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Instagram Engagement and Content Strategies of US and UK Legacy Media: A Quantitative Analysis of Five Leading News Outlets

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Abstract: The digital age, driven by advancements in data processing and internet technologies, has seen virtual social networks, particularly Instagram, become integral to daily life, influencing both leisure and professional activities. Instagram, with over two billion users in 2023, emphasizes visual storytelling, making it a pivotal platform for media outlets to engage audiences through photos and videos. This study quantitatively analyses the Instagram engagement and content strategies of five prominent legacy news outlets from the United States and the United Kingdom—*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *USA Today*, *The Independent*, and *The Washington Post*. Through an examination of over 9000 posts from January to December 2023, this research evaluates posting frequency, user engagement (likes and comments), hashtag usage, profile mentions, and geographic coverage. Findings indicate significant differences in posting strategies and engagement levels, highlighting *The Washington Post*'s intensive posting and *The Guardian*'s selective engagement strategy. This study emphasizes tailored strategies, thematic consistency, and careful use of mentions and hashtags as crucial for maximizing audience interaction.



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1. Introduction

The rise in Instagram as a visual-centric social media platform has fundamentally reshaped how audiences interact with content, posing both challenges and opportunities for legacy news media. With over two billion active users globally in 2023, Instagram has become essential not only for leisure and entertainment but also as a strategic platform for professional communication, information dissemination, and audience engagement (van Dijck, 2013; Leaver et al., 2020).

In the broader context of journalism, the digitalization of society has led to significant shifts toward content convergence and multichannel communication (Neuberger et al., 2018). The integration of social media into journalistic practice not only enhances interactivity but also creates an environment characterized by immediate feedback and dialogue with readers (Altmeyden et al., 2019; Planer et al., 2022). In particular, Instagram's distinct focus on visual storytelling offers news outlets unique opportunities to engage

audiences through compelling images and videos, fostering deeper connections and reinforcing brand identities (Carpenter et al., 2020). Media organizations must strategically adapt their content to Instagram's visual logic and interaction dynamics to effectively capture audience attention, which demands nuanced and targeted communication strategies (Denisova, 2023). These transformations underscore the importance of examining how media organizations structure their presence on Instagram not only visually, but also discursively. In a digital ecosystem increasingly dominated by visual platforms, legacy media outlets face the challenge of remaining editorially relevant by adapting their communication strategies to the specific language and interaction logic of these environments. This adaptation involves not only what to publish, but how to textualize and format content to capture audience attention within a system shaped by algorithms, short-form formats, and visibility dynamics.

Despite the growing number of studies on the use of Instagram by news media, a significant gap remains in the analysis of the specific strategies employed to connect with audiences. Recent works, such as those by Saks and Hopkins (2024), which focused on *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and Saks and Hopkins (2023), which examined regional newspapers in the United States, have analyzed variables such as posting frequency, the use of hashtags and mentions, engagement levels, and types of visual content. However, these approaches tend to be primarily descriptive and limited to national contexts, without thoroughly exploring key aspects such as the international scope of content, the visual logic of posts, or the presence of relevant figures in media discourse.

This study distinguishes itself from previous research by expanding the sample to five media outlets from both the United States and the United Kingdom, and by incorporating new analytical variables, such as geographic coverage and the identification of public figures mentioned, through the use of artificial intelligence-based techniques. Furthermore, although Instagram is a highly visual platform, this study focuses on the textual dimension of posts. The aim is to enable a more nuanced and contextualized analysis of how editorial strategy adapted to the logic of digital platforms.

The following sections include a structured literature review outlining previous research and theoretical contexts relevant to the study, followed by a detailed description of the research methodology, analysis results, and a comprehensive discussion. Finally, this paper concludes by highlighting the study's implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research directions.

2. Literature Review

The emergence of social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of news dissemination and audience interaction. Traditional one-way communication models have been replaced by dynamic participatory environments where audiences no longer passively consume content but actively contribute to its distribution and framing. Within this rapidly evolving context, Instagram has risen as a key platform for news engagement, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for legacy media organizations. This literature review explores existing research on audience participation, curated news flows, and strategic adaptations of news media, ultimately identifying gaps in current knowledge and highlighting the contributions of this study.

2.1. Audience Engagement and Participation in Social Media

The shift from traditional media consumption towards active audience participation has transformed the dynamics of news dissemination. Users are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants influencing news distribution through sharing, commenting, and interacting (Carlson, 2016; Sixto-García et al., 2023). This "audience turn"

has critical implications for journalism, reshaping traditional media's approach to content creation and distribution to prioritize user engagement and interaction (García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2023; Hendrickx, 2023). As such, the relationship between legacy media and audiences on social media has increasingly become a focal point in journalism studies (Tandoc & Vos, 2016; Karlsson et al., 2023).

Previous studies emphasize the varied intensity and nature of audience participation across different platforms. For instance, Larsson's (2018) comparative analysis reveals that Instagram facilitates primarily superficial engagement (e.g., likes), while platforms like Facebook stimulate deeper interaction through discussions and comments. Moreover, Hendrickx (2023) highlights how Instagram's user base typically engages more extensively with soft news, human interest stories, and visually captivating content. This preference underscores the importance of news organizations strategically aligning their content with audience expectations and behaviours on specific social platforms.

Traditional media outlets have embraced social media for news distribution, particularly in the realm of lifestyle, health, and entertainment-focused content (Perreault & Hanusch, 2023), primarily focusing on directing users to their websites through general links or specific news stories (Hille & Bakker, 2013). In addition, it is worth noting that Instagram, along with other social media platforms, has become one of the primary sources of news for the younger population, mainly due to its visual appeal and interactive features (Nee, 2019). In-depth examinations by Anter and Kümpel (2023) also underline the importance of understanding the informational behaviours of young adults, finding that they predominantly interact with news on Instagram through incidental exposure and visually appealing storytelling, influencing news outlets' content delivery approaches. Consequently, news organizations increasingly integrate interactive storytelling techniques and visual engagement strategies to sustain audience attention and participation on visually oriented social media platforms.

2.2. Curated News Flows and News Distribution on Social Media

The process of news dissemination on social media has been conceptualized through the theory of "curated flows", introduced by Thorson and Wells (2015, 2016). They identify the following five types of curators: journalistic, strategic, personal, social, and algorithmic. This model emphasizes that exposure to news content no longer depends solely on traditional newsroom gatekeeping but is instead fragmented among multiple actors involved in the selection, amplification, and redistribution of information. Editorial decisions now coexist with dynamics such as strategic communication, personal preferences, peer sharing, and automated algorithmic filtering.

Bruns' concept of "gatewatching" (Bruns, 2015, 2018) further expands this view, emphasizing the decentralized nature of news selection and distribution online. Rather than filtering news at the source, gatewatchers, whether individuals, media, or online communities, observe, highlight, and redistribute content through their own networks, creating more horizontal and collaborative information flows. Additionally, in this complex context of news curation several studies have highlighted the significant role of algorithmic digital intermediaries such as news aggregators and search engines in shaping access to journalistic content (Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2018; Scharkow et al., 2020). Furthermore, in some cases it is difficult to distinguish the type of curator behind a news post on social media, as is the case with social bots, which often blur the line between human and machine curation (Grimme et al., 2018).

Recent empirical studies show that journalistic curation accounts for less than 20% of the total content shared on social media platforms (Mayerhöffer et al., 2024), signalling a fundamental shift in control over news flows. This shift raises critical questions about

accountability, information quality, and the role of media literacy in an environment where audiences and algorithms significantly shape public discourse. [Tandoc \(2014/2014\)](#) further reinforces these dynamics by illustrating how real-time analytics and audience feedback actively shape editorial choices and the broader news ecosystem.

Legacy media, therefore, faces the dual pressures of maintaining journalistic standards and adapting strategically to algorithmically driven visibility patterns and user-generated content dynamics. Consequently, news organizations increasingly rely on platform-specific strategies, considering audience interaction metrics to inform their editorial decisions ([Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024](#)).

2.3. Instagram as a Visual and Strategic Communication Platform

Instagram's distinct emphasis on visual storytelling differentiates it from text-centred platforms like Twitter and Facebook ([Leaver et al., 2020](#); [Al Nashmi, 2018](#)). The platform's design fosters rapid consumption of visually appealing content, with limited opportunities for direct news linkage outside of the use of bio links or stories ([Hase et al., 2022](#)).

As a result, legacy media outlets must adopt visual-first strategies, optimizing image quality, using consistent aesthetic styles, and crafting narratives through visual elements rather than through in-depth textual reporting ([Carpenter et al., 2020](#)). Visual framing thus becomes critical as media brands often rely on emotionally evocative imagery and succinct captions to attract user attention and promote sharing. Moreover, Instagram's algorithm prioritizes engagement-based metrics such as likes, shares, and saves, making it essential for media outlets to design content that encourages active interaction. The platform's visual bias also introduces a hierarchy of visibility that favours esthetically polished, emotionally resonant, and entertainment-oriented posts, challenging the serious presentation of traditional news topics.

Recent research by [Kallio and Mäenpää \(2025\)](#) provides detailed insights into newsroom adaptations to Instagram's visual affordances, highlighting strategic deployments of formats such as Stories and Reels to optimize engagement. Their study reveals that newsrooms specifically tailor content formats to match audience interaction patterns, using Stories for real-time updates and audience redirection and Reels to broaden content reach through algorithmic exposure. Similarly, [Guo and Sun's \(2023\)](#) examination of local television news on Instagram emphasizes how visual vividness, timeliness, and strategic captioning directly enhance audience engagement and content resonance.

Instagram's algorithmic logic further intensifies competitive pressures, prompting news organizations to craft visually compelling and emotionally resonant content that aligns with user preferences and engagement behaviours. [Hermida and Mellado \(2020\)](#) elaborate on the distinct journalistic roles emerging on Instagram, such as visual storyteller and promoter, which diverge from traditional reporting roles to better resonate with the platform's audience. Such strategic adaptations not only optimize audience interactions but also significantly influence editorial practices and content strategies.

2.4. News Media Strategies and Challenges on Instagram

Despite Instagram's strategic potential for media branding and audience engagement, challenges remain. [Vázquez-Herrero et al. \(2019\)](#) identify platform-specific factors impacting journalistic strategies, notably the volatility of user preferences and the challenge of capturing user attention consistently. Moreover, while traditional media outlets attempt to adapt their content to the specific affordances of Instagram, their strategies are often more technical than strategic, lacking clear guidance or coherent platform-specific editorial processes ([Zimmermann et al., 2022](#)).

Additionally, the credibility traditionally associated with legacy media may not necessarily translate directly to social media success. Newman (2023) highlights a shifting pattern of user engagement, with increased preference toward news shared by celebrities or influencers rather than content produced by professional journalists or traditional outlets. This trend underscores the complex dynamics of credibility and audience engagement unique to Instagram, prompting further investigation into how traditional media can effectively navigate these new contexts. Moreover, practical challenges such as limited linking capabilities within posts significantly affect content strategy and user redirection efforts (Hase et al., 2022). Media outlets must innovate continually, such as using Instagram's native tools such as Stories for direct links, effectively managing trade-offs between platform engagement and external website traffic. Overall, these complexities highlight the importance of comprehensive strategic frameworks that explicitly integrate platform affordances, user engagement insights, and evolving journalistic standards into sustainable Instagram content practices.

Building on the issues discussed in the previous sections, several research gaps remain unaddressed, particularly in relation to how legacy media navigate Instagram's editorial and algorithmic demands. Few comparative studies have systematically analyzed legacy media strategies across different national contexts, particularly regarding engagement techniques such as hashtag deployment, tagging, story formats, and geographic targeting (Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Hase et al., 2022). Moreover, the influence of Instagram's visual logic on journalistic values such as factuality, depth, and critical reporting remains underexplored. Early findings suggest that visual-first news formats may favour affective engagement over analytical depth, but more empirical research is needed to understand these trade-offs systematically. Addressing these gaps, this study proposes a comparative analysis of strategies employed by major legacy media outlets in the United States and the United Kingdom. By focusing on dimensions such as content formats, audience interaction patterns, and strategic adaptation to platform affordances, this research aims to contribute to a better theoretical and practical understanding of digital journalism's evolution on visually driven platforms.

2.5. Research Objectives and Questions

Based on the review of the literature, several underexplored aspects have been identified regarding how legacy media outlets use Instagram. In particular, there are gaps in our understanding of posting dynamics, the factors that explain differences in audience engagement, and the textual strategies—such as the use of hashtags, mentions, and geographic references—employed to connect with audiences. To contribute to this discussion, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do the analyzed media outlets differ in terms of posting frequency and content delivery rhythms on Instagram?
- **RQ2:** In what ways do audience engagement metrics (likes and comments) vary across outlets, and how might these variations reflect strategic or structural differences?
- **RQ3:** What patterns emerge in the use of hashtags, profile mentions, and geographic references, and how are these practices related to audience engagement and editorial positioning?

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a descriptive quantitative approach to analyze how five prominent legacy media outlets strategically utilize Instagram. The methodology combines content analysis techniques (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016) with web scraping using Python libraries (requests 2.31.0, BeautifulSoup 4.12.13, and Selenium 4.15.2), natural language processing

(NLP) applications, BERT-based models, descriptive statistical analysis, and data visualization. The research focuses on Instagram posts published on the primary profiles of the selected media outlets from 1 January to 31 December 2023.

The selection of media outlets was based on their positions in the SCImago Media Rankings (SMRs) (<https://www.scimagoedia.com/index.php>, accessed on 14 December 2023), which assesses the web reputation of media organizations worldwide. The top five outlets were chosen based on their performance in this ranking. The selected media outlets are as follows:

- From the United States: The Washington Post, The New York Times, and USA Today.
- From Great Britain: The Independent and The Guardian.

Data extraction was conducted through web scraping (Panditrao, 2021). Initially, posts on the target profiles were identified, extracting the unique identifiers associated with each post along with the publication date. Subsequently, automated access to each post was established using its unique identifier, allowing the extraction of public data such as the main username, post text, number of comments, and number of likes. The data were consolidated into a semi-structured CSV (comma-separated values) database for further processing.

The raw data underwent an enrichment process to prepare it for analysis. Data enrichment is a stage in data analysis that generates derived attributes to enable a deeper understanding of the phenomena and patterns present in the data (Berwin et al., 2017). Specific attention was given to detecting hashtags, mentions, links, and references to individuals and countries. These textual elements were identified using automated techniques, such as pattern recognition and named entity recognition, based on pretrained language models known for their accuracy in classifying semantic content (Devlin et al., 2018; J. Wang et al., 2024). The enriched dataset was analyzed using descriptive statistical measures, complex network analysis, and data visualization techniques. Central tendency indicators, such as mean and standard deviation, were utilized to assess content delivery and audience engagement across the analyzed media outlets. Complex network analysis facilitated the examination of co-occurrence patterns among hashtags and mentions, enabling the identification of central elements and the detection of strategic patterns. This comprehensive methodological approach provides insights into how legacy media outlets curate content, construct thematic focuses, and engage with their audiences on Instagram.

To support the analysis, the selection of variables was guided by their relevance to the study's objectives and the specific dynamics of Instagram. Posting frequency was used to observe content delivery rhythms, while interaction metrics (likes and comments) were employed to evaluate audience response. Proportional engagement indicators allowed for comparisons between outlets with varying levels of activity. Mentions, hashtags, and named entities provided insights into thematic focus, brand positioning, and editorial strategies aimed at enhancing visibility and influence within algorithmic information flows.

4. Results

4.1. Posting Frequency and Interaction Volume

A total of 9467 posts were obtained using data extraction procedures. Analyzing the use of Instagram by media outlets, Table 1 presents the statistical indicators of posts made by each outlet. In absolute terms, *The Washington Post* is the most intensive user, while *The Guardian* ranks last, with a significant difference between them which exceeds 400%. This contrast is more pronounced when viewed on a daily and monthly basis. The values in parentheses correspond to the coefficient of variation (CV), expressed as a percentage. This indicator shows the variability of the data relative to its mean, allowing for a comparison of relative dispersion across media outlets. A high CV indicates significant fluctuation

in posting volume or interactions, whereas a low CV suggests greater consistency. On a monthly basis, the gap persists between *The Washington Post*, with an average monthly post count of 235.00, and *The Guardian*, with 46.48 posts. Decimal values are considered in the indicators due to their potential to express greater sensitivity in comparisons. *The New York Times* presented the second-highest monthly average of 196.75. While *USA Today* and *The Independent* display relatively similar monthly averages, comparing their coefficients of variation offers a more nuanced understanding of their posting behaviour. *The Independent* shows greater inconsistency in its posting patterns, with more pronounced fluctuations between months, in contrast to the more stable activity observed in *The Guardian*.

Table 1. General statistics.

	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Total Volume	559	1790	2361	2820	1937
Estimated Followers (Dec 23)	5.7 M	796 K	17.6 M	6.6 M	3.4 M
Monthly Volume	46.58 (10.37%)	149.17 (29.24%)	196.75 (12.29%)	235.00 (13.57%)	161.42 (16.81%)
Monthly Likes Number	1,135,659.50 (29.96%)	265,309.58 (69.90%)	11,083,485.00 (11.91%)	4,814,903.42 (17.40%)	1,374,207.75 (16.79%)
Monthly Comments Number	38,797.17 (61.05%)	19,719.08 (68.99%)	254,329.92 (51.95%)	152,249.42 (18.80%)	86,427.08 (13.86%)
Monthly Proportional Engagement	25,141.98 (28.49%)	1888.56 (52.55%)	58,222.56 (15.02%)	21,172.60 (11.90%)	9062.62 (1.22%)
Daily Volume	1.59 (48.85%)	5.10 (52.42%)	6.47 (23.05%)	7.73 (30.40%)	5.31 (32.30%)
Daily Likes Number	38,715.66 (151.29%)	9070.41 (327.09%)	364,388.55 (51.95%)	158,298.19 (83.90%)	45,179.43 (32.29%)
Daily Comments Number	1322.63 (180.93%)	674.16 (206.65%)	8361.53 (87.10%)	5005.46 (63.16%)	2841.44 (38.23%)
Daily Proportional Engagement	24,597.54 (127.86%)	1860.77 (262.98%)	58,035.36 (46.80%)	21,306.05 (76.93%)	9065.44 (1.96%)
Monthly Engagement Rate (%)	20.75	35.81	64.59	75.40	43.36

In terms of interactions, Table 1 refers to the total accumulated likes and comments in absolute terms for each media outlet. *The New York Times* exhibits the highest average accumulated likes, reaching a monthly average of close to eleven million likes. *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* show similar values, exceeding one million monthly likes, considering the coefficient of variation presented. On the other hand, *The Independent*, despite having three times more posts than *The Guardian*, demonstrated a considerably lower number of likes, close to 265,000 monthly likes.

The patterns observed in the likes indicators exhibit slight variations when analyzing the daily total averages. *The New York Times* presented the highest daily average value, followed by *The Washington Post*. *The Independent* remained in last position. It is noteworthy that the coefficient of variation values is very high, nearing 83% for *The Washington Post*, 151% for *The Guardian*, and 327% for *The Independent*. This indicates a high daily variation in user interactions with the posts.

The New York Times exhibits the highest monthly average value for comments, surpassing 254,000, followed by *The Washington Post* with close to 152,000. *USA Today*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent* presented values below 100,000, with *The Independent* having the lowest average value. The pattern observed is similar when analyzing the daily average comment values. Once again, high coefficient of variation values are observed for both daily and

monthly indicators, with the exception of the monthly values presented by *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*, where the coefficient of variation was close to 10%, indicating more stable monthly interaction levels.

4.2. Proportional Engagement per Post

To deepen the understanding of the interactive reverberation between users and posts it is interesting to analyze the proportional engagement, which takes into account interactions through likes and comments in relation to the number of posts disseminated, as shown in Table 1. This indicator is complemented by the monthly engagement rate relative to the estimated audience size. Although in terms of engagement volume *USA Today* ranks second-to-last, the coefficient of variation is close to 1%, indicating highly stable behaviour among its various posts which suggests high user loyalty. *The Independent* presents the lowest average engagement among the analyzed outlets, with a value close to 80% lower than that presented by *USA Today*. Furthermore, *The Independent* has the highest variation, with a value of 52.55% in monthly terms and 262.98% in daily terms, indicating wide fluctuation in how users interact with individual posts.

This indicator is complemented by the engagement rate relative to audience size. Since official follower counts for the end of 2023 were unavailable, estimates were produced using growth trends observed between October 2022 and February 2023. Based on these estimates, the average monthly engagement rate was calculated by dividing the sum of likes and comments by the number of followers, expressed as a percentage. The results reveal that *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* stand out with the highest monthly engagement rates, exceeding 64%. This suggests that their content not only generates large interaction volumes but also resonates strongly with their followers. *USA Today* and *The Independent*, despite having smaller audiences, also achieve notable engagement levels. In contrast, *The Guardian*, with a larger follower base, shows a lower relative engagement rate, possibly indicating a more selective or less interaction-driven strategy. Figure 1 provides a more detailed observation of the number of posts published monthly by each outlet and the interactions they generate with reference to the number of likes and comments. As previously noted, despite not being the outlet with the highest posting frequency, *The New York Times* generates the most interaction, in particular achieving a very high number of comments in October, in response to highly engaging content published during that period. This trend decreased in November, but did not drop to previous levels, although it would be interesting to know if it was sustained in 2024.

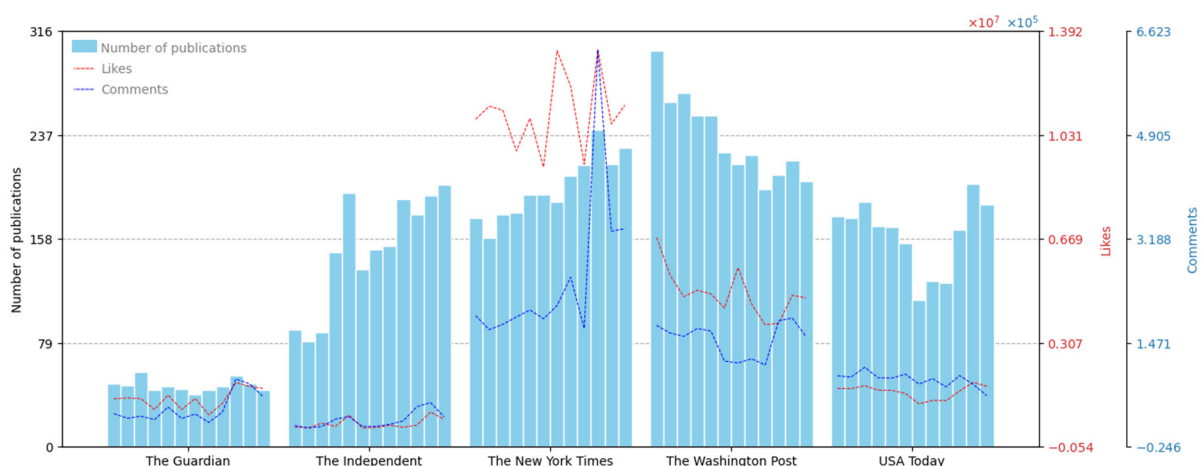


Figure 1. Number of publications and interactions per month.

4.3. Hashtags and Mentions

Figure 2 displays the percentage distribution of hashtags and mentions for each of the outlets. There is a disparity in the strategies employed by each of them. Regarding the use of hashtags, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* showed a percentage near zero, whereas *USA Today* and *The Independent* exhibited values above 10%. *The Guardian* utilized hashtags in over 60% of its posts. On the other hand, in terms of mentions, *The New York Times* had the highest percentage, with a value of 68%. *USA Today*, *The Guardian*, and *The Washington Post* had values of close to 20% for mentions, whereas *The Independent* had a virtually negligible figure.

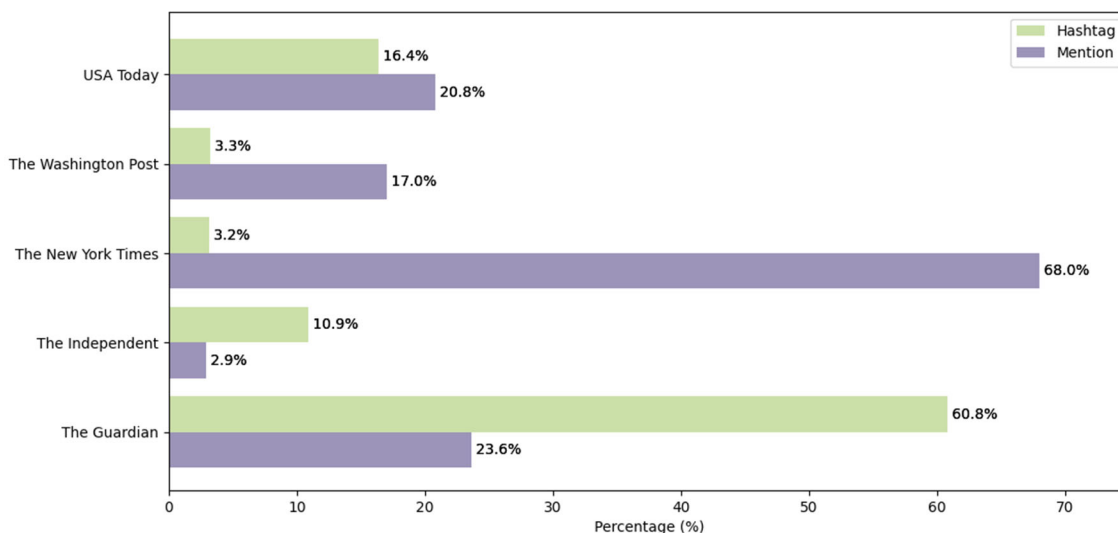


Figure 2. Percentage use of hashtags and mentions.

The distribution shown in Figure 2 reveals notable differences in the presence of hashtags and mentions across outlets. These variations suggest distinct editorial approaches regarding visibility and interaction strategies on the platform. While *The Guardian* stands out for its intensive use of hashtags, *The New York Times* emphasizes profile mentions, and *The Independent* makes minimal use of either. These choices may reflect differences in content type, dissemination goals, or the degree to which Instagram is integrated into each outlet’s overall communication strategy.

Table 2 presents the percentage variations in engagement concerning the usage of hashtags and mentions compared with the average interaction presented for posts without hashtags or mentions. It is observed that only *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* exhibited a positive variation for posts with mentions. In all other cases, posts with hashtags, mentions, or both showed negative variations, meaning that they had a lower average interaction than posts without hashtags or mentions. It is noteworthy that *USA Today* displayed percentage values considerably close to zero, indicating an insignificant variation in terms of hashtag or mention usage.

Table 2. Percentage variation in engagement with the use of hashtags and mentions.

	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Hashtags and no mentions	−19.70%	−33.36%	−41.43%	−2.70%	+0.26%
Mentions and no hashtags	+6.47%	−86.66%	+12.06%	−22.56%	−0.18%
Hashtags and mentions	−21.23%	−50.52%	−22.69%	−34.24%	−0.85%

This table reveals that the use of hashtags and mentions does not necessarily guarantee higher engagement. In most cases, tagged posts show lower interaction rates than those without hashtags or mentions. Only *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* achieve improved performance when using mentions, suggesting a more selective and effective tagging strategy. In contrast, *The Independent* shows significant declines, particularly in posts with mentions, which may indicate suboptimal or even counterproductive usage. These findings highlight the importance of a strategic approach to tagging, in which the relevance and editorial coherence of hashtags and mentions are key to maximizing audience impact. To better understand these engagement patterns, the following sections examine the mentions and specific entities referenced, as well as the hashtags used by each media outlet.

The main mentions identified for each of the five outlets are presented in Table 3. First, note that three outlets—*The Independent*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*—make use of self-mentions, which is a redundant linkage given that Instagram structurally provides access links to the profiles making the posts. This is particularly evident for *The Independent*, where 38.46% of posts mentioned themselves. Another pattern observed is the mention of profiles belonging to the same section of each outlet, such as @guardian_us and @guardianaustralia mentioned by *The Guardian*, or @nytopinion, @nytmag, and @nytcooking mentioned by *The New York Times*. The profile of the independent news agency AP News (@apnews) stands out as the most mentioned by *The New York Times* (4.17%) and *USA Today* (27.54%). Additionally, frequent mentions were observed for image sources, whether agencies or photographers (@gettyimages, @afpphoto, @mattmcclainphoto, and @amirbangs).

Table 3. Top 5 users mentions.

<i>The Guardian</i>		<i>The Independent</i>		<i>The New York Times</i>		<i>The Washington Post</i>		<i>USA Today fzi</i>	
@guardian_us	14 (10.61%)	@the.independent	20 (38.46%)	@apnews	67 (4.17%)	@postclimate	39 (8.12%)	@apnews	111 (27.54%)
@guardianaustralia	9 (6.82%)	@emelisande	4 (7.69%)	@nytopinion	44 (2.74%)	@mattmcclainphoto	23 (4.79%)	@usatoday	111 (27.54%)
@bjennigsuk	4 (3.03%)	@hannahgrae	4 (7.69%)	@nytmag	40 (2.49%)	@eatvoraciously	22 (4.58%)	@gettyimages	93 (23.08%)
@chantayjayy	4 (3.03%)	@lookfantastic	4 (7.69%)	@nytcooking	29 (1.81%)	@washingtonpost	20 (4.17%)	@afpphoto	41 (10.17%)
@christophcherry	4 (3.03%)	@damianlewisreallyofficial	3 (5.77%)	@amirbangs	24 (1.49%)	@jabinbotsford	19 (3.96%)	@usatodaysports	21 (5.21%)

Mentioned user (value and percentage of occurrence within records with mentions).

The analysis of mentions reveals distinct strategic approaches across outlets. While *The Independent* systematically engages in self-promotion by frequently tagging its own account, other organizations like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* adopt a more diversified approach, highlighting internal specialized profiles (e.g., specific sections) or external accounts such as partner agencies and image sources. This difference may reflect contrasting branding strategies: one focused on reinforcing institutional identity and the other oriented toward expanding visibility through external affiliations. Additionally, the use of mentions can be interpreted through the lens of curated flows, where tagging functions as a mechanism to guide audience attention and enhance informational legitimacy through alliances and shared references.

Figure 3 shows a graph of the five outlets, highlighting the mentions shared between different outlets. Upon studying the network of connections, it can be observed that only *The Independent* is isolated in the graph, utilizing unique mentions. The other outlets share various mentions, especially to refer to celebrities, photographer profiles, or news profiles, as is the case with the aforementioned independent news agency *AP News* (@apnews), which has shared mentions by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*.

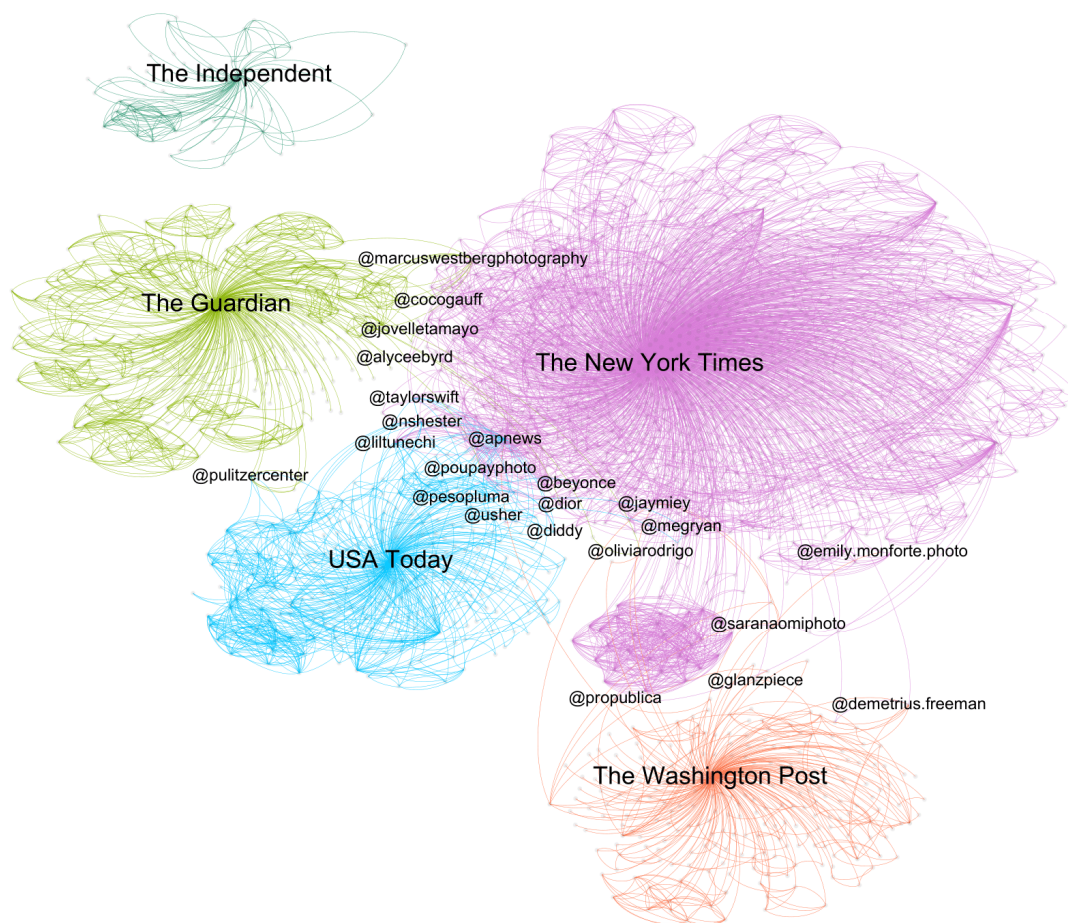


Figure 3. Graph of mentions used by each media outlet.

Examining Table 4, which displays the primary hashtags utilized by each of the five outlets, reveals several noteworthy observations. Distinct thematic priorities are evident in the hashtags of each outlet. For example, *The Guardian* concentrates on topics related to the climate crisis, while *The Independent* and *USA Today* predominantly employ hashtags associated with news and politics, with *USA Today* including several hashtags relating to sports. In contrast, *The Washington Post* shows a propensity towards comics, as indicated by its consistent use of related hashtags. Furthermore, *The New York Times* utilizes hashtags associated with specific events or current affairs, such as #YearInPictures, #metoo, and #Covid, indicating a direct response to ongoing events. Each outlet demonstrates a unique approach to content curation and audience engagement through their choice of hashtags, reflecting their distinct editorial identities and audience preferences.

Table 4. Top 5 hashtags.

<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
#ClimateCrisis 27 (7.94%)	#news 27 (13.85%)	#nytopinion 44 (58.67%)	#thelilycomics 29 (31.52%)	#sports 23 (7.26%)
#news 26 (7.65%)	#Trump 17 (8.72%)	#YearInPictures 12 (16.00%)	#wapocomics 22 (23.91%)	#california 10 (3.15%)
#Environment 23 (6.76%)	#fyp 13 (6.67%)	#metoo 9 (12.00%)	#BTW 18 (19.57%)	#Biden 9 (2.84%)
#worldnews 23 (6.76%)	#tv 10 (5.13%)	#Covid 1 (1.33%)	#BTWComics 4 (4.35%)	#Politics 9 (2.84%)
#UK 22 (6.47%)	#Politics 9 (4.62%)	#culture 1 (1.33%)	#thelilynews 4 (4.35%)	#nfl 8 (2.52%)

Beyond thematic classification, the use of hashtags by media outlets reflects strategic editorial decisions. Some use them to reinforce brand identity—*The Guardian* with climate change or *The Washington Post* with entertainment content—while others link them to specific news events or institutional campaigns, as seen with *The New York Times*. This selection functions as a form of content curation, enabling outlets to foreground particular narratives and guide audience attention within a highly visual and competitive environment.

Upon examining the network of connections between hashtags (Figure 4), it is evident that the node shared among the three outlets employing hashtags is #sports. Other nodes shared, albeit exclusively between *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, include #news, #Israel, #Gaza, #politics, #climatecrisis, and #china.

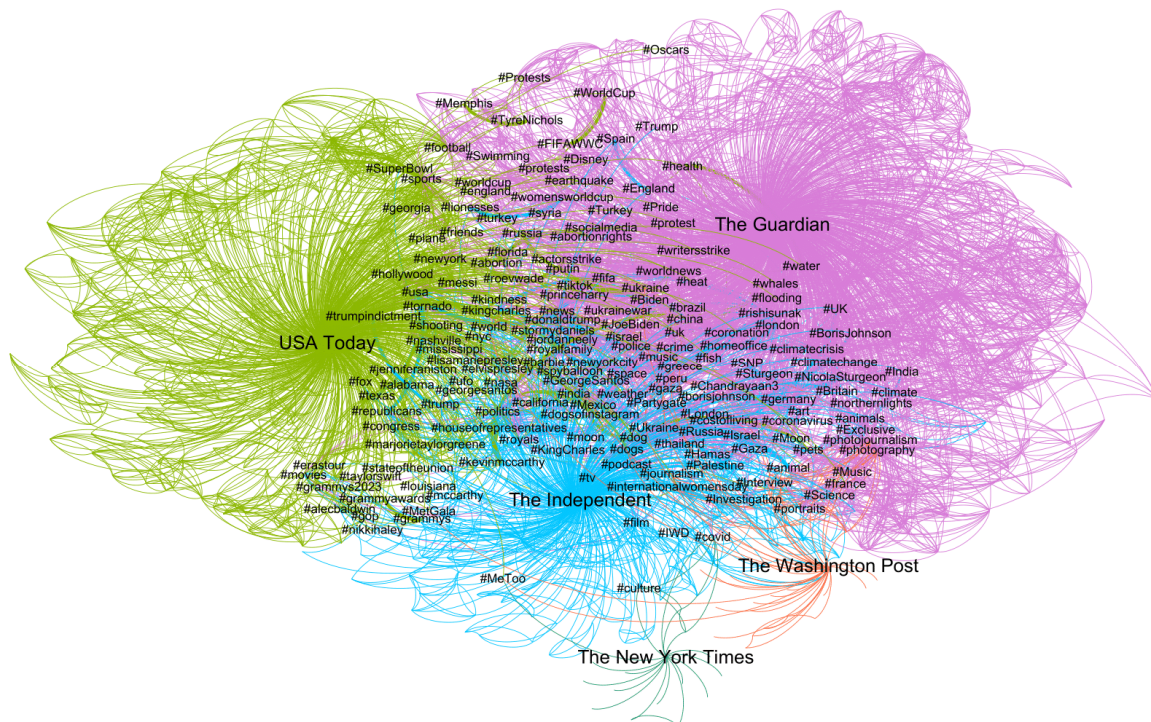


Figure 4. Graph of hashtags used by each media.

The analysis of the mention and hashtag networks reveals distinct editorial patterns among the outlets. The absence of overlap in the mentions network (Figure 3) suggests that each outlet operates within its own ecosystem, often referencing internal profiles or recurring collaborators and rarely tagging external actors shared across organizations. In contrast, Figure 4 shows a moderate overlap in hashtags, particularly around general themes such as #sports, #news, or global issues like #Israel or #Gaza. This partial convergence points to common thematic interests, but the overall distribution suggests that outlets may frame these topics through differentiated editorial perspectives.

4.4. Named Entities: People

When it comes to peoples' names (Table 5), the first item that stands out is the frequency of the name Donald Trump, which appears in the first or second position for the most mentioned across all five outlets. For *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* the frequency of the name Donald Trump notably exceeds the frequency of other identified names. Overall, names of political figures, mostly American and British, are observed, such as Joe Biden, Eric Adams, Boris Johnson, and Rishi Sunak. Also included are the names of political leaders Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, and Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, linked, respectively, to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Russo–Ukrainian

war. Exceptions occurred with the names Tyre Nichols, in reference to the case of the African American worker murdered in Memphis, and singer Taylor Swift, who, in 2023, gained prominence in the media due to her record-breaking ratings, numerous awards, and rise to billionaire status.

Table 5. Top 5 people entities.

<i>The Guardian</i>		<i>The Independent</i>		<i>The New York Times</i>		<i>The Washington Post</i>		<i>USA Today</i>	
Donald Trump	20 (4.26%)	Rishi Sunak	55 (5.91%)	Donald Trump	119 (7.76%)	Donald Trump	141 (8.73%)	Joe Biden	67 (6.49%)
Boris Johnson	10 (2.13%)	Donald Trump	48 (5.16%)	Eric Adams	22 (1.44%)	Kevin McCarthy	35 (2.17%)	Donald Trump	50 (4.84%)
António Guterres	9 (1.91%)	Joe Biden	21 (2.26%)	Kevin McCarthy	19 (1.24%)	Ron DeSantis	27 (1.67%)	Taylor Swift	24 (2.33%)
Benjamin Netanyahu	8 (1.70%)	Keir Starmer	21 (2.26%)	Ron DeSantis	16 (1.04%)	George Santos	19 (1.18%)	Kevin McCarthy	15 (1.45%)
Tyre Nichols	8 (1.79%)	Boris Johnson	18 (1.94%)	Volodymyr Zelensky	16 (1.04%)	Taylor Swift	17 (1.05%)	Tyre Nichols	15 (1.45%)

The prominence of political figures and media personalities in Table 5 suggests an editorial strategy focused on polarizing topics and high public visibility. The recurring presence of Donald Trump across outlets—including British ones—underscores his role as a transnationally newsworthy figure. In parallel, the inclusion of leaders involved in geopolitical conflicts (Netanyahu, Zelensky, and Biden) alongside celebrities or socially resonant individuals (Taylor Swift and Tyre Nichols) reveals a visibility logic driven by emotional relevance and public impact, rather than by traditional news hierarchies.

4.5. Geographical Coverage

In terms of geographical coverage, the results provided by the identification algorithm (Table 6) demonstrate that *The Guardian*, *USA Today*, and *The Independent* showed close to 50% coverage, while *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* exhibited percentages higher than 65%. The percentage refers to the official count by the United Nations, which includes 193 member states and non-member observer states the Vatican and Palestine. At first glance, higher values of geographical coverage, such as those observed for *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, suggest a greater emphasis on international news coverage across a variety of countries, which could be associated with an editorial strategy aimed at a global and diverse audience of events worldwide. However, it is also important to measure the frequency of mentions of different countries in the posts.

Table 6. Geographical coverage indicators.

Media	Number of Countries Mentioned	Percentage of Coverage *
<i>The Guardian</i>	84	43.08%
<i>The Independent</i>	96	49.23%
<i>The New York Times</i>	132	67.69%
<i>The Washington Post</i>	128	65.64%
<i>USA Today</i>	95	48.72%

* Percentage calculated with reference to the UN country count.

This table highlights notable differences in the international reach of the media outlets analyzed. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* stand out for mentioning the highest number of countries, with coverage exceeding 65% of all possible mentions, reaffirming their positioning as globally oriented news organizations. In contrast, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *USA Today* show more limited geographic reach, each covering around 50% of countries. These differences may be related to available resources, editorial agendas,

or each outlet's strategic focus on international reporting. Table 7 displays the five most-mentioned countries in the posts of each outlet. The United States emerges as the most frequent in the three American outlets, with percentages exceeding 50% of the posts, and in the British outlet *The Independent* with 34.13%, surpassing mentions of the United Kingdom with 25.70%. Only *The Guardian* from the UK presented the United Kingdom with a higher percentage (22.54%), followed by the United States (20.39%). Returning to the issue of international coverage, although *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* exhibited a higher percentage in terms of the number of mentioned countries, both have a greater concentration of posts referencing their home country, as observed with *USA Today*. Conversely, while mentioning a smaller number of countries, the British outlets, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, show a relatively higher presence of international topics in their top geographical mentions.

Table 7. Top 5 cited countries.

<i>The Guardian</i>		<i>The Independent</i>		<i>The New York Times</i>		<i>The Washington Post</i>		<i>USA Today</i>	
United Kingdom	126 (22.54%)	United States of America	611 (34.13%)	United States of America	1359 (57.56%)	United States of America	1752 (62.13%)	United States of America	1342 (62.28%)
United States of America	114 (20.39%)	United Kingdom	460 (25.70%)	Ukraine	106 (4.49%)	Ukraine	87 (3.09%)	United Kingdom	41 (2.12%)
Palestine	47 (8.41%)	Australia	57 (3.18%)	Palestine	73 (3.09%)	Palestine	82 (2.91%)	Chile	41 (2.12%)
Australia	26 (4.65%)	Chile	57 (3.18%)	France	58 (2.46%)	China	78 (2.77%)	Mexico	40 (2.07%)
Israel	20 (3.58%)	Canada	45 (2.51%)	Israel	58 (2.46%)	Mexico	58 (2.06%)	Ukraine	37 (1.91%)

While *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* mention a larger number of countries overall, Table 7 reveals that the majority of their content remains highly focused on the United States, which accounts for over 60% of their geographical mentions. In contrast, British outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, although covering fewer countries in absolute terms, distribute their attention more evenly between national and international topics. This contrast suggests that broader geographic coverage (as shown in Table 6) does not necessarily correlate with lower thematic concentration on the country of origin (Table 7). Each outlet appears to implement its international strategy differently, balancing breadth of coverage with varying degrees of national focus.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Instagram usage by five prominent media outlets, focusing on their post volume, engagement metrics, content, and geographic coverage. The findings reveal significant variations in the strategies and effectiveness of these outlets on the platform. Next, we discuss the findings relative to the research questions (RQs) that guided the study outlined in the introduction.

RQ1: How do the analyzed media outlets differ in terms of posting frequency and content delivery rhythms on Instagram?

Media outlets have adapted to the changing landscape of news consumption by strategically using various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter to disseminate news and engage with audiences (Hase et al., 2022). Instagram, known for its visual nature, provides a unique platform for media outlets to share news content in a visually appealing manner, potentially attracting a different audience compared to other text-focused social media platforms (Carpenter et al., 2020). The convenience, ease of use, and visual power of Instagram make it a popular choice for sharing news among

college students and businesses alike (L. Wang, 2021; Yanti & Dewi, 2021). Substantial disparities in posting volume and frequency were observed across the analyzed media organizations. *The Washington Post* exhibited the highest level of posting activity, indicative of a strategic emphasis on sustaining visibility and maximizing audience reach, whereas *The Guardian* adopted a more selective posting approach, potentially prioritizing a model of curated and higher-quality engagement. These strategies align with prior research, suggesting diversification in social media approaches among journalistic organizations (Hase et al., 2022; Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024), and further illustrate how posting frequency may serve as an indicator of distinct editorial frameworks in visually oriented digital environments. Posting frequency thus serves as an indicator of distinct editorial philosophies, with high-frequency posting prioritizing algorithmic visibility and selective posting emphasizing thematic coherence and content quality.

RQ2: In what ways do audience engagement metrics (likes and comments) vary across outlets, and how might these variations reflect strategic or structural differences?

Significant variations in engagement metrics were observed, particularly regarding likes and comments. *The New York Times* distinguished itself by attaining the highest average daily engagement, underscoring the role of visual storytelling in fostering active audience interaction (Carpenter et al., 2020). In contrast, the consistently stable engagement levels observed for *USA Today*, despite having a lower posting frequency, underscore the strategic importance of cultivating a loyal and enduring follower base. Conversely, *The Independent* exhibited notable fluctuations in engagement metrics, which may reflect inconsistencies in content resonance or mismatches with audience expectations, thereby highlighting the inherent challenges of maintaining sustained attention within an increasingly competitive and saturated digital environment.

Additionally, these findings invite a more nuanced consideration of engagement, not only in terms of volume but also in consistency and proportionality relative to audience size. Platforms like Instagram reward sustained interaction, and outlets able to maintain steady engagement—such as *USA Today*—may benefit algorithmically and in terms of audience loyalty (Larsson, 2018). Therefore, editorial coherence and platform-specific strategies are critical to maintain durable audience engagement in algorithm-driven environments.

RQ3: What patterns emerge in the use of hashtags, profile mentions, and geographic references, and how are these practices related to audience engagement and editorial positioning?

The analysis of content strategies revealed notable differences in the use of hashtags, profile mentions, and geographic coverage across the media outlets examined. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* demonstrated the broadest international reach, referencing a greater number of countries compared to their British counterparts. This extensive geographic coverage is consistent with their established reputations as leading global news providers. However, it is noteworthy that British outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent* exhibited a relatively higher proportion of internationally focused content relative to their overall post volume, underscoring their editorial emphasis on global issues despite fewer total mentions.

Further divergences were observed in the strategic use of mentions and hashtags. *The Independent* predominantly employed frequent self-mentions, indicative of a branding strategy aimed at reinforcing its institutional identity. In contrast, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* utilized mentions more expansively to highlight contributions from external profiles and partner agencies, a practice that both enhances credibility and diversifies the content offering (Zimmermann et al., 2023; Hermida & Mellado, 2020). The analysis of hashtag deployment also revealed distinct strategic orientations. Outlets such as *The Guardian* strategically leveraged hashtags to amplify visibility around

specific topics, most notably climate change, reflecting a strong editorial commitment to environmental issues. Meanwhile, *The Washington Post* demonstrated a preference for lighter, entertainment-related content such as comics, whereas *The New York Times* employed event-specific hashtags to foster targeted audience engagement. In addition, *The Guardian's* intensive use of hashtags—appearing in over 60% of posts—demonstrates a thematic editorial approach aimed at amplifying climate-focused narratives (#ClimateCrisis, #Environment), reinforcing the outlet's brand identity around global environmental concerns. In contrast, *The Independent* exhibits a quantitatively significant yet qualitatively limited use of hashtags and mentions, with many of its mentions being self-referential (38.46%), suggesting a branding strategy focused more on internal visibility than network engagement. These thematic divergences not only reflect the unique editorial priorities of each outlet but also illustrate differentiated approaches to audience engagement and brand positioning within the visual and interactive logic of Instagram.

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of this study—particularly the contrasting high-frequency vs. selective publishing strategies between outlets like *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*—can be interpreted through the lens of curated news flows (Bruns, 2018; Mayerhöffer et al., 2024). These findings suggest that both selective and high-frequency publishing strategies may represent distinct approaches through which digital media outlets engage in news curation within today's fragmented social media environment—either by prioritizing the quality of audience interaction or by maximizing visibility. In this context the study further indicates that media outlets can enhance audience engagement on Instagram by adopting tailored strategies aligned with their editorial goals and audience preferences. Specifically, high posting frequency, strategic use of mentions, and thematic consistency in hashtag deployment emerged as key factors influencing user interaction and engagement.

Across all three research questions, the study highlights the following central theme: how legacy media navigate Instagram by balancing traditional journalism principles with platform-specific demands. The findings demonstrate how outlets still function as gatekeepers—deciding what content to publish and how to frame it—while increasingly adopting gatewatching behaviours, such as tagging sources or aligning with audience trends. This dual role supports Bruns' idea that journalists are now both creators and curators of content. Examples include tagging sources or using hashtags to participate in broader topic-based discourse.

The concept of curated flows is evident in how news distribution now depends on the interaction between media producers, the social networks' algorithm, and the audience (Vállez et al., 2024). Outlets influence these flows by optimizing content, while users and platform algorithms further shape its visibility. Thus, editorial power is now shared, though journalistic values like verification and storytelling still play a critical role in determining resonance and reach.

The practical implications for journalism practice are as follows:

- Platform-specific strategy: Simply posting content is insufficient. Outlets should treat Instagram as a distinct publication space, using visual formats and analytics to maximize engagement.
- Audience interaction and community building: Features like Stories, polls, and Q&As offer ways to involve audiences without compromising editorial standards. Strategic mentions and user-generated content can enhance relevance and trust.
- Rethinking success metrics: Rather than focusing solely on external clicks, newsrooms should also track engagement rate, shares, and comment sentiment to evaluate performance within Instagram's ecosystem.

- Ongoing newsroom adaptation: Journalists need support to interpret analytics and maintain editorial values amid algorithmic pressures. Editorial decisions must weigh-up both public interest and platform visibility, with ethical guidelines for content presentation.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study's focus on a select number of media outlets, combined with its reliance on publicly available data, may not fully capture the complexity and nuance of contemporary social media strategies. Furthermore, the primarily quantitative approach adopted herein limits the depth of understanding regarding the social, cultural, and narrative dimensions underlying media organizations' use of Instagram.

Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable contributions by shedding light on the diverse strategic approaches employed by major media outlets, thereby laying a foundation for further scholarly exploration into the evolving role of social media within modern journalism.

Future research should aim to broaden the scope by including a more extensive and diversified sample of media organizations across multiple social media platforms. This would allow for a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of digital news dissemination strategies. The integration of qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth user interviews and thematic content analysis, could further enrich the understanding of audience perceptions, storytelling techniques, and engagement practices, ultimately enabling a more detailed and sophisticated comprehension of how media outlets are leveraging Instagram's unique affordances to connect with and influence their audiences.

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