The Impact of Digital Media on Urban Discourse:
The Journalists' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The media plays a crucial role in disseminating public information. This holds particular significance in urban contexts where it is vital for citizens to be informed about local issues as an integral element of urban discourse in the public sphere. With the growth of digital media, concerns about the quality of media content are increasing. This study investigates media perspectives on the quality of urban discourse, drawing on interviews with 51 journalists across four countries (Ireland, Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom). The findings underscore the immense potential of local journalism in shaping interactions between local government and citizens. While digital media has led to an explosion of content availability, it also poses challenges in providing reliable information to citizens. The study reviews these challenges and proposes solutions to enhance the quality of urban discourse.

KEYWORDS
Journalism, Online Media, Political Accountability, Urban Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban discourse is a social construct that provides a framework for interpreting territorial realities. This framework not only helps us to understand urban reality but also fosters ideas about the future of cities. Urban discourse is multi-faceted accommodating the perspectives of professionals, stakeholders and residents. First, there are well-known urban discourses constructed in the field of urban planning and communicated top-down (Karsten 2009), including concepts such as attractive city, creative city,

smart city and resilient city. These discourses are crafted on a global scale, albeit with local specificities woven into the fabric. Second, there are city discourses shaped by its residents and communicated from the bottom-up. These residential discourses, often underpinned by daily local interactions, can intersect with urban planning discourse. However, they tend to be fragmented and elusive making them challenging to integrate in urban policy processes (Karsten 2009).

Short (2000) provides a novel perspective distinguishing three primary discourses of the city: the authoritarian city, the cosmic city and the collective city. These discourses frame urban social relations, intellectual discussions and political forces. The authoritarian city discourse encompasses social aggregation and is charcaterised by order and discipline but also resistance, contestation and anarchy. According to this approach, a city reflects and embodies various authorities and powers in its street layouts, location of functions as well as citizens' behaviors. By contrast, the cosmic city discourse views the urban environment as a religious artefact. Cosmologies created in the past by various beliefs justified the social hierarchy of urban areas and built their spatial structures. Today a steady secularisation of the city is observed, undermining the city as the site of cosmic narrative. The collective city discourse is the most appropriate for this study. It depicts the city as a site of collective provision, consumption and action with a stronger role for civic society - a shared space, a place of joint projects and neighborhood effects (Short 2000).

This article adopts a simplified definition of 'urban discourse': a public discussion on urban affairs through speech or writing, producing meaning and involving various types of actors. The media, acting as a primary source of understanding and a vital public forum (cf Talbot 2007), plays a critical role in communicating and shaping urban discourse. Journalists can provide reliable and in-depth information to inform deliberation and decision-making. The quality of urban discourse depends on the media's ability to communicate a diverse range of information and perspectives. In this paper, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What role does journalism play in creating urban discourse?
2. How do journalists contribute to political accountability?
3. What is the impact of online media on urban discourse?

These questions will be addressed from the perspective of journalists, offering a unique insight into the functions of the media and their relations with their audiences. Consequently, urban discourse will be evaluated by the key actors who are responsibile for the quality of information and commentary disseminated in the media.

The paper is organized as follows. It begins by setting out the conceptual framework on the role of the media in public discourse. This includes an examination of mediated deliberation, the role of language and digital media. The methodology and data sources employed for this study are then presented. The empirical section provides the key findings from the interview research. A wider discussion synthesizes the key findings. The final section draws conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this article explores how the media represents and shapes urban discourse. It highlights the interactions between media, language, and digital technology in influencing public deliberation, policy-making, and urban development. The framework identifies key components and relationships in urban discourse, providing a foundation for understanding the complex interplay between mediated deliberation, language, digital media, and their impact on urban discourse. Particular attention is placed on the importance of reliable information dissemination, diverse perspectives, and ethical public relations practices in shaping informed and inclusive urban discussions.

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