



Article

Different stakes, different struggles, and different practices to survive: News organizations and the spectrum of platform dependency

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Abstract

As people access news via digital platforms, existing literature provides foundations for institutional approaches to news organizations' platform dependency. Yet, platform dependency also exists on a spectrum: size, business model, and market position impact how each news organization strategizes its reliance on digital platforms. I draw on in-depth interviews with 22 South Korean news professionals to delve into different survival strategies in dealing with South Korea's biggest search portal and news aggregator, Naver. Findings reveal that contrary to the common belief, journalists in legacy news organizations experience more pressure and compromise journalistic values with clickbait headlines. They deem their relationship with the platform more in hierarchical and inevitable terms while journalists from new, emerging organizations are relatively freer from the competition for clicks and strive for more quality journalism. However, the difference stems from the Naver platform's news organization ranking system and its tiered visibility structure that systematically creates the difference in audience reach and news distribution.

Keywords

Digital platform, new institutionalism, news aggregator, online news, platform, platform dependency

Introduction

Digital platforms are profoundly changing our media environment. They mainly do so by functioning as core intermediary bodies; Van Dijck et al.'s (2018) definition of digital

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platforms as “a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interaction between users—not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies” quintessentially illustrates that digital intermediaries alter existing social institutions, values, and practices. One institution significantly—or irrevocably—impacted by digital platforms is the news industry. News outlets need to quickly adapt to the changing environment by constructing their content with algorithms in mind (Caplan & boyd, 2018) or adjusting their editorial decisions based on which content the audience will more likely react to (Tandoc, 2014).

Because many people prefer to access news via distributed access, such as through social media, news aggregators, or search engines (Newman et al., 2021), news organizations now rely on digital platforms for audience reach and news distribution (Bell and Owen, 2017). Following this recognition is that news organizations have become dependent on digital platforms. Acknowledging this worrisome status quo, scholars are starting to examine digital platforms and their algorithms’ impacts on news organizations at an institutional level (Bailo et al., 2021; Dommett, 2021; Meese and Hurcombe, 2021; Nielsen and Ganter, 2018). This line of research provides a crucial foundation for meso-level, institutional analysis approach to platform dependency and how it manifests in practice. Yet, platform dependency also exists on a spectrum: size, business model, market position, and type of news impact how each news organization strategizes its reliance on digital platforms for audience traffic (Bailo et al., 2021; Meese and Hurcombe, 2021). News organizations’ struggle with digital intermediaries is relational; for instance, legacy outlets may have more exposure in news curation or have a higher rank in search results, giving them leverage in audience traffic. On the other hand, relatively smaller, newly created outlets need to find their own ways of competing for news distribution and audience reach. These differences in opportunities, limitations, and conditions create varying survival tactics among news organizations. How do these differences emerge, and how do the differences inform the spectrum of platform dependency? This is the overarching question guiding this research.

This article attempts to explore the institutional impacts of the intermediating role of digital platforms with platform dependency as a guiding concept. Yet, it simultaneously paints the different ways that dependency manifests. What characterizes journalistic practices among established and emerging news outlets dependent on news-aggregating platforms? What distinguishes news organizations’ paths for audience traffic? How do journalists describe and imagine their organizations’ relationship with digital platforms? In the following article, I draw from in-depth interviews with 22 South Korean news professionals to delve into different survival strategies in dealing with South Korea’s biggest search portal and news aggregator, Naver. I find that news organization’s relationships with the Naver’s Partnership Program—a tiered system governing the visibility of the news content—drive news organizations to develop different practices, values, and perceptions, which reflect varying degrees of platform dependency. Findings reveal that contrary to the common belief that bigger, more established, legacy news organizations will have more autonomy, journalists in these organizations experience more pressure and compromise journalistic values for audience traffic. They describe their relationship with the platform in hierarchical terms. Conversely, journalists from new, emerging organizations are freer from the competition for audience clicks and imagine a

more autonomous relationship with Naver. However, it is too soon to argue that this represents an enduring effort for autonomy: the difference in norms, practices, and values stems from the Naver platform's tiered governance system that creates systemic limitations in audience reach and news distribution.

Digital intermediaries, platform dependency, and new institutionalism

The news media ecosystem is currently at a critical juncture with platform dependency: news media organizations have become dependent on digital platforms for audience traffic and news distribution (Nielsen and Ganter, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Intermediary platforms such as social media platforms, search engines, and news aggregators are now the dominant ways of finding and accessing news (Newman et al., 2021). Platforms' infrastructural traits—in their scale and inevitable use—have captured the news industry (Plantin et al., 2016). Nechushtai (2018) illustrates that platforms have become indispensable for news organizations to generate readership that the news industry is “infrastructurally captured.” Hence, when these intermediating platforms change their news curation algorithms, such as blocking news exposure, news organizations have to promptly adapt to the new environment (Meese and Hurcombe, 2021).

News aggregators further complicate the situation. News aggregators are websites that “unbundle” the original news content and “rebundle” different articles with the same topic and host the content on their own site (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Their role as an aggregator, particularly redistributing news content from different news outlets on a single website (Isbell, 2010; Lee and Chyi, 2015), creates an environment of intra-media competition where news outlets compete for users' attention and news selection. Yet news aggregators' cues are decisive factors for users' news selection: for instance, where news items are positioned on the website affects users to pay more attention and increases click probability (Engelmann et al., 2021). Because news organizations lack data and information about which article gets prioritized—for instance, Google News only vaguely indicates that articles are ranked based on factors such as prominence, authoritativeness, and freshness—news outlets conceive different strategies to capture audience attention. Gossipy and sensational headlines—clickbait headlines—are one example that news organizations employ to highlight their presence and collect clicks in the highly competitive algorithmic curation environment (Lischka and Garz, 2021). Yet, it comes at a cost: while clickbait headlines may initially boost pageviews, too many and extensive clickbait will eventually decrease pageviews, along with the news organization's reputation and credibility (Lischka and Garz, 2021; Molyneux and Coddington, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

As such, platform dependency brings seismic changes in journalistic practices, values, cultures, and norms. Whereas digital platforms impact news organizations from deep within, existing research on digital platforms and how they restructure the news media environment “has less to say about how news media *adapt* to the wider, ongoing, transformation of the environment in which they operate” (Nielsen and Ganter, 2018: 1604). Acknowledging this gap, scholars recently address the changes occurring within news organizations; for instance, news organizations now develop news content with

algorithmic curation in mind (Caplan & boyd, 2018) and actively implement interactive digital tools such as web analytics that transform the journalists' judgment on news value (Christin, 2020; Tandoc, 2014). At the individual level, journalists adapt by perceiving and performing their democratic roles in new, compromised ways (Dommett, 2021). This new focus on the digital platforms' impact vis-à-vis news organizations at the institutional level is in line with examining the role of digital platforms on a meso and institutional level—using new institutionalism to understand platform power.

New institutionalism “focuses on the role of institutions as meso-level structures that mediate between individual (or group) actors and large-scale forces” (Bannerman and Haggart, 2015: 2). It recognizes that organizations are not free from exogenous pressures and moments of critical junctures (Ryfe, 2006); as Napoli (2014) demonstrated, new institutionalism lays a foundation for seeing digital platforms as institutional forces that reshape the news industry at the primary level of organization. New institutionalism also regards institutions as both formal and informal: not only as rules but also as routines, norms, and common values that govern actors' practices. This allows us to understand changes in individual journalists' practices as institutional changes occurring at a critical juncture.

Moreover, new institutionalism acknowledges that as news organizations imitate the “success case,” similarities in structures and processes between organizations emerge and create isomorphism (Caplan & boyd, 2018). Yet, platform dependency exists on a spectrum: there is a complicated story of dependency as news organizations—varying in sizes, types of news, business models, market positions, and social reputations—adapt differently to the platform environment. While digital platforms' impact on the news ecosystem is strong—for instance, Facebook tweaking its algorithms results in considerable losses in audience traffic, pageviews, and online advertisement revenue (Bailo et al., 2021)—it is not unilateral across the industry. For instance, Kleis Nielsen and Ganter (2018) examine how even a relatively large, digitally strong legacy news media organization struggles with a sense of asymmetry with far larger digital intermediaries. If an organization in a privileged position as their case, they argue, fears losing control and becomes dependent, less privileged news media organizations are even more likely to do so. Yet, smaller, online-based, or newly established organizations can be at a different starting point in their relations with digital platforms, having different constraints and expectations, setting different goals, and eventually creating divergences in isomorphism.

In this research, I spotlight the significance of understanding the complexity of platform dependency, noting how news organizations make different choices for survival, imagine relationships, and depend on digital platforms to various degrees. The lens of new institutionalism is helpful for this research because it grapples with platform dependency as a critical factor that impacts individual journalists and news outlets. At the individual level, it allows us to view journalistic practices as consisting of taken-for-granted institutions and extrapolate institutional changes (Bannerman and Haggart, 2015). It also allows us to trace organizations' strategic responses to the critical force of platform dependency. Simultaneously, while new institutionalism assumes isomorphism, we need to critically examine how organizations face diverging opportunities, limitations, and stakes in the power asymmetry digital platforms have created.

Pointing to understanding the complex story around platform dependency, I argue to develop the concept of platform dependency in more nuanced and fine-grained ways to chisel out how news organizations' practices, strategies, and dependencies are deeply contextualized by the platform structures in which they operate.

Case study and method

As an analytical lens, I offer a case study of relations between a South Korean news aggregator and news outlets. The South Korean context is particularly useful for mainly two reasons. First, it is helpful to analyze platform dependency in terms of audience traffic and news distribution as one digital platform, Naver, dominates the access to and distribution of news. Functioning both as a search engine and a news aggregator, Naver has achieved the state of infrastructure in terms of its scale and criticality of use (Jin, 2017; Plantin et al., 2016). Its platform power is more evident in terms of audience traffic: 64.4% of the Korean population access news via digital platforms, and 41.6% responded that they use Naver to search for news (Newsis, 2020). Moreover, as Naver hosts news content on its website (native hosting strategy), users rarely visit news organizations' original websites: only 5% of users directly access original websites to consume news, as opposed to the 72% relying on distributed access (Newman et al., 2021). This concentration makes it extremely hard for news outlets to generate unique audience traffic from their own websites and make them depend more on Naver's curation.

Second, the South Korean context illustrates the institutional impact of platforms on news organizations through its tiered visibility structure. To "develop a healthy Korean online news ecosystem," Naver maintains a tiered Partnership system. Since 2015, an independent organization—though funded by Naver—called News Partnering Evaluation Committee evaluates each outlet's overall quality, quantity, and technological stability of news articles and ranks their Partnership level with Naver. There are three Partnership levels: "News Search Partner," "Newsstand Partner," and "News Content Provider (CP) Partner." Out of 6031 news organizations in Korea in total, only 76 organizations are at least above the Newsstand Level, and fewer on the CP Level (Korea Press Foundation, 2021). Based on their Partnership levels, Naver affords different opportunities of visibility and financial compensations to news organizations. Out of the three, Naver curates articles only from the CP level outlets directly on its main page and distributes advertising revenues generated from news article ads. For other levels, users can access news articles only through Naver Search, and Naver does not share advertisement revenues. Then, its tiered visibility system is simultaneously a tiered governance system (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020): it divides news organizations based on their history, quality, eligibility, and competence and allows different opportunities for visibility and exposure.

Amid this background, the article's data are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 South Korean journalists from July 2021 to August 2021, with the shortest taking 55 minutes to the longest to 1 hour 20 minutes. Interviews explored their experiences, norms, routines, and cultures working in a range of outlets. Positions among the interviewees also varied: some are newly hired, while some are at senior and managerial levels.

To effectively compare the difference in strategies and relationships with Naver, I categorized the news organizations as either legacy/established or new/emerging outlets. In dividing the category, various factors were considered: the date of establishment, company size, market and social position, and Partnership Level with Naver. In the case of the establishment, I set 2005 as the dividing timeline. With the government-led rapid expansion of the telecommunication service in Korea in the early 2000s, online news journalism started to emerge during that period (Jin, 2018; Kim and Hamilton, 2006; Kim, 2020). In terms of market and social position, I looked at the report published by the Korea Press Foundation (2021) that compared news outlets' market dominance and consumer awareness. As a result of Japanese influence, the Korean press maintains a hierarchical and exclusive culture, with exclusive press clubs controlling important beats (Glinina, 2010); the category of social position was cross-referenced with this. In total, 14 participants were from CP Level/Established organizations, four from Newsstand Level, three from News Search Level, and two were not partnered. As a case study, this narrow lens allows us to pay attention to the spectrum of platform dependency per the organizations' different "ranks," moving beyond generalized assumptions. A detailed description of the categories and organizations can be found in Table 1.

Findings

Different journalistic practices for audience reach and visibility: racing or pacing for audience traffic

At the level of individual journalists' practices, the difference between legacy outlets and emerging outlets emerged either in the form of journalists desperately *racing for audience traffic* or relaxedly *pacing for audience traffic*. Interestingly, journalists in legacy news outlets, especially the big three that have marked the historical outset of Korean journalism and accumulated solid readership and revenue (Choi, 2007; Seo, 2020)—thus on the highest Partnership Level—were in the race to get more audience traffic. On the other hand, journalists in relatively young and new organizations were working at their own pace rather than diving into the competition.

In the *race to traffic*, journalists in the established organizations experienced managerial and editorial pressure to increase audience traffic on a daily basis. The changes in the newsroom culture to fast-paced, mass-producing working conditions, with an emphasis on the number of clicks and pageviews, go in tandem with the general shift to digital journalism as immediacy (Usher, 2014) and quantification (Christin, 2020; Petre, 2021) emerge as core values of news production. For instance, Petre (2021) exemplifies how the implementation of audience metrics in the US newsrooms reinforced journalists to compete against each other, increasing productivity at the cost of their personal lives and professional values. Likewise, Korean journalists explicated changing norms and practices as the required number of daily reports increased exponentially, making them compromise fact-checking processes to meet the requirements and question their journalistic roles. However, in the South Korean case, the shift particularly pertained to platform dependency as news outlets had to rely on Naver as the central gateway for audience

Table 1. Research participants' codes and information.

Interviewee #	Year of news organization established (before or after 2005)	Market position (news type)	Partnership level with Naver	Categorization
1 TJ	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
2 GT	After 2005	Digital	Newsstand	Emerging
3 MJ	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
4 SJ	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
5 SJ	Before 2005	Digital	News contents	Established
6 SG	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
7 SH	Before 2005	Digital	News contents	Established
8 JH	After 2005	Digital	Newsstand	Emerging
9 TG	Before 2005	Digital	News contents	Established
10 IB	After 2005	Digital	News contents	Emerging
11 DY	After 2005	Digital	Newsstand	Emerging
12 EH	After 2005	Digital	News search	Emerging
13 DW	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
14 HY	After 2005	Digital	Newsstand	Emerging
15 GA	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
16 JH	After 2005	Digital	News search	Emerging
17 CS	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
18 JD	After 2005	Digital	Not partnered	Emerging
19 HK	After 2005	Digital	Not partnered	Emerging
20 DW	Before 2005	Digital	News contents	Established
21 YJ	After 2005	Digital	News search	Emerging
22 KM	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established
23 HM	Before 2005	Print, digital	News contents	Established

reach. For news outlets on the CP Partnership Level, the competition was more intense as they had to compete against one another for audiences' clicks among other CP-level news articles aggregated by and curated on Naver.

TJ works in one of the top three legacy outlets, but his company lagged behind its competitors regarding Naver pageviews. He explained changes in his routines and work cultures as the company announced its plan to beat the other two for good:

There's a lot of pressure from above because our role model is X [competing outlet], and they are the number one in pageviews. The workload increased so much, I really want to quit my job. The senior managers look at the pageview number and say, "Why is it so low? Publish more articles," and more work falls on us. Sometimes I have to skip lunch, work on Saturdays, or prepare my article at 11 pm.

Similarly, MJ, a journalist in another established outlet on the CP Partnership Level that sometimes even boasts one million pageviews on Naver, explained the new routine in her organization:

I've worked in this [business] department for a year and a half, and it's changed a lot since a new editor came. He worried that our department was not read enough and wanted to change that. In a good way, we became influential. In a bad way, the pressure for pageviews increased a lot. Every morning, the editor would send "the number" in the group chat, like comparing other departments' Naver's pageviews.

Comparisons and competitions intensify among CP-level organizations because even for legacy outlets with relatively robust individual websites, audience traffic rendered through Naver mattered more. To both TJ and MJ's senior managers and editors, pageviews on Naver meant broader public reach, social impact, and more revenues.

On the contrary, new, emerging outlets were *pac*ing their way for audience traffic. Journalists in relatively young organizations—hence, on either Newsstand or News Search Partnership Level—expressed fewer concerns and experienced less pressure from editors. Because of Naver's tiered governance system that prioritized CP-level outlets, they were not participating in the intense competition for audience clicks. EH, working in a news organization founded only 5 years ago, mentioned how her boss advised her "not to hurriedly copy and paste others' materials but to put in unique perspectives."

I don't feel any pressure for pageviews and clicks. My company's chief editors and senior strategy people used to work in legacy media outlets, and they hated clickbait, sensationalism, and copying and pasting types of news. I'm very lucky in that sense, I think.

EH's company, on the News Search Level, did not push their staff to publish breaking news. It instead focused on providing "unique perspectives" as their articles would not get instant traction because of the lack of visibility on Naver. This was resonated by DY: his company does not focus on publishing breaking news and immediate reporting, although it is an online-only outlet. He attributed this to the company's partnership level, the Newsstand Level; in fact, when he published a breaking news piece, it went unrecognized because the article was not curated on Naver's main page. As a result, he enjoys the "after-work" life, which is rare for an online-only news outlet, but he was less motivated, knowing that his articles could not reach broader audiences.

GT, a journalist working in an online news organization on the Newsstand Level, similarly expressed the lack of pressure and autonomy he enjoyed. Yet, he explained that it was because his organization was "the second-tier" that lacked incentives:

My editors don't care about pageviews at all. It's to the extent that they don't want attention, being passive. I don't fret about pageviews because there's no incentive, and my company doesn't compete for audience traffic because we are at the second tier. The top-tier organizations have to compete because they are constantly compared to other top-tiered ones. I once published one article which hit ten thousand views, which was the company's record. My boss actually scolded me that pageviews don't help the company and that I should avoid sensitive topics.

In his case, audience metrics, which often news organizations implement to rate and rank individual journalists' work efficiency and use as a parameter for bonuses or incentives (Christin, 2020), were not a stress factor; such incentive systems did not exist. In

contrast, journalists from established outlets recounted how their senior managers and editors regularly evaluated them based on quantifiable scores: the number of pageviews, shares, and comments on Naver.

The difference in journalistic practices is partly due to the available economic resources of organizations (incentives and bonuses) but also in part due to the structural limitations put on by Naver in terms of news exposure and audience reach. The very starting point for the amount of audience traffic that organizations can attract is vastly different based on the Partnership levels. HK, a journalist who previously worked in the established outlet but now works in a small-sized, very recently founded organization, concretized the gap:

The difference in pageviews is huge. For News Search or Newsstand Level organizations, one thousand [pageview] is considered successful. The most they can get is probably ten thousand. For CP [Level organizations], even their crappy piece hits ten thousand pageviews, with the maximum around fifty thousand.

There is thus a clear distinction in the amount of achievable audience traffic between the news organizations whose articles are automatically distributed to users via Naver's news-aggregating service and the news organizations whose articles users have to access by actively searching on Naver's search engine service. Whereas using news-aggregating services is associated with accessing news from a greater variety of news outlets (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018a), there exists a significant level of inequality among news outlets in terms of audience reach. Naver's tiered system impacted organizations at the institutional level, resulting in differences in journalistic practices. On one hand, the tiered system allowed established outlets to compete for pageviews and rely on Naver more for audience traffic, competing in a race provided and enabled by the platform. On the other hand, pressure for speed was absent in emerging outlets because they lacked incentives for competition for audience traffic, which ironically gave more autonomy and time to individual journalists.

Taking different paths for securing audience traffic at the organizational level: quality journalism vs sucking up clicks

In the platformized environment in which Naver, as a digital intermediary, determines the level of exposure, news organizations explore different adaptive strategies. Emerging organizations that systematically lack visibility due to their lower Partnership levels have to find their own ways to survive and maximize audience reach. Consider JD, the founder of a month-old online news organization that specializes in investigative journalism. His company was not yet partnered with Naver, and thus, lacked natural audience reach and did not receive money from Naver. He had to devise a way to make people search and visit the website. He considered "quality journalism" as the vision guiding his company:

What I'm aiming for is different from the fast-paced news production system. My company's goal is to go back to the roots of journalism, based on facts and in-depth investigation. I can't

compete with big outlets in terms of speed, but I can provide factual and in-depth news that they can't offer. I'm aiming for that niche market of quality journalism.

He argued that if his outlet keeps producing good news articles—objective, credible, and fact-checked—audience recognition would naturally follow as people visit his website. Similarly, YJ, a journalist working in a small-sized outlet, with 20 employees in total and on the News Search Level, emphasized that “quality news” journalism would eventually lead the audience to actively search his outlet. Similar accounts followed as one interviewee who works in an online organization at the Newsstand Level explained that his seniors meticulously engaged in the editorial process, regarding “worthy articles” as their survival tactic. As JD demonstrated, within the tiered governance system of Naver, natural audience reach for emerging outlets is limited because Naver's tiered system does not curate their content on its main page or share advertising revenues. To tackle this structural hurdle, emerging outlets relied less on the platform to figure out ways to make users conversely reach them through quality journalism.

For established news organizations, the situation is different as they are guaranteed natural exposure on Naver, allowing easier audience reach. Journalists working in legacy outlets recounted structural changes within their organizations: having enough staff writers and budget, these companies moved toward creating a separate online department to get traffic. For instance, GA, who investigates social justice issues in a legacy outlet, expressed concerns about the newly created online team that specializes in publishing issues trending online, such as what people say on online communities or simply translating international celebrity gossip. SJ, a young journalist who another legacy outlet had just hired, was designated to an online department against his will: “I did not become a journalist to do this,” he lamented as he wrote about politicians' scandals.

Creating a separate online department has been a widespread trend among traditional news outlets globally (Boczkowski, 2009; Vobič and Milojević, 2014). Known as the “traffic whoring job,” journalists take on the rotational duty to work in these online departments meant to get audience traffic by producing sensational, celebrity-related, or clickbait news (Christin, 2020). While this is a general trend in digital journalism practices, Korean legacy outlets demonstrated another strategy that implied their dependency on Naver. One of the industry's hot topics discussed among interviewees was a newly created subsidiary company that a highly recognized legacy outlet with a solid revenue base had just established. Interviewees mentioned that “everybody in the industry knows that this company recruited all the ‘best players’ at getting pageviews on Naver.” HM, who has just been hired by that company, explained his organization's goal as simply “sucking up clicks” that would cater to advertising revenues for the mother company.

My company serves two roles. The first is quantity, dealing with hot issues and publishing a lot of them. We simply copy and paste whatever is online, and I'm okay with that. The second is quality, producing something exciting, new, and provocative. Sometimes, the mother company takes my article and publishes it under its name because it will get a lot of traction on Naver. They know my work is better and that I do a better job.

Literature on media innovators describes the centrality of technology in the media industry and the relative flexibility newcomers have, compared to legacy organizations as the latter struggle internally to make necessary adjustments (Küng, 2015). For

instance, one dilemma for legacy news outlets using clickbait headlines, following the newcomers' strategy, is that clickbait headlines eventually hurt the outlet's credibility and reputation (Lischka and Garz, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). In Korea, a more complex strategy emerged among legacy outlets, showing fast adaptations to the technological force of digital intermediaries. As HM's account illustrates, it is a structural change that creates a separate subsidiary company to take advantage of the Partnership Level of the mother company and be more competent for audience traffic on Naver.

The contrasting paths for audience traffic, expressed through differences in organizational vision and changes in structure, is an institutional change shaped by Naver's tiered governance system. For emerging outlets, audience reach is structurally limited as their articles are not curated on Naver. Hence, rather than solely relying on Naver's news aggregated service, they devise ways to make audiences actively search for them; one chance is quality journalism. Moreover, Naver's Partnership Rank system puts another strain on emerging organizations, increasing the risk of publishing clickbait. As mentioned before, in Naver's determination to shift its role as a regulator of the news ecosystem, the Committee regularly scores and ranks the overall competence of outlets and decides its Partnership level. For smaller, emerging organizations to increase their audience reach and news exposure by climbing up the Partnership Level, they have to maintain not only the stable quantity of news but also quality. Hence, the contrasting paths demonstrate the spectrum of platform dependency: what is at stake for these organizations is more significant, which, in the end, is related to their survival and expansion than established outlets that already have a better chance of keeping their Partnership.

Naver's assertion of its role as the mediator of news is in part in favor of the healthy Korean online news ecosystem, as it argues, but also in part in favor of the platform: the shift of the platforms being an ally with news outlets to a regulator has to do with its own stake of maintaining user loyalty. Should platforms allow low-quality, fake, and sensational news to flourish, they risk experiencing a decrease in user loyalty (Lischka and Garz, 2021). Thus, the platform needs to put sanctions on outlets for having extensive clickbait headlines. Digital platforms' self-presentation as the custodian of the news ecosystem has an institutional impact on the news media industry, changing not only the norms and cultures of news production but also company business structures and how they operate.

Describing the relationship with digital intermediaries: between “the boss and an opportunity”

Existing literature unilaterally points toward the relationship between news media organizations and digital intermediaries as being asymmetrical due to opacity of audience data, lack of control in curation, and local/global power dynamics (e.g. Dommett, 2021; Ihlebæk and Sundet, 2021; Nielsen and Ganter, 2018). Similarly, power asymmetry was a topic often addressed among the interviewees, yet more so by journalists working in established organizations.

In cases of established, legacy news organizations, journalists explained the relationship in more hierarchical terms, such as “the boss and the servant,” “completely subordinated,”

or “an ecosystem you can’t escape.” Their understanding of the relationship with digital platforms as an inevitable condition aligns with their adaptive strategy and level of dependency. At the organizational level, established outlets ran online departments specializing in clickbait headlines and gossip news. At the individual level, journalists compromised journalistic values, prioritizing audience traffic and immediacy in news production.

More broadly, others addressed the inevitable institutional changes in the news media industry due to Naver dependency. Journalists working in legacy press agencies, the organizations that initially do not distribute news on their websites for free but license their content and provide it to other news outlets (Isbell, 2010), complained about this change. TG, a journalist working in the leading press agency, explained:

Press agencies are supposed to do B2B (business-to-business) transactions, providing content for other outlets. But in this platform environment, we are providing news content to Naver, and eventually, directly to consumers. So it’s becoming B2C (business-to-consumer). This has structural problems because we have to compete with other organizations for audience traffic while selling our information. All organizations are now jumping into the competition.

This led established journalists to perceive and describe their relationships with Naver in ways that the news market structure is utterly reshaped by the powerful platform: SH, another journalist working in a competing press agency, described the change as “Naver becoming the wholesale merchant of news.” He complained that in this environment, the workload for journalists working in legacy press agencies doubles: while they need to provide the most up-to-date information to other news organizations, they also need to compete against each other to publish content suitable for capturing user attention on Naver. DW, a journalist from a legacy outlet, noted the power asymmetry:

The platform is the boss. We are like its servants, following its rules and hustling and trying not to get kicked out of its Partnership. Whenever Naver announces that it will change its news curation algorithm, the senior strategy people rush for an emergency meeting,

Hence, when discussing the news organization’s relationship with the Naver platform, some saw it as a codependent, parasitic relation in which news organizations needed Naver to survive. Others saw it as hostile and antagonistic in which the digital intermediary is threatening the authority of legacy news media.

Established journalists framed themselves as small and powerless compared to the giant power that Naver has. However, as Ihlebæk and Sundet (2021) illustrate, “smallness” is relative: being small does not entail the same notion for all organizations, which results in different strategies. While “smaller” in size, journalists from emerging organizations saw Naver’s news aggregation rather as a favorable opportunity for them. For news organizations that rely on Naver’s search engine function in click referrals, journalists saw the platform as an important bridge that connected new readers to their websites. Interviewees responded that the benefit of Naver’s news service was that they could reach a wide variety of audiences regardless of their political beliefs, relying on the referrals coming from the “automated serendipity” (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018b). That is, as users scroll down the search results, they serendipitously encounter news from outlets they would not normally use (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018b).

This kind of unexpected encounter is a valuable opportunity especially for news organizations that do not have as much exposure as established ones in the Naver ecosystem, and has led to the differing strategies aforementioned: high-quality reporting and scoops. Emphasizing quality journalism will naturally bring readers to actively search for his organization on Naver, JD, the founder of a month-old, unpartnered online news outlet, even envisioned ultimate independence from Naver's news aggregation service. As a start-up, he wore many hats as a journalist, chief editor, and chief executive, and explained his approach: "It's all about the content, and I don't think Naver platform matters. If our content is good, exclusive, and worthy, people will come to us. We won't have to rely on Naver's curation."

However, there were complexities and paradoxes in emerging outlets' platform dependency. While JD imagined a more independent relationship, autonomy from Naver does not necessarily translate to autonomy from other intermediaries. As exemplified in this dialogue, while not relying on Naver's news-aggregating function, another form of platform dependency existed:

Interviewer: So, how do you reach the audience if you don't rely on a news aggregator?

JD: First, I publish our news articles on KakaoTalk's (social media and messaging app) public channel and share the link to people I know—opinion leaders in their fields like politicians, company CEOs, and other journalists—like an email subscription service. There are about 150 of them, so I hope they spread the word. Then, I use Facebook to share my piece, and my team members also do that.

Similarly, EH shared that in an attempt to compensate for the lack of visibility on Naver, her organization—on the News Search Level—also actively used Facebook or KakaoTalk to distribute news. Journalists from emerging outlets whose articles are not prioritized or curated on Naver also turned to using their social media to increase digital publicity. For instance, one interviewee who previously worked in an organization on Newsstand Level had created a personal YouTube channel to increase his online visibility. After moving to an established outlet partnered on the CP Level, he no longer saw the need to run his channel because his articles were more visible on Naver and read widely. Other participants working in emerging outlets also commonly depended on Facebook to actively share and publicize their articles to distribute news, not being able to rely on Naver like journalists from established outlets. While this can be seen as emerging outlets' relative autonomy from Naver, this is a shift in the platforms that journalists depend on, from Naver (as a news aggregator) to Facebook or YouTube (as social media). This shift is creating another form of platform dependency where organizations still rely on platforms for audience reach and news distribution, moving from one platform to another.

Discussion and conclusion

The rise of digital intermediaries has brought the news media industry to a critical juncture. This article presents a nuanced picture of platform dependency, tracing the changes

in daily practices at the individual level and business strategies at the organizational level. I have attempted not to assume the unilateral impact of digital platforms on news organizations of different sizes, market positions, goals, and social positions; the focus was to draw out the spectrum of platform dependency. New institutionalism, which sees exogenous pressure like platform dependency bringing critical changes at the level of institution—including individuals' practices and organizations' values and structure—provides a crucial foundation for this research. Simultaneously, this article tackles on the idea of isomorphism (Caplan & boyd, 2018) to closely examine divergences among organizations at different scales, positions, and situations.

The strategic case of South Korea in which one dominant digital platform creates a hierarchical news structure by allowing different visibility based on its “ranks” provided a useful lens for analyzing news organizations' strategies for navigating the tiered governance system. Based on the interviews with South Korean journalists, I found how Naver's tiered system of Partnerships impacts news outlets differently, creating divergent journalistic practices and organizational visions and structures—thus resulting in varying degrees of platform dependency. On one hand, established outlets, whose articles are prioritized by Naver's news aggregation algorithms, rely on the platform to compete for clicks and audience traffic. On the other hand, emerging outlets placed on the fringe of the tiered visibility system find their own ways of audience reach and depend less on the aggregation system. Hence, while the former sees platforms as the inescapable boss, the latter sees platforms as an advantageous opportunity and ultimately, imagines a more autonomous relationship.

These findings may lead to the conclusion that small, newly established news organizations are more independent from digital platforms. Indeed, on the surface, these organizations seem to envision an autonomous environment in which they can gain audience traffic by themselves and rely on the platform minimally by providing good quality news articles. The accounts from established, legacy outlet journalists may also ironically suggest that despite their relative size and stability in the industry, they are still considered small and powerless businesses that struggle more than less-established organizations. This may showcase an inverse relationship between news organizations and digital platforms, in which the bigger and more established the news organizations, the greater the dependency. However, if we look at the findings closely, we also identify that the very baseline may be different for news organizations, and what each organization can do, is predetermined by the stratified structure of the platform. Within the structural constraints, each organization seeks opportunities and acts strategically based on their existing resources; for established, legacy organizations that get more exposure, they compete for audience traffic by speeding up the production process, inducing clickbait, or creating separate online departments or a new company. Because they are already on the highest Partnership Level with Naver, the benefit of clickbait and sensational news are bigger, as it translates to higher advertising revenues that Naver distributes. For new, unstable, emerging organizations, what is at stake is grave—whether they abide by Naver's regulatory guideline and their role as the guardians of the news ecosystem decides whether they can move up the Partnership ladder. If they do, their news articles' distribution, audience reach, and social impact

will significantly increase. Thus, they have to follow Naver's rule by producing quality news and not jumping into the competition of immediate news production and user selection. In this sense, platform dependency may exist on the spectrum, but even that spectrum is conditioned and shaped by digital platforms.

In both cases, however, this case illustrates how digital platforms have the power to define standards that even formerly powerful and independent institutions like news media have to follow. This has significant social implications, as the news institution is going through fundamental changes, such as how news organizations perform democratic activities (Dommett, 2021), realize the ideas of press freedom and the public's right (Ananny, 2018), and negotiate between public and private values (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Digital platforms impact, alter, and restructure each new organization at different levels, but the democratic consequences of platformization of news reign evenly throughout society.

Advancing this finding, this article suggests calling for transparency in how digital platforms define "credible" and "worthy" news and how their news curation algorithms prioritize one news outlet over another. One consistent criticism stemming from platform studies is that major digital platforms are being discreet in their decisions and systematically limiting access to data, while envisioning and establishing themselves as custodians of a healthy information ecosystem (Donovan et al., 2019; Gillespie, 2018). This lack of transparency creates instability for news organizations, who constantly experience the fear of not knowing when the platform algorithm, terms of use, and news curation policy may change. For Korean news organizations, there is a constant fear of not exactly knowing Naver's criteria for deciding Partnership levels, which can break or make organizations. Policymakers and academics have consistently criticized this ambiguity: since its introduction in 2015, only 0.77% (8 organizations) have managed to maintain their "Content Provider" Partnership level (Keum, 2021), suggesting significant fluctuation in their decision. Clear and precise standards around the platforms' decision-making process can provide more autonomy to news organizations.

Arguing for a nuanced view of platform dependency, this article provides room for thinking about how the struggles of organizations are far from being uniform. This research is not without its limitations: the limited number of interviewees is one, and the unique Korean context in which digital platforms rank and stratify organizations is another, which could limit the scope of the research. However, future research can build on this article by exploring conducting systematic comparative research on how different organizations organize different strategies to survive in the increasingly platformized news environment, and how news organizations can possibly achieve autonomy.

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