



DEPARTMENT OF  
APPLIED IT

# MAINTAINING LEGITIMACY IN A DIGITAL AGE

## A Case Study of Offside Press AB



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Thesis:	30 hp
Program:	Digital Leadership
Level:	Second Cycle
Year:	2025
Supervisor:	Olgerta Tona
Examiner:	xx (fill in after the seminar)
Report nr:	xx (see published list on the course page)

# Abstract

This paper investigates how journalistic organizations maintain legitimacy in a digitalization era using Offside Press AB and its three publications: Offside, Filter, and Skriva as the case study and explores how legitimacy is maintained through various strategies to respond to digitalization. Drawing on Suddaby et al.'s (2017) framework, the study identifies three key legitimacy strategies: conforming, decoupling, and performing and examines how these unfold across secondary themes such as shifting content from analog to digital, employing standard revenue models, interacting closer with the audience, establishing their niche, resisting time pressure to prioritize storytelling rather than speed and leveraging AI for data gathering and illustrations. A qualitative methodology was employed, using semi-structured interviews and a Gioia-informed (Gioia et al., 2013) coding process to analyse empirical findings. The findings suggest that legitimacy is a dynamic and multi-layered resource: organizations simultaneously align with institutional norms (e.g., digital formats and subscription models), resist dominant digital pressures (e.g., platform-driven speed), and selectively adopt innovations to signal relevance. The study contributes to legitimacy theory by highlighting how these strategies operate and are shaped by both technological and cultural shifts. Lastly, it adds to the Information Systems literature by emphasizing how legitimacy is negotiated in relation to digital tools and platform logic.

## Keywords

Digitalization, journalism, legitimacy, conforming, decoupling, performing, AI, Audience engagement.

# Foreword

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to **Offside Press AB** and its magazines *Offside*, *Filter*, and *Skriba* for taking the time to participate in our interviews. Your openness, hospitality, and willingness to share your perspectives have been essential for this thesis. Visiting your offices and getting the chance to speak with all of you was both insightful and inspiring.

We also want to extend a warm thank you to our supervisor, Olgerta Tona, for her continuous support throughout the entire process. Her guidance, feedback, and encouragement have been invaluable, and we are truly grateful for her help in shaping this work.

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Gothenburg, May 2025

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# 1 Introduction

The digitalization that we now live in has impacted on all areas of modern society, including journalism. Journalism has always been important, and with for example political polarization increasing around the world the importance of journalism is growing (Beaufort, 2018). A significant portion of society depends on journalism for accurate and unbiased information across various topics like economics, sports, news and politics. This dependency on journalism brings forward concerns regarding both legitimacy and credibility within journalism today. As digitalization continues to emerge there has been a change in how both journalism is consumed and how it is produced. During the last decades journalism has undergone substantial changes, where it has moved from traditional printed media towards a more digital format. This shift has rapidly increased with the emergence of new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and social media. Journalism today is not only shared through the more traditional media like television, newspapers and radio. Instead, a lot of media is shared through easy access social media platforms, where it expands and reaches significantly more people. Additionally, these platforms allow readers to engage with the media content, providing immediate feedback and the opportunity to interact directly with journalists (Kane et al., 2014; Ren et al., 2022). This development has changed the dynamic between media providers and their consumers (Erbrich et al., 2024).

This has raised questions regarding journalistic authenticity (Uth et al., 2025). The idea of what journalism is and how it is done has been challenged with the evolution of technology. These changes have not only transformed the definition of what journalism is, but also the public's norms and the environment that journalism operates in (Tong, 2018). Since legitimacy is "defined as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suddaby et al. 2017, p.451), and the norms have changed, digitalization has affected how legitimacy is maintained in journalism. The advance in the digital era is responsible for authorities losing monopoly information production. Therefore, a big question is whether journalism can still offer quality and reliable news with everyone practising it in the digital era (Tong, 2018).

In past research the focus has been on larger organizations and not on organizations or media companies that produce traditional journals (Blassing & Esser, 2021; Lindblom, Lindell & Gidlund 2022; Birkner, Keute & Davydova 2024). While past research has mainly focused on large mainstream journalistic organizations, this study aims to investigate how legitimacy can be maintained in smaller organizations. Furthermore, the study focuses on journal writing organizations rather than daily newspapers or mainstream media. The elevation of algorithm-driven content on social media, combined with higher demands for rapid and endless content delivery puts more pressure on journalists whether it is a large or

small organization. This pressure often leads to difficult choices for journalists where they have to balance between maintaining traditional journalistic values such as accuracy, impartiality, and depth, but at the same time adapting to the demands of the digital media landscape (Ren et al., 2022). This tension has the potential to undermine the integrity of journalists, especially with the fast pace and wide-reaching capabilities that lie within digital journalism.

In this study we investigate how digitalization (Faulkner & Runde, 2019) has reshaped how journalism is done. This thesis specifically explores how digital transformation has affected the ways that journalistic organizations maintain legitimacy. Considering these shifts in the media landscape, the central research question for this study is "How do journalism organizations maintain legitimacy in the era of digitalization?" This question is particularly applicable given the prevailing use of both social media platforms and the rise of disruptive new technologies such as generative AI (Opdahl et al., 2023). Furthermore, traditional journalistic barriers blur due to increased content created by audiences instead of by journalists. This evolution has also made it harder to maintain the ethical standards within journalism, which makes the question regarding legitimacy even more critical.

To answer our research question, we will employ a qualitative methodology, conducting semi-structured group interviews with both journalists and editors within the organization Offside Press AB which includes three journal magazines called: Offside, Filter and Skriva. located in Gothenburg, Sweden. Each of these magazines publishes paper magazines four to six times annually, and each of these magazines have just undergone or are in the midst of a digital transformation. This transformation includes things such as offering online articles and pre-recorded audio versions of their content. By studying these magazines within the organization Offside Press AB, we can explore different approaches within one organizational structure and better understand how different editorial practices work to both gain and maintain legitimacy. Similar studies have been made before, but the focus has always been on larger organizations and not on organizations or media companies that produce traditional journals. This gap in the research field we aim to fill with this study.

## 2 Related Work/Previous Research

### 2.1 Background

In this section of the paper, we cover how journalism has shifted from traditional to digital media (Faulkner & Runde, 2019). Furthermore, we dive more specifically into which aspects of journalism have been affected by digitalization, such as

changes in content, delivery, news selection, reach, audience interaction, and revenue models. Furthermore, in this literature review part of this thesis we delve into scholarly contributions that have explored the effects that digitalization has on journalism and the different consequences this brings.

Aspects of journalism	Digital Media compared to Traditional Media
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stories can be posted without involving anyone.</li> <li>• Faster production of content compared to traditional news outlets.</li> <li>• Lower labour costs than traditional media.</li> </ul>
News Delivery and publications of news.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News delivery keeps changing on a very frequent basis in digital media.</li> <li>• Using social media as a promotion tool.</li> </ul>
News selection and coverage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technologies such as AI offer data driven news selection.</li> <li>• Prioritising stories that are trending online.</li> <li>• High importance on hashtags, likes, shares etc, which were not a factor previously.</li> </ul>
Reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News travels faster in a digital environment.</li> <li>• More people have easy access to produce and consume journalism because of social media and the internet.</li> <li>• Higher diversity in audience compared to traditional media.</li> </ul>
Audience Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closer interactions between journalists and news readers.</li> <li>• Creation of online communities.</li> <li>• Digital media journalists can be exposed to online controversies and harassment.</li> </ul>

Revenue Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent branding from journalists, rather than being tied to an organization.</li> <li>• Online and Website advertisements and easier promotion tools.</li> <li>• Monthly subscription-based models instead of buying magazines.</li> </ul>
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Figure 1. Aspects of journalism in digital media compared to traditional media

### 2.1.1 Traditional vs digital media

The 21st century has been an eventful time for journalism and how it is being made. The biggest change, first and foremost, is the shift from one-to-many mass communication models such as TV, billboards, and newspapers towards social media (Flew, 2012). As a result, digital platforms allow everyone to perform the practice of journalism. Media producers and consumers are becoming participants of the social media cultures, which is giving them more power in relation to media corporations. Therefore, journalism is getting democratized, allowing everyone to create and share stories on social media. “While democratization of journalism in itself might not be a bad thing, the legitimacy of journalism can be jeopardized when every single individual connected to social media can freely practise it” (Flew, 2012, p. 7–8).

Multiple IS literature has looked at how digitalization can affect journalism. For example, one of the concerns that digitalization of journalism can cause is fake news (Shirish et al. 2021). Fake news is an umbrella term that refers to any intentionally deceptive digital misinformation, propaganda, or disinformation. It signifies fabricated information that has the format of news but is produced without following the practices of legitimate journalism and the necessary editorial checks. Fake news perpetrators are information producers willing to disregard journalistic norms to advance political agenda, make financial profits, gain psychological satisfaction, or any other form of social gains (Shirish et al. 2021). This makes it even harder for audiences to separate trustworthy journalism from misleading or manipulated content, which puts additional pressure on journalistic organizations trying to maintain credibility in the digital age.

Furthermore, IS literature suggests that credibility issues appear as challenges across digital platforms. For example, due to the open nature of social media, platform drifting can happen. Platform drifting happens when the platform logic deviates from organizational towards an alternative logic. (Rahrovani, 2020). An example could be undermining the intended use of a platform (e.g., reliable news dissemination) to get a post viral or popular. Further literature notes that digital transformation processes often differ, based on institutional contexts and resource constraints, with nonprofit organizations, for example, struggling to maintain

mission-driven values when engaging with open digital ecosystems (Cipriano and Za 2025).

Other IS literature further argues that digitalisation involves new technologies and additionally redefinition of how an organization works and what it values (Baiyere et al. 2020). **In the case of journalism, this means that adopting digital tools can threaten foundational editorial principles if not carefully managed.** In the case of smaller businesses, they often adopt digital tools reactively under pressure rather than strategically, which can intensify tensions between innovation and authenticity. (Mandviwalla and Flanagan 2021). Engagement with digital objects raises questions about an organization's structure, mode of being, and other basic properties (Faulkner and Runde 2019). Finally, smaller media entities may adopt a commensalistic position within digital ecosystems engaging just enough to benefit from platform infrastructure while retaining editorial independence (Gastaldi et al. 2024).

With the introduction of new technologies, multiple aspects of journalism change. The first aspect of journalism that changes is content. **Social media, for example, allows journalists to interact with day-to-day users and create communities, which journalists can use to discover what piece of news this community wants to see. Monitoring hashtags and trends allows journalists to be up to date with what is happening in the world in real time.** Furthermore, social media allows journalists to create news stories through social media quotes without directly involving anyone (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Other technologies such as AI allow journalists to produce content faster, while keeping the labour costs relatively low as well (Kim & Kim, 2017; Davison et al., 2023). AI delivered content can have its shortcomings as well, because it does not go through a proper editorial review. This can lead to content that is provided by unclear sources and a lack of fact checking processes, which can be dangerous due to the spread of misinformation (Shirish et al, 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Opdahl et al., 2023).

With the change of content in published news, digitalization changes the way news stories are delivered as well. The most obvious change in news delivery is the switch from traditional delivery outlets such as newspapers, magazines and broadcasts into new formats such as websites, social media, podcasts etc (Mangold et al., 2022). What is particularly interesting is that delivery of news is something that keeps changing within this era of digitalization. **For example, early on, news was shared without a link to the news story, but news organizations switched to “put more emphasis on disseminating news through their own platforms than using social media because of proprietary and revenue generating reasons” (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, p.1507). Nowadays, most news journals only post the most breaking and recent news on social media, using it as a tool to promote their own website, rather than using it as a media to purely post content in.** Moreover, social media allows journalists to reach audiences faster, create communities and interact with them in real time with their readers (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). This highlights the importance of speed, engagement and strategies to publish news to various audiences involved.

The publication of news is another aspect of journalism that is continuing to change in the current area of digitalization. Technologies have introduced greater flexibility and adaptability in publication strategies. Rather than sticking strictly to traditional print schedules, many outlets now try out digital-first or hybrid models to remain relevant in an increasingly online environment. For smaller media organizations, the digital transformation is not only a technological shift but also an economic necessity, as digital models offer more sustainable publishing formats due to lower overhead costs (Mandviwalla & Flanagan, 2021; Rios-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Some organizations have limited the publication of print magazines and invest further into the digital publications of their stories. **The shift into digital models allows them to avoid the shortcomings of printed magazines and survive in the industry of journalism.**

The change in how news is published nowadays allows journalistic organizations to select the stories they print out for the public. The changing behaviour from audiences with technology has shifted the criterias of news selection for journalistic organizations. One of the examples could be that AI technologies are now used across various stages of news production, which can include identifying patterns or trends in data that inform editorial decisions (Opdahl et al., 2023). AI introduces a more data-driven news selection and influences the journalist's choice of what news to post, because data that is available everywhere can clearly show trending topics and what news people want to hear. In addition, the fast-paced nature of digital media requires quicker judgment calls, often prioritizing stories that are likely to gain immediate traction online.

**Furthermore, social media plays** a key role in shaping what news gets covered; journalists now monitor hashtags and social personalities to stay informed, and they track metrics such as likes, shares, and comments to determine which stories resonate most with the public (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). As media organizations aim to produce more content faster (Kim & Kim, 2017), editorial teams are pressured to make quick decisions on which topics to cover, occasionally sacrificing slower long-term reporting and properly fact checking the news. The popularity of platforms like X among public figures has led journalists to build stories from online posts rather than traditional interviews, raising concerns about verification and the credibility of sources used in the selection process (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). With news selection processes changing, it is important for journalistic organizations to adapt the way they format and show news to their audiences as well.

The formatting of journals and magazines has been significantly changed by digitalization. Digital media, whether it is websites or social media, are currently replacing traditional print magazines. Technologies such as AI are used in different stages of news production, such as data collection or transcription, which influences the way news stories are written and presented to an audience (Opdahl et al., 2023; Davison et al., 2023). Automated writing systems, as an example, allow organizations to produce a vast amount of content in standardized formats, which streamline publication but can limit creative variation (Kim & Kim, 2017). These formats are optimized for speed and volume and often generated without going through a proper editorial review and may lack proper sourcing and fact-checking

processes (Opdahl et al., 2023). Several journalists are branding themselves as their own individual, rather than as a part of a bigger organization. This allows them to include more personal and informal content along with their traditional reports (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). The term “branding” distinguishes between standard news dissemination and journalists using social platforms to cultivate their own style and relationship with the audience (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, p.1509). Together, these developments show how digital journalism formats are increasingly influenced by automation, platform conventions, and individual expression—marking a departure from uniform, editor-centered print layouts toward more fluid and customized formats shaped by both machines and personal engagement.

With all the facilities that technology provides for journalistic organizations, reach has become a crucial aspect in journalism that is changing because of digitalization. Nowadays, the news travels faster and further than it used to do, because of technology and the increasing number of people involved. Media producers and consumers are becoming participants of the social media cultures, which is giving them more power in relation to media corporations (Flew, 2012). Furthermore, reaching large audiences fast has become easier due to the sheer number of different social media users such as X, Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok etc. This allows journalists to not only reach bigger audiences, but also more diverse audiences from across the world at a very fast time (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Besides social media, AI is also a technology that allows journalists to reach bigger audiences. Using AI for data analysis and content creation enhances the scalability of journalism and allows stories to be tailored quicker for larger and various audiences (Opdahl et al., 2023).

Digitalization has created new forms of crowd engagement, with examples such as direct audience participation in content creation and real-time communication between journalists and readers (Zahay et al., 2021). Audience engagement-oriented journalism creates space for more conversations between journalists and audiences rather than a cold distant relationship between consumers and organizations. Journalists nowadays use platforms like social media to share news and to ask their communities what stories they want, which creates a two-party conversation, which did not happen in the past (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Although this engagement holds transformative potential, it requires a rethinking of traditional journalistic routines, which is not always feasible for all editorial offices due to limited resources or resistance to change (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Interestingly, while local journalism is often seen as most suited for community-driven engagement, many local newsrooms still use social media primarily for broadcasting rather than for meaningful interaction or incorporating user-generated content (Jerónimo et al., 2022). As mentioned previously, independent branding is another factor that can play a role in creating relationships between journalists and readers. (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022, p.1509). However, this increased visibility, and interaction can also come with risks, because it exposes journalists to an online media, which can cause harassment online. Building a strong audience engagement can help media organizations attract new subscribers and retain their current ones for a longer time. Furthermore, building a strong audience helps journalistic

organizations maintain revenue stability, particularly when feedback loops are prioritized and used to shape content strategies (Erbrich et al., 2024). Despite its challenges, audience interaction is becoming central not only to journalistic identity but also to organizational survival and innovation in the digital age.

The **digital transformation** has changed **traditional revenue models in journalism** quite significantly, **pushing media organizations to experiment with new financial strategies to survive** (Baiyere et al., 2020). Initially, digitalization reduced income from print sales and advertisements, which had been the main form of sustainable income newspapers and journals (Franklin, 2014). This decline in revenue made organizations seek other ways of revenue. One of the most prominent responses has been the adoption of digital-only subscription models, including bundling strategies where content is locked behind paywalls accessible to subscribers (Erbrich et al., 2024). These subscription models, inspired by mainstream streaming services like Netflix and Spotify, aim to attract new audiences, which tend to be more digitally present, by offering multiple "newspapers" rather than paying a certain amount for every single one. Cross publisher bundles in particular are useful in attracting and engaging readers who might be hesitant to subscribe to individual outlets, **although they present challenges such as how to divide revenue fairly among publishers and concerns about weakening brand identity for outlets still invested in print** (Erbrich et al., 2024).

**For smaller media companies, especially local publications, the move toward digital revenue streams is also a necessity,** as digital platforms allow for more cost-efficient operations (Mithas et al., 2013; Mandviwalla & Flanagan, 2021; Rios-Rodríguez et al., 2022). However, the shift to subscription-based models is complicated by resource limitations, especially in economically constrained editorial offices that lack the infrastructure or personnel to develop innovative monetization strategies (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Organizations that succeed in building communities around their content, while responding to reader feedback—tend to achieve greater subscriber retention and financial stability, reinforcing the connection between audience engagement and economic performance (Erbrich et al., 2024). The evolution of revenue models in journalism is adapted more towards digital audiences and is more focused on users.

### **2.1.2 Legitimacy in digital journalism**

**Digitalization has brought the classical question of legitimacy at the forefront. Indeed, it has made the boundaries between professional journalism and content produced by users more unclear.** This fact challenges traditional notions of journalistic credibility, because nowadays anyone can contribute by producing and spreading content. One can argue that content created by non-journalists enhances the possibility for news diversity, but it also raises concerns over accuracy, authenticity, and the risk of spreading misinformation, especially through platforms like social media (Shirish et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Mangold et al., 2022; Uth et al., 2025)

Studies exploring how different audience segments allocate trust in today's digital era suggest that some audience groups still rely heavily on classic legacy media, while others are very skeptical of institutional journalism. This increasing

polarization within audience trust indicates a significant challenge for journalistic organizations when it comes to maintaining legitimacy, particularly since we live in an era characterized by partisan media and misinformation (Mangold et al., 2022; Uth et al., 2025).

Research has also described the struggles that occur in journalism when maintaining credibility while adapting to digital platforms. **In the digital era there are journalists who feel cornered by ambiguity and find it necessary to engage with various digital platforms to reach their audience.** This is happening while journalists often recognize that the algorithms that they depend on could potentially undermine the integrity of their work and their identity as journalists. **These algorithms sometimes prioritize engagement metrics over journalistic standards, complicating the task of upholding professional credibility (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022).**

This literature review highlights how digitalization has changed journalism and influenced how journalistic content is created, shared, and produced (Faulkner & Runde, 2019). Social media and AI are central factors in these changes, providing new opportunities but also significant challenges. While social media enables greater audience interaction and branding for journalists, it simultaneously increases risks such as misinformation and a loss of credibility and legitimacy (Shirish et al., 2021).

In the context of this paper, we are discussing legitimacy in journalism. **Why is legitimacy important in journalism? Legitimacy helps journalists maintain professional standards and norms. “By doing so, it wins the trust of the public and the authority so that it can gain independence from state control” (Tong, 2018 p.257).** To paraphrase this, legitimacy builds trust, therefore keeps journalism credible, which allows for a safe and healthy environment in the media landscape.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Legitimacy theory

Legitimacy is “defined as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suddaby et al. 2017, p.451). This notion has been important across different fields, such as political science, philosophy, sociology etc. (Suddaby et al. 2017). In this study, we draw upon Suddaby et al. (2017) legitimacy theory which views legitimacy in three ways: **legitimacy as property, legitimacy as process and legitimacy as perception.** In this paper, we have decided to take and use the perspective of **legitimacy as property.** We have decided to take and use the perspective of legitimacy as property, as it enables us to **view legitimacy as a resource that organizations can hold and manage.** This perspective is useful for understanding how organizations seek to

appear legitimate within a broader institutional context, and how legitimacy can be strategically maintained or enhanced over time. This approach fits with this case study, due to it being a transition of an already legitimate organization from traditional media to digital media.

Legitimacy as property is defined as an asset or resource possessed in measurable quantity by some legitimacy object in relation to others (Suddaby et al. 2017). Researchers who adopt the view of legitimacy as property aim to find the characteristics that constitute legitimacy. Researchers describe legitimacy as an “operational resource” (Suchman, 1995) or as an “intangible asset” (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006). The most common question that can be asked about legitimacy as property is: “How can it be physically measured?” Multiple authors have tried to answer this question by creating different clusters of attributes of legitimacy that have a tendency to occur together (Suddaby et al. 2017).

Most efforts of authors build on Weber’s (1968) categorization of three types of legitimacy, which includes: Traditional, Charismatic and Rational-legal (Suddaby et al. 2017). The observation that Weber made is that people view an authority as legitimate if it has endured a long time (traditional), if it derives from community trust (charismatic) or if it is based on practical logic (rational-legal) (Suddaby et al. 2017). This model of legitimacy has had a major influence on how management theorists have conceptualized the construct. Suddaby (2017) mentions that multiple other authors have made considerable efforts to capture the properties of legitimacy and have categorized them into different categories. Some of the most notable categorizations done by researchers include sociopolitical and cognitive (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994), cognitive, regulative and normative (Scott, 1995), pragmatic, moral and cognitive (Schuman, 1995).

Lastly, besides the different categorizations of legitimacy as property, researchers theorize the construct of illegitimacy, which is a negative form of legitimacy, which creates a liability for an organization (Suddaby et al. 2017). Legitimacy as property researchers have conceptualized illegitimacy in two views. The first view says that illegitimacy is not simply a “low level” or “absence” of legitimacy, but rather a summarization of a different set of properties. Organizations can be legitimate and stigmatized at the same time; therefore, they cannot be viewed as simply as having a different degree of presence/absence of a certain attribute (Suddaby et al. 2017). The second view of illegitimacy defines it as “part of a continuum of attributes that exist in private opposition where one object has a property (legitimacy) and the other does not (thus is illegitimate)” (Suddaby et al. 2017, p.455). Simply put, authors have defined legitimacy as a “bipolar” construct ranging from strong forms of positive legitimacy to strong forms of negative legitimacy, where the middle point is the switch from legitimacy to illegitimacy (Suddaby et al. 2017).

### **3.1.1 Where does Legitimacy as property occur?**

“A firm “gains”, “acquires”, “buys,” or even “wins” legitimacy from its audiences through adoption of legitimate structures, practices, and symbols” (Suddaby et al.

2017, p.455). The organizational-environmental relationship's role in locating the source of legitimacy is illustrated by how different researchers measure it. The three measurements of legitimacy as property are: **Population density, Media accounts and Regulator's authorizations (Suddaby et al. 2017).**

*Population density* is based on the assumption that the more an organizational form appears in a population, the more likely it is to be legitimate. The more the number of organizations in a population grows, the more legitimate this population is (Suddaby et al. 2017). Therefore, legitimacy of a certain practice will enable the creation of other organizations with similar forms or practices. At a certain point, when a form of practice is taken for granted, legitimacy allows for competition. However, this measure of legitimacy has been criticized, "because of its focus on cognitive legitimacy and the relative lack of attention paid to measuring socio-political legitimacy" (Suddaby et al. 2017 p.455). This take on legitimacy misses its multi dimensional character. This disagreement also happens due to cognitive factors and socio-political factors being related to each other. Therefore, researchers focus on the content analysis of Media accounts and Regulators' authorizations.

*Media accounts* are about focusing "on measuring the frequency of conversations about organizational forms and practices." (Suddaby et al. 2017 p.455). Within this perspective, content analysis is the most common technique of measuring and optimising legitimacy. An example that Suddaby (2017) brings in his paper is Lamertz and Baum's tracking of the legitimacy of organizational downsizing, doing so by counting the frequency of downsizing accounts in Canadian newspapers. From their experiment, they concluded that downsizing conversations affected content in three key ways. First, conversations changed to ideology focused conversations. Second, the arguments shifted from technical to institutional and lastly, the conversations started as reactive but ended up as proactive. (Suddaby et al 2017). Other researchers have conducted similar experiments, and the conclusion is that "Content analytic techniques, in fact, appear to be the most common technique of operationalizing and measuring legitimacy within this perspective" (Suddaby et al 2017 p.456).

The last measurement that researchers investigate is *Regulators' authorization*. Since regulators have authority, their decisions have consequences to an organization. Besides that, "an administrator's approval also has an indirect effect: such an approval is an important cue of legitimacy of an organization" (Suddaby et al. 2017 p.456). Therefore, registrations and licenses can provide an advantage to organisations when it comes to proving their legitimacy. A method that is mentioned in Suddaby's paper (2017) is measuring legitimacy through surveys and semi structured interviews.

Overall, all these studies "share the key assumption of contingency theory that legitimacy is an organizational property or capacity that may not be directly observable but can be measured by proxy" (Suddaby et al 2017 p.456). Legitimacy varies by quantity according to this stream of research, meaning that some organizations have more legitimacy and some others have less. This assumption

has raised the question of whether legitimacy should be treated as a thing which organizations have or not, or as a variable which some organizations have more than others. Another key aspect of the **contingency theory** is that legitimacy is located at the intersection of an organization and its environment, which means that legitimacy is constructed through the relationship between the environment and the organization.

### 3.1.2 How does legitimacy as property occur?

Suddaby et al. (2017) suggests that it happens “through a degree of fit between the legitimacy object, for example, an organization, category, or organizational practice, and its environmental context.” (Suddaby et al. 2017 p.456). To describe this fit, multiple authors use terms such as congruence, consistency, cultural alignment etc. Different organizations use strategies in order to achieve this fit and attain legitimacy. The three strategies are conforming, decoupling and performing (Suddaby et al. 2017).

*Conforming/isomorphism* is the strategy of adapting to fit by taking characteristics, practices and forms that are **imposed by the organizational firm** (Suddaby et al. 2017). The main argument to appear legitimate for organizations is that they adopt characteristics that are set by norms or standards generated by the organizational field. Complying with these social pressures of legitimacy, increases the chances that an organization survives and increases the similarity between organizations (Suddaby et al. 2017). Organizations adopt these norms even if there is no technical or economical advantage, because they chose to adapt to fit as their main priority. Previous research has shown that complying with normative pressure set by the environment has improved chances of survival for a firm. However, the counter argument to that is that there should be a distinction between internal and external isomorphism based on whom the focal legitimacy object seeks legitimacy with (Suddaby et al. 2017). Furthermore, organizations tend to adopt characteristics of industry leaders, dominant designs and industry wide templates to seek legitimacy while avoiding socially disapproved practices. In conclusion legitimacy “is an outcome of ongoing adaptations designed to maintain congruence between the internal norms, values, and characteristics of the firm and those of the environment outside the firm” (Suddaby et al. 2017, p.457).

**Decoupling** is the strategy of conforming superficially to appear legitimate to external audiences while protecting the core activities of the organization. Previous research has shown how large corporations often ceremonially adopt but do not implement normatively mandated business practices, however they still protect their core business functions (Suddaby et al. 2017). This research extends across multiple empirical settings such schools, affirmative action hiring practices and acceptance of shareholder value. The use of decoupling is a strategy to maintain a degree of fit with both economical-technical pressures and social pressures that surround an organization (Suddaby et al. 2017).

Lastly is the strategy of **performing**, which is demonstrating the technical prowess of an innovative practice (Suddaby et al. 2017). This means that organizations achieve legitimacy by demonstrating their technical or innovative prowess over

their competitors. An example of that could be how the demonstration of the critical role that design factors played when electric lighting replaced gas-lighting. Making the lightbulb look like flames, demonstrated familiarity with what people were used to (normative legitimacy), while showing technical advantage over competitors, because it is a new technology (pragmatic legitimacy) (Suddaby et al 2017).

In conclusion, the legitimacy theory from a property point of view provides a comprehensive theoretical lens to understand how journalistic organizations face the legitimacy challenges in the current digitalization era. In this perspective, treating legitimacy as a tangible asset allows us to analyse how the Offside Press AB journalistic organizations maintain legitimacy during their transition era from paper magazine to online journals. The strategies, conforming, decoupling and performing (Suddaby et al. 2017) present a clear framework for us to analyze how Offside Press AB responds to external pressure to maintain legitimacy. Thus, implementing this theory offers a structured exploration of legitimacy in journalism in our case study and insights into how this organization manages its legitimacy in the digital landscape.

## **4 Method**

### **4.1 Case description**

This study is a case study of Offside Press AB. In this study, we have conducted group interviews with the three journalistic organizations included in Offside Press AB: Offside, Filter, and Skriwa. These organizations publish long-form journalism on topics they and their audience find interesting.

Offside is a magazine focusing on football stories and behind-the-scenes insights from the football world. As of May 2025, Offside has around 10 000 subscribers to their journal out of these 10 000 around 3000 are only digital subscribers, meaning that they don't get the journal to their home via post. Offside has 2 Chief editors that also work as reporters. Beside this they have one more person working full-time as a reporter and another reporter that works half-time as a reporter and half-time as a web-editor. When we conducted the interview, Offside also had a reporter-intern.

Filter concentrates on critical writing about subjects they find intriguing and underreported. One of their most famous publications came in 2018 when they published a text about the murder of the Swedish prime minister that happened in 1986. Filter has 1 Chief editor that also works as a reporter. They also have one Digital Chief, two reporters and one Art Director. In May 2025 Filter had around

7000 subscribers where around 1500 of these only subscribed to the journal digitally.

Skriva is a magazine aimed at writers and aspiring authors, offering inspiration, writing advice from renowned Swedish authors, practical tips on getting published, and regularly organizing writing competitions and literary events to engage and support the writing community. In May 2025 Skriva had around 6500 subscribers.

## 4.2 Data collection

The method that we have chosen to collect data with is semi structured group interviews (See interview guide in appendix 1). The primary reason for this choice has been due to the nature of the organizations, which are relatively small, and due to the time restrictions, that these organizations have. The adaptability of semi structured interviews is particularly useful when studying dynamic fields such as journalism, where external influences such as digitalization and shifting audience behaviors may shape professional practices in varied and unforeseen ways (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

In the context of our study, the interviewees can discuss their views on topics such as digitalisation, AI, and social media while providing stories and examples from their experience. Lastly, group interviews allow interviewees to bounce ideas with each other and follow up with each person's perspective on certain topics.

Interviews were conducted in person in the offices of the journalistic organizations Offside, Filter and Skriva. Conducting the interviews on-site allowed for a relaxed setting, in which interviewees could feel familiar with and present personal stories and examples more easily. This approach aligns with best practices for semi-structured interviews, as the physical presence of the interviewer can support engagement and attentiveness, reducing potential distractions that might arise in remote settings (Karatsareas, 2022). All participants provided informed consent, and interviews were recorded with their permission to ensure accuracy in transcription and analysis. Confidentiality was maintained, and responses were anonymized to protect participants' identities. Following ethical guidelines strengthens the credibility of the research, enhancing the reliability of the findings obtained through this method.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection process, the interview guide was developed in accordance with established methodological frameworks. The five-phase process for constructing semi-structured interview guides that we follow emphasises the importance of identifying prerequisites for using the method, reviewing relevant literature, formulating a preliminary guide, pilot testing, and finalizing the guide based on feedback (Kallio et al. 2016). Following this approach helps ensure that the questions are clear, relevant to the topic and allows the respondents to give comprehensive and genuine answers. The interview guide this

study uses is designed to encourage participants to reflect on their professional experiences regarding digitalization in journalism.

### 4.3 Selection of interview participants

As we have mentioned we conducted interviews with journalists and editors that worked on all three journals that Offside Press AB publishes. When it comes to the size of each editorial team, there are some differences, but in all the interviews we conducted, the following roles were represented at each newspaper: reporter, editor-in-chief, and publisher. Unfortunately, we experienced some dropouts in a few of our group interviews, as some people had personal issues. It also happened that a reporter at one of the editorial offices was not present during the interview, as other work got in the way. Below is a list of the individuals who participated in our interviews at Offside Press AB.

List of the groups interviews				
Groups	Journal	Participants	Role	Length of the group interview
1	Offside	Interviewee 1	Reporter, Editor-in-Chief, and Responsible Publisher	48 minutes
1	Offside	Interviewee 2	Reporter	
1	Offside	Interviewee 3	Internship reporter	
2	Filter	Interviewee 4	Reporter, Editor-in-Chief, and Responsible Publisher	61 minutes
2	Filter	Interviewee 5	Reporter	
2	Filter	Interviewee 6	Digital Chief	
3	Skriva	Interviewee 7	Reporter, Editor-in-Chief, and Responsible Publisher	31 minutes

Figure 2. List of group interviews.

### 4.4 Transcription

As we previously mentioned, we interviewed several employees at the organization Offside Press AB. All interviews were conducted with the consent of the interviewees. Once the interviews were completed, we transcribed them using the transcription feature in Microsoft Word. After receiving the initial transcriptions

from Word, we reviewed the audio files again and corrected any errors that may have occurred during the transcription process. Once this was done, we went through the interviews once more to ensure that the audio files and the actual transcriptions matched accurately. Since all interviews were conducted in Swedish, the documents needed to be translated into English. To save time, we used the translation software DeepL. After the translation was completed, we carefully reviewed both the Swedish transcriptions and the English versions to double-check the accuracy of the translation. This multi-step process aligns with recommendations in qualitative research to treat transcription not as a mechanical task but as a critical and interpretative act that requires accuracy, ethical consideration, and reflexivity (McMullin, 2021). Furthermore, using AI-based tools like Microsoft Word or DeepL must be accompanied by human oversight to correct errors and preserve meaning, especially since voice-to-text software often misses contextual nuances and struggles with multiple speakers or accents (McMullin, 2021).

## 4.5 Data analysis

To analyse the data, we have used the **data structure method (Gioia et al., 2013)**. The data structure method allows us to clearly show what secondary themes connect the interview results that we have with the three aggregate dimensions, which are the three ways that legitimacy as a property occurs in *Offside Press AB*: Conforming, Decoupling and Performing. This method allows us to group quotes and statements from interviews that relate to a certain theme. Secondary themes allow us to connect first order concepts that we discover from interviews with the three aggregate dimensions.

The coding of the interview transcriptions was done using Atlas.ti. The first step is doing open coding, where we quote paragraphs from the interview and coded key words from that. From the results of the open coding, there are open codes which have been merged with each other because they are used in a very similar context. After a code co-occurrence analysis, we discover secondary themes that appear in our interviews. Using the first order concept and the second order themes, we created a data structure (Gioia et al., 2013), which allows us to connect the second order themes with the three aggregate dimensions of how legitimacy as a property occurs. From there we can conduct the analysis of how the journalistic organizations of *Offside AB* maintain legitimacy in the era of digitalization, in the lens of legitimacy as property.

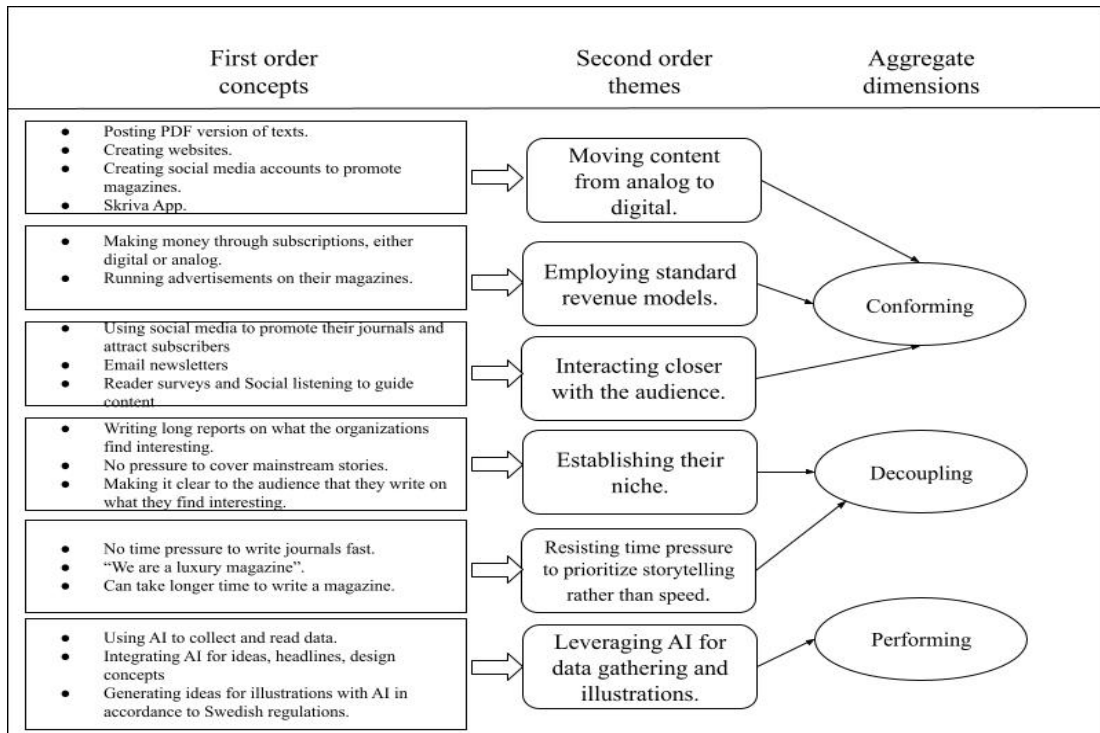


Figure 3. Data structure.

## 5 Results

In this section we present the results that are gathered from the interviews that were conducted with Offside, Filter and Skriva. Besides presenting the results, this section examines the collected data and showcases how legitimacy as property occurs in the case of Offside Press AB.

### 5.1 Conforming

The first strategy that Offside Press AB uses to maintain legitimacy is conforming. Conforming is the strategy of adapting to fit by taking characteristics, practices and forms that are imposed by the organizational firm (Suddaby et al. 2017). In this case conforming consists of three main approaches, **which are moving content from analog to digital, employing standard revenue models and interacting closer with the audience.**

All three magazines—Skriva, Offside, and Filter—demonstrate clear efforts to **shift their operations and content delivery from traditional analog formats to digital platforms.** This strategic pivot reflects a broader industry trend, but also each magazine’s unique positioning and resource considerations.

Skriva embraced this transformation early by developing its own digital infrastructure. As one representative noted, *"We've created our own app and started sending digital newsletters to keep in touch with our readers digitally."* - Interviewee 7. This digital outreach is part of a broader strategy to engage readers beyond the printed page, offering both convenience and extended value. This has helped Skriva keep up with their digital audience, which is growing over the years due to the nature of journalism's evolution. Having an app for the platform is a very standard procedure nowadays for most organizations. The app that Skriva has created allows for convenience, keeping in touch with the readers and fitting in with what the rest of the industry does. Other than that, similarly to *Offside* and *Filter*, Skriva have their own website, where they post the newsletters or updates on what is coming.

At *Offside*, the shift was more a matter of necessity and focus. Facing declining returns from print, the magazine streamlined its physical offerings and emphasized digital formats. One editor commented, *"I can say that we are in the middle of the major digital transition [...]. There we went down a bit from this printed paper product. From six printed issues a year to four issues. This was so that we could invest more in digital media. We made a new website. Our challenge has always been that since 2000 we have always had a lot of subscribers to the paper magazine."* - Interviewee 1. *Offside* puts in perspective that moving content from analog to digital, is more than just a transition of a journal into a PDF file. During this transition, they have had to think about their current subscribers, business models that they need to follow, potential promotion tools and investments they need to make to gather new audiences and costs that are involved with the digitalization of the journal. Besides offering content that is existing on their website, *Offside* uses the website to include a podcast in there, which is additional content that they offer to satisfy their audience.

*Filter* takes a more structural approach, investing in its organizational capacity to handle digital change. According to one interviewee, *"We hired a digital director and started planning a digital relaunch. To prepare for what will happen in autumn 2025, when the new Filter is launched. The new Filter will be mainly a digital product with paper magazines as an option for subscribers"*. - Interviewee 4. *Filter* is heavily focused on fully moving digitally in the future. They further prove *Offside*'s point, that digitalization can require structural changes within the organization and in their case, they have acted by hiring a digital director, which is a role that they did not have to think about in the past.

This indicates a deliberate, top-down initiative to embed digital thinking within the magazine's core. Together, these examples illustrate a convergence around digital transformation, but through different paths: *Skriva* through direct-to-reader tools, *Offside* by reducing print dependence, and *Filter* via organizational development. Each case highlights how legacy cultural magazines are realigning their operations to remain relevant and accessible in a digital-first media environment. An important factor that must be kept in mind when moving content from analog to digital is how revenue is affected by this change.

All three journals within Offside Press AB **employ standard revenue models** such as: use subscriptions and ads for revenue. Despite being independent cultural magazines, Skriva, Offside, and Filter rely on conventional revenue streams similar to those used by mainstream media. These include subscriptions and advertising, though often with a tailored approach that reflects their brand identity. Similarly to moving content from analog to digital, their revenue models are mostly adaptations to what the rest of the industry does, therefore these fit well into the definition of what conforming is.

In Skriva, interviewee 7 explained: *"We are basically a cultural magazine, but work as a commercial magazine. [...] For example, we offer both classic subscriptions where people can take part in what we publish digitally but also receive the magazine in the mailbox 6 times a year. But we also have the option of only subscribing to Skriva digital. And today, about a third of our subscribers are fully digital"*. As mentioned, nothing out of the ordinary in the way that Skriva makes revenue. These results make sense in the bigger picture as well, because it could possibly be risky to change or create new ways to make revenue in a small organization, when there is already a system that has worked for them. The main adaptation of the strategies of making revenue for Skriva is that digital subscribers are added as an income source rather than just the people who buy the physical copy of the magazine.

Offside takes a similar stance, emphasizing reader loyalty: *"If you want to be independent and survive on advertising revenue and subscriptions today, you probably have to be digitized"*. - Interviewee 2. Interviewee 1 furthermore quotes: *"And we're on a pretty high horse in that we've turned down all betting company revenue and the like, which makes us very unique in the industry."* Similarly to Skriva, Offside follows very standard revenue making models. However, what is interesting in Offside's case and something that may be a bit different from mainstream sport magazines is the refusal of betting companies as their advertisers. The reason that they are possibly doing this is to avoid promoting something that may be socially unacceptable for certain groups of people. This approach in itself, even though it can be a bit different from other companies, is a form of conforming in the sense that they are using an industry-wide template for making revenue, while avoiding practices that can be socially disapproved of.

Filter also maintains a mixed revenue model: *"Our big problem around this is really that we need to continue with paper magazines as these are where we get the most revenue. At the same time as we have to move towards digital, this is really a big challenge."* - Interviewee 4. *"We have a bit too many subscribers and advertisers for this to be possible [to abandon print]"* - Interviewee 5. The emphasis here is on adapting traditional models to fit a digitally evolving media landscape. Furthermore, they need to keep this model for them to keep going in the future. Then again, making money from subscribers and advertisers is an industry-wide template for making revenue. To all three of the magazines, the revenue making models that they choose do not necessarily provide any competitive advantage, however they allow them to keep their organization transparent and trustworthy.

Moving on from employing standard revenue models, another way of conforming that happens in the case of Offside Press AB is **interacting closer with their audience**. One of the effects of digitalization is the opportunity that it creates to connect with more people faster and easier, which is something that media outlets have realised. Organizations at Offside Press AB have realised this as well and they have been active on social media and email, to interact more often with their audience and stay connected with them.

Skriva uses social media to show what happens behind the scenes of their writing, which gives the audience a sneak peek at how they work and gets to know them better. Interviewee 7 quotes: *“We currently have about 10,000 followers on Instagram and 27,000 following us on Facebook. We work quite traditionally with pushing for editorial material, but we also share some 'behind the scenes' things from us here at the editorial office. This is mainly to trigger people to read and to get new subscribers.”* Besides that, posting on social media is used to generate some hype or buzz about the upcoming magazine. This helps the magazine stay engaged with their audience, create a closer relationship with them and possibly gain attraction from people who are seeing the posts for the first time. A detail that can be noticed here, is that posting on social media can allow for transparency and remove some forms of barriers between what the audience actually gets and how that product is made. By showing the audience how the work is done, it allows Skriva to also deal better with the normative pressure and setting and matching expectations of the audience of their product.

Offside takes a similar stance, emphasizing communication with the subscribers: *“Those who follow us on social media feel that they get closer to both us at the editorial office. And they get that sense of community. We try to respond to most of the people who send DMs on Instagram or emails to have a relationship with our readers.”* - Interviewee 2. Communication between journalists and subscribers is important, because it creates closer interactions between the audience and the journalists as people rather than just an organization. Offside further mentions how important the creation of communities is, due to them allowing generations of new possible topics that Offside can write about. This can be seen as a win-win situation for both the community and the journalists, because the community gets what they want and for the journalists, community discussions can be a source of inspiration to keep producing magazines with topics that are interesting for this community. As the theory mentions, legitimacy can be derived from community trust (Suddaby et al, 2017), therefore staying connected and active with the community that is created is an important factor for Offside to maintain their credibility and legitimacy.

Similarly, Filter notices the importance that interactions with their audience have in the creation of their product. When asked how digitalization has affected Filter, one of the aspects that interviewee 6 mentions is interaction with the community. *“Most importantly, we have the opportunity to have more interactions with our subscribers, and we may not be fully utilising that today. But when and if we want to do that, we have clear and simple tools to use.”* More interactions with their subscribers help them figure out what the people want and what are the expectations that their audience set for them. Furthermore, Interviewee 3 noted:

*“The part of the digitisation process that I am most interested in is the figures on how many people have visited the site and how many clicks different reports get. This part of the digitisation process helps me to know how to work in the future.”* Filter uses audience interactions to measure the traffic that they get, which is a way for them to see if a certain publication is doing well or not. This allows them to work based on feedback that they get and comply with what their audience requires from them. Complying with their audience needs is an important aspect of conforming as a strategy to maintain legitimacy, because following industry standards and seeing what works and whatnot can help an organization stay up to date with the industry and not fall behind in an environment where everything is rapidly changing.

## 5.2 Decoupling

The second strategy that the organizations in Offside Press AB use to maintain legitimacy is decoupling. *Decoupling* is the strategy of conforming superficially to appear legitimate to external audiences while protecting the core activities of the organization (Suddaby et al, 2017). **Rather than chasing trends or traffic, Skriva, Offside and Filter focus on deep, distinctive editorial identities that set them apart in a crowded media environment.** Decoupling in Offside, Skriva and Filter manifests in two approaches: **Establishing their niche and resisting time pressure to prioritize storytelling rather than speed.**

Skriva is clear on their approach by focusing on a clear niche and not following wider market trends. They have a clear goal of writing journals about writers, aspiring authors and people who are generally invested in literature. Interviewee 7 explained *“There are newspapers and magazines about reading and literature and so on, but nothing that focuses solely on writing. So that's the thematic niche and then it has turned out that it works quite well digitally, in all our magazines there is a gradual transition in that direction”*. - Interviewee 7. Skriva makes it very clear that this form of writing is their core. They do not plan to change the content that they cover in their journals, because they have found a niche that works for them and there is no reason to adapt to the rest of the industry, where journals try to cover as much as they can. This form of decoupling works well for the organization, because it also relates to what their audience wants and expects from them.

Offside is explicit about avoiding the pressures of mainstream coverage. As one of the interviewees shared, *“For example, we don't have to write a line about the World Cup of football if we don't want to.”* - Interviewee 2. Offside makes it clear that their choice of what they write about is the most important aspect of how they approach writing their magazines. This may sound a bit counter intuitive, because, for example, the World Cup is the biggest event in football and most magazines would instantly take the opportunity to write about an event that happened during that. However, what Offside is looking for is stories that are rarely covered. Interviewee 1 further reinforces that point by saying: *“We can skip writing about things we don't want to write about. We are just looking for good stories.”* Even though the industry standard is writing about the hottest trending topics, Offside

actively chooses to avoid that. An advantage that this can provide for them is creating a brand identity. By sticking to what their core writing philosophy is, Offside sets expectations on their audience which allow them to be unique in their field, while still being a trustworthy magazine. Offside is very clear about the journals being interesting as their main goal and they want to be satisfied with them themselves before considering releasing it to the general public.

Similarly, Filter defines its identity by rejecting the metrics-driven logic of digital media. An interviewee explained: *"We can't replace a daily newspaper or people's general broad flow of information. What we're going to do is find a twist on things, we're going to find a unique or smarter angle on things. [...] but it has to be smart, and the reader has to be surprised. If we stop being surprising, we have no reason to exist."* - Interviewee 4. The emphasis here is on originality and quality over volume or virality. Filter acknowledges that their goal is not to replace a local newspaper or any mainstream news sites. They stick to what is their strong suit, which is finding different twists and critical angles to incorporate in their storytelling. For Filter, the surprise factor is what matters more than the size of the story that they are covering.

All three journals highlight that niche positioning **is not about appealing to everyone**. It's about building a loyal audience that values their distinct editorial perspective. **In doing so, they decouple from dominant digital media logic and assert their cultural legitimacy on their own terms**. The second approach of decoupling that they take is **resisting time pressure to prioritize storytelling rather than speed**.

At Filter, the editorial team is aware of how time constraints shape digital publishing but chooses to push back against them. Interviewee 4 explained: *"The magazine is made very slowly. That's how we've always worked, even if it's not how people do it digitally. That tempo has value, and we think the readers notice that."* Even though digitalization puts emphasis on fast and relevant news, Filter explicitly chooses to stick with their slow writing for multiple reasons. First, slow writing is essentially their strength when it comes to how they produce their journals. Putting emphasis on taking time to write high quality stories allows them to deliver what the audience is looking for. They see slow writing as an advantage rather than a disadvantage and their readers get what they expect. Interviewee 6 further enhances the point by mentioning: *"We work incredibly slowly compared to a newsroom. When I worked in newsrooms, you could often interview a person and write a story in about an hour. Here at Filter, it can take us a whole day to write a text, and that's when things move fastest."* They resist the fast-writing pressure, which is not what people generally expect from commercial news outlets, however this slow writing is exactly what the audience is used to, which is important, because shifting away from this practice could in itself raise questions and could put their legitimacy at jeopardy.

Similarly, Offside takes pride in its careful pace, positioning slowness as a feature rather than a flaw. As Interviewee 2 described it: *"We're a luxury magazine. People take their time with it. We can't rush something out just to be on time, we need to feel good about it."* An interesting connection we can see here is that they

connect slow writing with luxury, which is a clever way to create a strong brand identity. In this case, slow writing is a strength for the organization, rather than a weakness compared to other competitors. To further enhance the point of this strategy being part of decoupling, one of the core values that seems to be part of Offside is that they want to feel good about what they write, instead of posting just to be on time. This seems to be their way of balancing two external pressures that could arise from their audience, producing magazines at a certain time and writing quality stories for their audience, where the priority is clearly on writing quality stories.

Meanwhile, Skriva emphasizes what the other magazines have said when it comes to resisting time pressure to prioritize quality. According to Interviewee 7: *“Neither we nor our sister magazines live in a world where they have to fight to be the fastest or the first to publish something. So, it's not really an issue for us.”* When it comes to resisting time pressure, all of the magazines take a very similar approach within one another. Slow writing, to prioritize quality over speed seems to be a value core for all of them, and they do not want to change it in order to conform with the “fit” that is set by the industry. While they do appear like a general magazine, Offside, Filter and Skriva have certain practices that they do differently from the rest, which is what allows them to be unique to their audience and maintain legitimacy in the long run.

### 5.3 Performing

Performing is demonstrating the technical prowess of an innovative practice (Suddaby et al. 2017). In the case of Offside, Filter and Skriva, Performing comes in the approach of **leveraging AI for data gathering and illustrations**. While maintaining strong editorial standards, magazines like Skriva and Filter are cautiously (AI) into their workflows but not to replace human creativity, instead to support and enhance it in targeted ways.

At Skriva, AI is used specifically for visual production. As Interviewee 7 explained, *“We have done it a bit to support illustrations.”* They further elaborate how they use it within compliance with Swedish regulations. Out of the three journals, Skriva uses AI the least and in a tame way. AI usage in this case is just a replacement of a mundane task, rather than taking over an editorial job or story writing.

At Offside, when asked about the usage of AI Interviewee 1 responded with: *“We have used AI quite a lot, such as when we recently did a reader survey [...] and in order to be able to read the data in this survey more quickly, we used some AI tools such as Chat GPT”*. Offside Press AB is not against fully resisting technology but using it smartly in order to improve existing processes. The organization chooses technological tools that support, instead of letting it take over the work that is done by humans.

Filter takes a broader view, employing AI across several backend and planning functions. Interviewee 6 quotes: *“I use AI quite a lot in my work, partly to help*

with search optimisation, short headlines and preambles etc. I also use AI to summarise things I've written.” Furthermore, Interviewee 5 mentions another use of AI in Filter: “[...] who is our Art Director here at the editorial office, can use AI when sketching cover ideas, for example. [...] For ideas like this, AI is a great tool to use.” These applications help streamline production while keeping the storytelling of their journal completely human led. Together, these examples show a trend of pragmatic experimentation, where AI serves as a back-end aid or creative sketching tool rather than a replacement for editorial voice.

Strategies	Approaches	Offside	Filter	Skriva
Conforming	Moving content from analog to digital.	- Creating their own website and podcasts. - Reducing the number of printed issues to 4 a year.	- Transitioning into a mainly digital newsletter.	- Creating an app. - Sending digital newsletters to readers.
	Employing standard revenue models.	- Offering both paper and digital subscriptions. - Avoiding possibly unethical advertisers such as betting companies.	- Offering both paper and digital subscriptions.	- Offering both paper and digital subscriptions.
	Interacting closer with their audience.	- Free podcast. - Creating Facebook and Instagram communities.	- Using social media metrics to see what users want. - Closer communication with readers via email.	- Using social media to show 'behind the scenes' content.
Decoupling	Establishing their niche.	- Strong focus on football stories that are not mainstream. - Choosing the stories based on what they want to write about rather than how big they are.	- Heavy focus on apolitical critical writing. - Not wanting to replace daily magazines. - Unique or smarter angles on occurring events.	- Focus on producing magazines on writing. - Write mainly for aspiring authors and writers.
	Resisting time pressure to prioritize storytelling rather than speed.	- Consider themselves as a luxury magazine. - Slow writing is seen as a value to produce a good magazine.	- Very slow writing compared to a newsroom. - Slow writing matches the expectations of the readers.	- Slow writing to produce a high quality product for aspiring writers.
Performing	Leveraging AI for data gathering and illustrations	- Using AI for reading data from surveys to get feedback from readers.	- Using AI for illustrations and generating cover ideas.	- Limited use of AI, mainly for illustrations.

Figure 4. Summarisation of results

## 6 Discussion

This discussion chapter interprets the findings from our study of Offside Press AB, connecting empirical observations to theoretical concepts and broader developments in journalism. Our study addresses the question: **“How do journalistic organizations maintain legitimacy in the digital era?”**

In this study, conforming appears in three different approaches, moving content from digital to analog, employing standard revenue models and interacting closer with the audience. The change towards new formats of journalism such as websites, social media and podcasts is something that aligns with previous literature (Mangold et al., 2022). This shift from analog media to digital media is a conforming strategy, because it is just a measure to adapt to “fit” (Suddaby et al. 2017) in order to survive in the ecosystem. Without digitalization, it may have been hard for organizations to survive (Mandviwalla & Flanagan, 2021; Rios-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Moving content to digital content is something that a lot of organizations have already done and has become somewhat of a standard in journalism. Another aspect of survival is employing standard revenue models that the industry follows. Subscription based models have become a standard in journalism in the industry (Baiyere et al., 2020, Erbrich et al., 2024). This adaptation of revenue models to the digital era aligns with what previous literature has said as well. (Rios-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Jerónimo et al., 2022; Erbrich et al., 2024). This compliance with the norms, allows organizations to survive, and allows them to appear legitimate to the public’s eye (Suddaby et al, 2017).

Closer interactions with the audience, on the other hand, enabled by platforms such as social media, websites and email (Kane et al., 2014) are another way of appearing legitimate to the public eye and maintaining legitimacy. Active communities are something that journalistic organizations strive for in this day and age and social media allows for this interaction between the journalists and audience (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Why this is important to the legitimacy of the organization is that community trust is one of the main factors to view an authority as legitimate. (Suddaby et al, 2017). Direct and real time audience interaction is an important trait of new era journalism which has been studied in previous literature as well (Zahay et al., 2021). Furthermore, closer interaction with the audience creates space for closer interactions between organizations and readers. We can argue that with further community interaction, the more the population density increases, which is a measure of legitimacy as property as well (Suddaby et al, 2017). According to theory, the more an organizational form appears in a population, the more likely it is to be legitimate (Suddaby et al, 2017).

Decoupling, on the other hand, appears through two main approaches: establishing strong focus on their niche and resisting time pressure and focusing on storytelling rather than speed. Literature mentions that most news outlets track metrics such as likes, shares, and comments to determine which stories resonate most with the public (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). However, establishing a niche can be quite the opposite of that. Another aspect of digital journalism that “establishing their niche” contradicts literature in, is that journals nowadays prioritize stories that are trending online (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022). Furthermore, resisting time pressure in order to prioritize storytelling rather than speed is something that somewhat contradicts what literature mentions in the changes of journalism in digitalization. Most formats of journalism nowadays are made in a way to prioritize speed and mass production of media (Kim & Kim, 2017; Opdahl et al., 2023), so establishing a niche and resisting time pressure, are not two ways of following industry standards to achieve what is perceived as “fit” (Suddaby et al, 2017).

Lastly, performing appears through leveraging AI for data gathering and illustrations. Using this approach can accelerate tasks that otherwise would have required significant human labour (Opdahl et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous literature mentions that AI generated stories can lead to content that is provided by unclear sources and a lack of fact checking processes, which can be dangerous due to the spread of misinformation (Shirish et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Opdahl et al., 2023). Using AI purely for data gathering and illustrations can avoid these issues that the literature presents. Furthermore, in connection with previous literature, they argue that relying on automation to an excessively high degree can weaken trust in journalism (Opdahl et al., 2023). Further integration of AI may require additional policies such as proper editorial team taking care of fact checking or establishment of solid policies to avoid their human lead process that is encouraged (Davison et al., 2023).

While this study offers an analysis of legitimacy strategies within Offside Press AB, there are several limitations to our research. First, the research focuses on a single media company and its three affiliated magazines: Offside, Filter, and Skriva. All of them are small journalistic organizations, which focus specifically on their own niche. While these journals can be used to represent more similar organizations, it is still difficult to generalize these results on a bigger scale. Second, the study relies heavily on semi-structured group interviews due to time restrictions. While the group interviews allowed for a freer form of conversation, individual interviews could have produced more nuanced insights into role conflicts or tensions within the legitimacy strategies employed and personal insights to the research. Third, the research is geographically and culturally contextualized in Sweden, a country with relatively high trust in media and strong public service traditions. These institutional characteristics likely change how legitimacy is negotiated and may not be reflective of more adversarial or commercial media environments. The research does not provide data for other countries, where the context of journalism could be different. Lastly, this study offers a single time during a period of an ongoing process such as digital transformation. As technologies like AI evolve and media production and consumption ways evolve, the strategies described could change. Future research on this topic would be valuable in capturing how legitimacy practices change over time.

## 6.1 Implications for theory and practice

This study contributes to the Information Systems (IS) literature by providing an empirically grounded understanding of how digital transformation affects legitimacy in the context of journalism. While traditional IS research has explored how organizations use digital tools to improve efficiency or user engagement (Baiyere et al., 2020; Mandviwalla & Flanagan, 2021), this study emphasizes how legitimacy is maintained not only through functional adoption, strategies of how technology is used. Journalistic organizations must balance the affordances that technology provides with normative and social pressures.

Our findings illustrate that legitimacy in digital environments, besides being a matter of aligning with technological trends, but of managing the ontological implications of digital tools, as theorized by Faulkner and Runde (2019). For example, the selective use of AI for peripheral editorial tasks demonstrates how organizations use new digital tools while preserving editorial identity validating the IS insight that digital tools should be integrated within social and professional contexts, rather than being used in isolation. Additionally, even if not explicitly mentioned, by considering aspects such as platform drifting (Rahrovani, 2020) and mindful engagement with digital infrastructures (Gastaldi et al., 2023), this study extends IS theory by showing how smaller organizations manage tensions between digitizing and maintaining legitimacy while doing so. This highlights the importance of digital boundary work in legitimacy construction, a dimension often overlooked in IS studies focused on platform participation or compliance. Finally, this research connects IS and legitimacy theory by looking at digital transformation as not just an operational shift but also looking at how legitimacy is affected in this shift. As digital ecosystems evolve, organizations are compelled to constantly redefine what constitutes credible participation. The interplay between resisting automation, maintaining editorial niches, and carefully performing innovation demonstrates how digital transformation is tied to legitimacy negotiations in both symbolic and technical domains.

Based on the strategies used in this study: conforming, decoupling and performing, we provide the following recommendations for similar organizations within journalism navigating digital transformation.

First, we highly recommend that organizations take the step to **adapt to digital industry norms**. This is of high relevance if an organization wants to remain relevant and accessible. Adapting to digital industry norms includes offering digital platforms such as updated websites, apps, podcasts, and also following revenue models like hybrid subscription options which include both print and digital. It's also important for these types of organizations to be active on social media platforms and use tools like digital newsletters and or emails to help organizations build stronger relationships with their audience, which helps strengthen the organization's legitimacy and credibility. **Second, we suggest that organizations protect their core editorial identity and do so by focusing on a distinct niche and avoiding the outside pressure that exists to constantly follow trends or produce content at high speed.** Organizations can benefit from prioritizing quality storytelling and maintain a slower more thoughtful pace of publishing. This approach helps when it comes to building credibility and differentiates an organization in an increasingly crowded digital media landscape. Third, we highly recommend that similar organizations to Offside Press AB integrate **AI tools in a supportive way**, using these tools to assist with tasks such as data analysis, summarizations and visual material. But it is of the highest importance that the core journalistic work, like editorial judgement, storytelling and fact-checking remains firmly in the hands of journalists. This to ensure legitimacy and integrity of the content that is published.

These recommendations that we have provided can support similar journalistic organizations like Offside Press AB in balancing adapting to the digital, while still

preserving editorial values. So that similar organizations can stay both competitive and safeguard both their legitimacy and credibility in today's media environment.

## 7 Conclusion

This discussion has critically examined how Offside Press AB navigates the challenges of digital transformation by using legitimacy strategies of conforming, decoupling, and performing. Each strategy showcases different strategies of how legitimacy is as a property happens in an organization and how it is maintained in the long run (Suddaby et al., 2017). In conclusion the strategies presented demonstrate that legitimacy in journalism today is not only earned by sticking to a single logic or a particular model. Instead, legitimacy is maintained through a flexible multi faceted balancing act where it is of the highest importance that journals keep on adapting enough to stay relevant within their field, while also resisting enough to preserve the specific journals core identity.

In this case study, Offside Press AB exemplifies with their three magazines how smaller publications can sustain credibility in today's digital landscape by making deliberate and value driven decisions and choices across multiple spheres. Lastly, we argue that this nuanced understanding contributes to everything within the broader literature connected to media transformation, professional autonomy and institutional adaptation. But it also provides a conceptual framework for how other journalistic organizations can deal with the question "**How do journalism organizations maintain legitimacy in the era of digitalization?**". This study aims to provide answers in the specific case of *Offside Press AB* and possible research opportunities on a bigger scale and different contexts.

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# 9 Appendices

## Interview Guide

**Question 1: What is your role in the organization?**

**Question 2: How is the organization you work for different from others, what is the organization's niche?**

**Question 3: When was the moment your organization decided to go digital? How does that change your work? (ask if they use AI or not)**

**Question 4: How important is digitalization for your organization? (Is it possible for a small journal like Offside/Filter/Skriva to survive? And could Offside/Filter/Skriva have survived if it wasn't for the digital transformation the magazine went through?)**

**Question 5: This digital transformation, how has it affected the relationship with your customer/subscribers?**

**Question 6: What role does social media play for Offside/Filter/Skriva?**

**Question 7: How do you address the tension between having accurate news and the need to publish it very fast? (How does Offside/Filter/Skriva ensure all stories are fully fact-checked)**

**Question 8: Could a Claas Relotius-like case threaten the journal's credibility, and does digital transformation make such risks more or less likely?**

**Question 9: Has digitization changed journalistic ethics for you? If yes, in what ways?**

**Question 10: Is there something you want to share with us that we have not captured in the interview?**