studies could correct this bias by employing mixed-method research designs, combining digital surveys with in-person interviews in underrepresented regions.

A particularly revealing tension emerged around the theme of audience fragmentation, often referred to as the “bubble effect.” While this has been widely debated in academic literature (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017; Quattrociocchi et al. 2016), the findings here suggest that it operates not only through algorithmic filtering but also as a sociological mechanism. As discussed earlier in the context of Bourdieu, symbolic capital accumulated within a niche habitus is difficult to convert across broader fields. Thus, the inability to reach ideologically distant or disengaged publics is not just a technical limitation but a field-specific constraint. Addressing this tension requires coordinated action across editorial, institutional, and platform levels, including algorithmic transparency, intentional co-creation, and structural support for content designed to cross social boundaries.

Beyond these dimensions, this study identifies three underexplored but crucial research frontiers.

Comparative Studies on Civic Efficacy across Media Cultures: moving beyond general comparisons, future research could systematically analyse how alternative media in different countries perform in converting awareness into civic action. This could involve coding and evaluating campaign structures, emotional appeals, engagement metrics, and follow-up behaviours to map what editorial formats work best - and under what cultural and political conditions.

The Institutional Perspective: to date, little research has investigated how NGOs and public bodies internally assess and negotiate partnerships with alternative media. Ethnographic research inside these organizations could uncover the rationales, fears, and expectations that shape such collaborations. How do institutions measure success in these

hybrid formats? What risks, reputational, political, financial, are perceived? And how do internal power dynamics influence communication decisions?

The Political Economy of Platforms: finally, a critical direction for future inquiry lies in exploring how the architectural and economic logic of platforms like Instagram and TikTok constrains the civic potential of actors like Factanza. Algorithmic volatility, opaque monetization policies, and shifting moderation rules all impact what content is seen, prioritized, or suppressed. Investigating how creators and institutions navigate (or resist) these constraints is essential to understanding the structural leeway for public-interest communication in the platform economy.

Ultimately, these limitations point to a central question that extends beyond this case study: what kind of public discourse is possible in a media system governed by algorithms, attention, and affect? This thesis does not claim to answer it fully, but it aims to sharpen the tools with which future scholars, communicators, and cultural actors might approach it.

This research began with a desire to understand how communication could be made meaningful for a generation often excluded from traditional narratives. The journey through Factanza revealed both creative potential and structural fragility. While the platform succeeds in reshaping how public-interest content is delivered, it operates within systems that prioritize speed, emotion, and visibility. Creating real awareness today requires more than engaging formats, it demands a deeper interrogation of the digital environments where meaning is made.

This case raises urgent questions. Can branded content maintain depth when addressing social issues? Is Factanza's model scalable in the long term? Can neutrality avoid flattening political complexity? Based on this research, the answer is often no. Its impact is real, but limited, confined to like-minded audiences and vulnerable to the logics of platform capitalism.

I chose Factanza for this thesis because it represents a new kind of cultural organization. More than a media outlet, it is a hybrid actor that shapes narratives, influence perception, and cultivates community within an ecosystem defined by instability and

visibility. Its collaborations with NGOs are not just communication efforts, but examples of cultural project management in action.

For those working in Arts and Culture Management, this case signals a clear shift. Today, cultural production unfolds across digital platforms, shaped by branding strategies, algorithmic influence, and the economy of attention. Understanding and managing these forces is no longer optional; it is essential not only to reach audiences, but to foster critical awareness and long-lasting cultural impact.

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