

FUTURE MEDIA HUBS 2026 KEY TRENDS

THE LANGUAGE, USAGE AND FORMATS OF ONLINE MEDIA HAVE EVOLVED INTO SOMETHING FUNDAMENTALLY NEW, WHILE TRADITIONAL MEDIA STILL STRUGGLE TO ADAPT.

- Although expectations around news content remain relatively stable, **online formats are changing at speed**.
- **Mobile** has become the dominant device – across news consumption and social media alike. This **reshapes visual language**. **Vertical** storytelling now sets the norm, even influencing how we frame stories beyond screens.
- **Short, fast** formats dominate. This creates a tension for traditional news media: how to stay brief and immediate while still offering quality, depth and layered reporting?
- **Video** remains the leading storytelling format, and they keep getting shorter. Where most YouTube videos were already constrained in length, short-form video – often under 60 seconds – is now taking over every major platform.
- At the same time, one **long format** is gaining momentum: **podcasts**. Often running longer than an hour, they continue to grow in both supply and audience reach.
- **Younger audiences** are moving toward new formats like **livestreams, webtoons and microdramas**. They expect emotions and narrative moments to be remixable, shareable and reusable across platforms.
- The **boundary between gaming and traditional media** has largely disappeared. IP and media assets now extend into transmedia story worlds, spanning film, games and social environments.
- Traditional media companies are still largely organised around **legacy formats** for print, radio or television. While they invest in derivative formats, they often lack the capability to create native, transmedia content from the outset.

“Gen Z and Gen Alpha don’t accept passive consumption. They expect spaces where they can create, remix and belong.”

RECOMMENDATION

- News media companies need to accelerate their adoption of the new (visual) language, while maintaining the quality and depth for which they are known. They must focus more on natively designing and creating content for the new formats and channels. If media companies succeed in this, they can play an important role as go-to-destinations for reliable information, while better connecting with new audiences.

“The most successful IP of 2026 is designed as a world rather than a format.”

USERS AND THEIR PLATFORMS ARE CHANGING AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA ARE LEFT BEHIND

- **Platforms and influencers drive** reach, leaving **publishers** in a weak position: they do still **create quality** content, but have **little impact** on how it gets **distributed** or **monetised** via tech platforms.
- One of the more worrisome observations is that **traditional journalistic items are no longer considered traffic drivers** by the tech platforms. They are more and more degraded by the algorithms: journalism **loses visibility** on social networks.
- Younger audiences have a **different relationship** with platforms. For them platforms function less as distribution channels and more as **identity spaces**. They shift part of their lives to happen inside virtual worlds, so-called **thirdscapes**.
- Platforms are **social stages** where **identity is tested and shaped**, which enable **direct access and discussions, outside** of the reach and **oversight** of traditional structures like media, parents or schools.
- Often this happens in the **gaming universe** which has become a crucial part of the content, media and entertainment experience. New (AI-driven) technology **democratises the creation of games and in-game worlds**, making it accessible to non-developers.
- This creates even **more fragmentation** and **proliferation of content**. Gaming stakeholders thus create **their version of media**, yet **traditional media lag** the insights and action to in return **infiltrate** that universe.
- Platforms like Roblox enable **easy in-game presence** without heavy engineering, it are often **brands and not traditional media players** that embrace this method.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The current geopolitical situation calls for less dependency on search engines and social platforms, and moving away from the dominant platforms. Media companies should contribute to rebuilding a European tech media ecosystem, where capability and credibility is key in order to ensure users move to these trusted European platforms.
- Media companies should strengthen direct audience connections, via apps, in-depth emerging stories and destinations, newsletters, subscriptions, podcasts,...
- Entering game spaces is mandatory for traditional (news)media to connect with younger audiences, so media companies should step up their game to acquire the ability and credibility to do so.
- One approach for media companies is to cover in-game worlds as places where culture, economy and social life unfold. Even if this content does not natively appear in those new worlds, reporting on it through their media channels can bridge the two worlds and secure reach to and engagement with new users.



“There is a transfer of agenda-setting power and credibility from news media to creators operating outside traditional journalistic norms.”

TRADITIONAL MEDIA ARE THE GATEKEEPERS OF THE PAST, NOT THE FUTURE

- **Traditional media** have over the recent decades **lost much of their role as gatekeepers** of news and access to quality content. A flood of **new gatekeepers** is more successful in capturing the minds, hearts and eyeballs of users.
- The **tech platforms were the first** to challenge the traditional gatekeepship. **Social networks and search engines** placed themselves between media-sources and users. Their algorithms decide what is shown to who, effectively making the curated context obsolete.
- The **upside was traffic** that was driven towards media destinations. This has **now changed**, as **traffic** from the platforms to media destinations **is drying up**. Search and social traffic to news sites is **collapsing while AI summaries** displace clicks and referrals even more.
- The **democratisation of content in the platform world** allows for content creators to easily create and distribute content of all sorts. An interesting observation is that content created by and shared via **personal accounts resonates better** with many users and thus outperforms traditional media brands on platforms.
- **Some of these content creators rise to the top, becoming media brands of their own.** They are the next generation of influencers, **reshaping trust and agenda-setting**. Entire businesses emerge around them and their impact is huge. Yet, they **do not in any way comply with media deontology**, regulations and **oversight** that comes with traditional media.
- A worrisome trend in recent years is the **growing influence of billionaire owners** of a wide range of media outlets, both in the US and in Europe. Although this is as old as media itself, we recently see how billionaires are taking over media, not only as an investment, but also to have a determining impact on politics and society, **often with an outspoken ideological agenda**. New is the unseen power concentration by combining the ownership of traditional media, social media and even AI-platforms.
- On the same line, we see how **radical parties and their politicians are bypassing traditional media** altogether while only using social media and even their own platform to communicate with their audiences, thus **escaping the controlling power of traditional media**.
- In countries where radical parties and politicians rule, there is **increased state pressure** on (mainly) public broadcasters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Traditional media companies should strengthen direct audience channels. Develop apps, newsletters and subscription hubs to offset volatility in search and social referrals, ensuring newsrooms control at least part of their own distribution.
- In the current geopolitical situation, it is important for our society to recognize and restore the importance of objective quality media. Media companies can play a crucial role, alongside political policy initiatives aimed at forcing international tech players to respect European legislation, in rebuilding a European tech ecosystem that meets user expectations while balancing our European values and norms with business interests.

DECLINING TRUST IN TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND INCREASING NEWS AVOIDANCE

- **Believe in legacy media keeps eroding further** across all demographics as a result of a combination of elements: from **continued attacks** from certain players on the political spectrum to the perception of **structural decline of quality** due to the economical constraints media have to work with.
- Simultaneously, an **increasing part** of the public suffers from **news fatigue**, actively **avoiding news** as it is perceived as **overwhelming** in quantity and **negativity**. These people might still trust traditional media, but they **chose to opt out** most of the time, becoming very **selective** in what they want to follow.
- The news that is still consumed has the risk of being subject to **confirmation bias** in which people increasingly tend to only consume news that confirms their existing opinions, thus cutting them off from a wide and more balanced worldview.
- We see a fundamental shift in how **people trust central legacy media less in favour of “influencer voices”**, often operating in so-called **echo chambers** on social media platforms. This contributes to an **even larger media fragmentation** and into the risk of further societal **polarisation**, potentially even endangering **democratic mechanisms** in our society.
- The **attention-mechanisms** that are driven by the business logic of big tech platforms reinforce the risk of people getting stuck in echo chambers and confirmation bias even more.
- A recent **threat** to trust is the **emergence of AI-generated content** that becomes very **hard to distinguish from what is real**. Deepfakes and “AI slop” (low-quality, low-effort digital content generated rapidly and in large quantities by artificial intelligence) are flooding platforms like Youtube, rapidly **increasing the quantity of content, yet equally decreasing quality** and trustworthiness. The fundamental problem with this evolution is not that people can no longer distinguish if something is fake, but rather that we get into a **situation where people no longer believe what is real, because it could be fake**.
- **Younger** audiences are **disengaging faster**, as they move away from linear channels overall. In that case it is often not only a matter of leaving, but rather **not initially engaging with traditional news**.
- They prefer living inside **thirdscape worlds** and gaming environments where **belonging** is key and in which they can actively participate in so-called world-building. Here dynamics of engagement are very different: growth depends on fanship, personal trust and connection with “winners” building the deepest connections, strongest ecosystems and lasting trust.
- **Identity, shared values, community and relationships become central** to media relevance, something that **traditional media have failed** to develop over the decades.
- This leads to an **increasing information inequality** where a declining number of people still has access to a broad and balanced (news)media offering, while others – often deliberately – limit their media consumption to what personal confirmation bias, echo chambers and platform algorithms present them.
- Still, more people **become aware of the risks** of declining trust, news avoidance, confirmation bias and echo chambers. Several initiatives aim at media literacy growth, but these are unevenly spread and insufficient.

“Transparency has shifted from ethical ideal to strategic necessity.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Media companies can address the lack of trust by focusing on greater transparency: who they are, their journalists, their shareholders, how are stories created and verified, ...
- Traditional media must – despite the pressure from current economic attention mechanisms – focus on presenting stories and facts in an understandable, constructive and balanced manner, moving away from sensational clickbait titles. They should let go of the battle of “most attention” and strive for the battle of “most trust”.
- Media companies must focus on greater representativeness, both in the mix of stories being told and in the composition of the newsroom to present those stories. This can bring media companies closer to segments of the audience that currently feel unrepresented in any way.
- Media companies must focus on building qualitative relationships that go far beyond the historical link between media and consumers. The need for belonging, community and identity has never been translated into products and value by the media. These should be considered fundamental KPIs in rebuilding a new (digital) media ecosystem where traditional players play a more significant role.

AI AND THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM: ASSISTANT OR ADVERSARY?

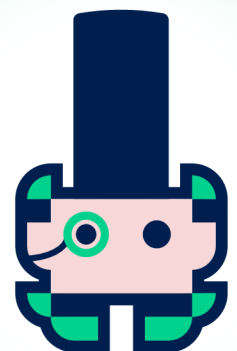
- Many **legacy media organisations move beyond AI-pilots** to build robust, scalable technology stacks and solutions
- AI sits at the **core of news production and distribution** processes. Workflows shift towards **AI-supported pipelines** with text, video, audio and moderation being automated. As such, AI proves to be a **great help for newsrooms** and media companies. The rise of agentic AI is expected to automate complex production tasks and workflows even further.
- AI allows media companies to **step up the way it presents content in different formats** and through different **channels**. Content becomes liquid as single stories can be **automatically adapted** into multiple formats for different channels and needs. Multimodal AI, like Veo 3 and Sora 2, are enhancing the results extensively.
- This allows for **more relevant and targeted communication**, leading to **hyper-personalisation**, making media feel like a mirror, reacting to mood, context and identity of the user.
- AI also proves to become a huge **additional challenge as a potential new gatekeeper**. Today most AI-platforms allow for **daily news digest** based on users’ preferences and AI-behaviour. It is expected that AI will soon be able to **natively create journalistic content**, based on the original input (like press releases) or by simply observing events like journalists would do. On the longer term AI has the potential to disrupt the position of legacy (news)media companies even further.

“In more and more newsrooms, AI already drafts part of the daily output.”

- Media companies are trying to deal with the accelerating adoption of AI by **building policies and governance models around the “human oversight” principle**. AI can and should be used in the process, but qualified journalists have to focus on verification and context. New roles, strict rules and with “human in the loop” are being rolled out. However, several “AI-incidents” – where AI-mistakes enter the published content stream – show that this is often not sufficient, with great risks of eroding trust even further.
- The quality and trustworthiness of AI is also based on the quality of its training data. Global models like ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Grok or Claude all have their own **cultural bias**. Although most of these models are by now very language-capable, this might not be sufficient to guarantee quality across the entire chain. For this reason, **European newsrooms are developing their own proprietary language models**, trained on local data, often based on existing models so they can develop faster and more efficiently.
- **As AI scales, maintaining trust remains critical**. Transparent, sustainable and responsible AI becomes not only a competitive advantage, but will prove to be instrumental for the operation of any media company. One key domain of action is through C2PA authentication (an open technical standard for publishers, creators and consumers to establish the origin and edits of digital content).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- News media companies can leverage AI to accelerate their alignment with new user expectations. Faster, high-quality content creation, better personalisation, automatic conversion into different formats, etc., can help media companies keep pace with rapid developments.
- It is crucial that media companies continue to rigorously ensure accuracy, reliability and quality. Proper training of internal teams in the use of AI, along with strict ethical guidelines and permanent human oversight, must ensure that AI helps media companies achieve their goals without falling into the trap of manipulation and fake content.
- The threat that AI could become the primary new gatekeeper – deciding not only what people see, but also shaping it and eventually even creating the news itself – makes it even more important for traditional media to take control of a (new) European media tech ecosystem. Not to stop the developments, but to regain ownership over them.



LEGACY BUSINESS MODELS UNDER PRESSURE

- For many years, traditional media companies are **struggling to adapt their business models** to the new digital reality. We can only conclude that the **challenges are only getting bigger**.
- The traditional **dual market model** in which (paying) users attract advertisers, is fundamentally **broken**. As users increasingly leave traditional media platforms, advertisers also move towards other channels for reach and relevance. Brands are faster in migrating to platforms with (targetted) reach and are also faster in adopting advertising experiments in new spaces like games.
- In recent years, **traditional revenues remain in decline** and can not be offset by digital advertising revenues as these are mainly captured by US tech platforms. Media companies are **experimenting with hybrid revenue models**, but evidence shows that paywalls are limiting traffic, thus impacting advertising revenues even more. Although many news outlets saw an **increase in subscriptions in recent years**, we **now see paywall fatigue** growing, resulting in a **plateau** when it comes to new subscriptions.
- There is substantial money in the media and entertainment space, but it becomes **increasingly difficult for legacy media** companies to **tap into these revenue streams**. The **money is extensively flowing towards (mainly American) platforms** and the **gaming** industry. Digital advertising is mainly benefitting big tech platforms, but new players also succeed in where traditional media typically fail: charging for subscriptions, services, commerce, monetisation of data, (in-app) purchases and tapping into other sources of online revenue.
- Traditional media companies face an **innovation dilemma**: the accelerating **speed of change** – shifting user expectations, change in formats and channels, different approaches towards content types, the rapid rollout of AI, ... – **requires traditional media to invest** in both keeping their **legacy** models afloat and at the same time invest in media of **tomorrow**. The **business reality** however forces them to work with **lower budgets**, leading to **layoffs** and newsroom **consolidations**, potentially **negatively impacting** the quality of their existing products, while never reaching the experience digital native players are offering. This might **eventually push even loyal users away** as they grow increasingly disappointed with the (news)media products they get served.
- Although commercial media companies often see (local) public broadcasters as fierce competition, the steady income of publicly funded players might aid in strengthening the local media ecosystem, considering the investments in innovation and transformation are shared with the entire industry.

“Traditional media companies are becoming subcontractors for the Big Tech.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Media companies must focus on a variety of potential new revenue streams: hybrid models with advertisements, subscriptions, bundles, micro-payments, e-commerce, etc.
- However, this will likely remain a rear-guard action as long as the concentration of media power persists on foreign, non-European tech platforms. The only real solution for both the role and the business model of media is to rebuild strong traditional companies that embrace new forms, channels and expectations in the digital world. The way to achieve this is by reclaiming European control over social media and AI, which not only attract all the attention today but also - from their monopolistic positions - completely push out traditional media. The current geopolitical crisis proves this is not only a risk from a business perspective, but also for our European democratic values.
- Now more than ever, the struggle is not between players in a single market, between public and commercial broadcasters. The battle is between traditional media players - as an existential part of our society - and new challengers - gatekeepers - who wish to capture the attention of consumers and citizens with different business and moral values. Although commercial media companies often see (local) public broadcasters as fierce competition, the steady income of publicly funded players might aid in strengthening the local media ecosystem, considering the investments in innovation and transformation are shared with the entire industry.

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