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RECEIVED 30 October 2025

REVISED 23 January 2026

ACCEPTED 27 January 2026

PUBLISHED 19 February 2026

CITATION

Rizzuto F (2026) Journalists' perspectives on the presence of hate speech in Italian local news media: counter-hate speech strategies and risks.
Front. Commun. 11:1735958.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2026.1735958

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Journalists' perspectives on the presence of hate speech in Italian local news media: counter-hate speech strategies and risks

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The article proposes a reflection on the contemporary Italian news media system, which is facing the threat of fostering a powerful 'hate factory', connected to the pervasive and planetary practices of divisive news construction and sharing through the social media. Recent studies have pointed out both an increase of lexical choices based on hate or verbal violence in Italian news coverage (above all referring to women and migrants) and of threats and insults against news professionals. Therefore, in the contemporary media system news media actors are challenged to find innovative strategies to face insulting and hate in the digital agora created by online platforms and transformed by AI. Through 10 in-depth interviews with local media news professionals, this study analyses the presence of hate speech against local journalists in Italy and its influence both on their informative practices and on their private life. In the study concrete actions against hate speech are also presented, aiming at underlining that Italian local journalists are daily involved to combat hate speech at an individual level with personal and legal risks.

KEYWORDS

counterhate strategies, hate speech, Italian journalism, local journalism, online hate speech, social media

1 Introduction. Social media and online violence: a theoretical framework

In a social context where the dimensions of uncertainty and insecurity coexist and are tragically exacerbated by wars and the disruption of the geopolitical balances of the 20th century, the contemporary digital agora is pervaded by the proliferation of online threats and hate speech in a communication short-circuit, capable of spreading and exponentially multiplying negative and divisive contents and fostering an uncontrolled dissemination of false information in order to activate emotional opinion dynamics (Papacharissi, 2015; Corner, 2017; De Blasio and Selva, 2019; Balzerani, 2019). This study seeks to investigate the role of social media in news production and how they influence journalistic practices at the local level, focusing on the hate speech directed at journalists in Italian local media and the actions undertaken by journalists to counter these attacks.

The research is based on the assumption that the pervasive spread of hate speech has been accelerated by the recent transformation of Italian media market (AGCOM, 2025), characterized by hybridization process (Splendore, 2023; Solito and Sorrentino, 2023), the rise of fragmented public spheres (Sorice, 2023), and the increasing use of social media in journalistic practices (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2025; Molino, 2025). The digital revolution

brought about the dismantling of the traditional news organizations and relevant changes in professional logic, due to new ways of interacting with readers the presence of digital media has increasingly changed not only the amount of available information, but also the traditional forms of interaction among citizens, groups, and institutions, which has had different national declinations and several models. In the hybrid media ecosystem (Chadwick, 2013), one of the most significant risks is that individuals may uncritically accept a representation of reality based on ideological distortions and disinformation practices that polarize public debate. Therefore, it is useful to reflect on the dynamics of the relationship between the content disseminated on platforms and a violent or uncivil behavior, not only in the public sphere but also in private interactions, since these changes challenge both political and professional actors to find innovative and effective ways to face hate speech at a legislative and a cultural level.

The infosphere is now dominated by the 'opaque' algorithms elaborated by the platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Nielsen and Ganter, 2022), which are private, transnational companies, based on the logic of profit and often operating in a context with "few rules" (Gillespie, 2018; Fuchs, 2020), with little or no attention to the risks of the disinformation strategies or viralization of harmful fake news (Iretton and Posetti, 2018; Zerilli, 2023). These factors are strongly influencing our democratic architectures (Persily and Tucker, 2020; Chambers, 2021), more and more threatened by a "new" opacity of the borders between freedom of expression and the need to limit manipulation of information flows as well as violent contents, spread by communication practices characterized by brevity, conciseness and preferring a rigidly binary logic (us/them).

The topic of hate speech and its ties with the rise of social media points to some difficulties since both its theoretical definition as well as practical and legal regulations seem inadequate. One of the most relevant problems has been the definition itself: the tension inherent in this concept derives from its opaqueness (definitions are often considered vague or contradictory), and from the fact that the framing tends to be emotional and tinged with a moral tenor. Moreover, as Hietanen and Eddebo (2022) underlined, the notion of hate speech builds upon very old legal traditions, and it is strictly dependent on the peculiar interpretations of freedom of speech in different national contexts. It changes over time and in relation to factors such as national laws, international documents, social media self-regulation codes. Although there is no universally shared definition of hate speech, European institutions have tried to establish its boundaries in a series of documents and legislative initiatives (European Parliament, 2020), focusing on the content and on the targeted victims, like the "EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online", signed in 2016 and implemented in 2025 to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online.

In this study it is used the definition of hate speech proposed by ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) in 2015 which included «advocacy, promotion or incitement, in any form whatsoever, to the denigration, hatred or defamation of any person or group of persons, as well as any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat against that person or group of people and the justification of all the foregoing types of expression, whether on grounds of race, color, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status» (ECRI, 2015).

Literature has addressed online hate speech from a variety of perspectives: the academic discourse on this topic (Costello and

Hawdon, 2020; Alkiviadou, 2018; Paz et al., 2020) reveals its controversial nature (Brown, 2018), and that it is problematic to correctly determine what can be accepted as free speech (Cohen-Almagor 2005; Slagle, 2009; Nicita, 2025). Consequently, the definition of hate speech must also include "identifying the conditions that make different types of content more or less harmful and determining a threshold beyond which hate speech would be intolerable online" (Ieracitano et al., 2024, p. 26). Moreover, the spread of hate and verbal violence must be connected to the presence of many geopolitical and cultural factors that have led to an increase in propaganda, polarization (Marino and Iannelli, 2023), heightening the risk of radicalization and violent extremism in many national contexts. For example, the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine impacted the EU's internal security landscape in the last three years, acting as major catalysts for violent extremist narratives and propaganda and eroding European democracies (Heinze, 2016; Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021; Bennett and Kneuer, 2023).

Assuming that the spread of various forms of verbal violence is present in different national contexts (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017), the focus of this study is on the configuration of the contemporary media ecosystem as a powerful 'hate factory' in Italy, a context which remains underrepresented in this area of research, underlying the dangers for a historically *peculiar* informative system (Murialdi, 2014; Hallin and Mancini, 2021; Mazzoleni, 2021). Bentivegna and Boccia (2021) noted that "the communicative practices enabled by online platforms, together with a militant and widespread opposition to the élites, represent the fuel that spreads aggressive speeches by citizens" (Bentivegna and Boccia, 2021, p. 13). Recent studies have pointed out an increase both of lexical choices based on hate in Italian news coverage (Vox. Osservatorio Italiano sui diritti, 2025) and of attacks against journalists (Ossigeno per l'Informazione, 2025): these data confirm that Italian news professionals must face the problematic interaction between the concrete possibilities for users of producing and spreading verbal attacks or hate speech, and the need to protect themselves as well as other individuals, especially the most vulnerable. As a matter of fact, subtle and pervasive psychological violence, potentially coming from any user through social media, does not only alter the traditional communication circuits of representative democracies, leading to an increasingly marked tendency towards polarization, but, at an individual level, may negatively affect the perception of reality of the victim-target of personal attacks, profoundly compromising their sense of security and social relationships (Harvey, 2021).

Previous studies have offered insights into how social networks affect journalism in different national contexts, underlining the relevance of algorithms in the selection of topics, which brings about a radical change in the relationship between journalists and audiences and transforms newsrooms daily work. One of the main objects of interest in this field is the digital harassment of women journalists: in different national contexts, scholars analysed the presence of an aggressive discourse against journalists disseminated on social networks, focusing on the case of women who are targets of online harassment, death threats, the disclosure of personal data, or gender-based violence (Rego, 2018; Cuellar and Chaheer, 2021; Rees, 2023; Al-Rawi, 2023; International Women's Media Foundation, 2025). According to Pena-Fernandez et al. (2025), "hate speech directed at women journalists can be considered to be a specific type of harassment that includes sexist or misogynistic comments via which they are criticized, attacked, marginalized, stereotyped, or threatened on the basis of their gender or sexuality" (Pena-Fernandez et al., 2025, p. 3).

Literature shows a growing body of research examining the impact of sensationalisation on news, associated with the increasing presence of social media in the post-truth cultural context (McIntyre, 2018; Marinov, 2020; Joux, 2023): through algorithmic mechanisms the search for dramatic and spectacular conflicts among opposing opinions, their ability to arouse emotions and the tendency for the supremacy of one's own point of view are encouraged. This model oriented towards the legitimacy of all opinions is increasingly imposing on the editorial logic of information: consequently, by transforming reality into a controversy, for which it is necessary to elaborate positioning choices in the chaos of multiple truths, journalists tend to give space to all versions of a story. The main risks are that news professionals may become targets of attacks or contribute to give visibility to counter-narratives that are false, but which nevertheless compete. In Italy the journalistic infotainment logic has become predominant from the 90s, with the commercial national televisions owned by Silvio Berlusconi (Rizzuto, 2019): in the context of platforms it has found new life, and strengthened the process of pathemization, fostering plausible and trivializing narratives, in which the objective reporting of facts becomes less relevant than the ability to arouse strong emotions (Thussu, 2007; Salmon, 2008; Cappello and Rizzuto, 2024). Acting alongside the growing prevalence of market logic in the Italian information system, all these factors have strengthened tendencies toward a spectacular representation of reality, and accelerated narrative practices based on the use of the emotional factor as a lens to select events and report them (Papacharissi, 2015). This constant use of emotions presents several challenges: undoubtedly, a predominantly emotional communication circuit allows attention and consensus in the platformized public sphere more easily and without intermediaries (Sorice, 2023). However, preferring the emotional component may conduct journalists to the detriment of informational-cognitive methods, making more problematic understanding issues or priorities for users/citizens, while, on the political side, appeals to emotions are increasingly used by Italian leaders to motivate or create favorable attitudes in more and more volatile electorates, now detached from traditional affiliations (Mazzoleni, 2021; Hallin and Mancini, 2021).

This study assumes that the digital age presents new elements, which have altered communication circuits and social interactions (Chadwick, 2013), fragmenting information flows and multiplying the number of actors capable of producing and disseminating news. Undoubtedly, from a merely deterministic perspective, the current peculiarities of platforms seem to favor “deep transformations in public debate, which has increasingly become an occasion for conflict and positioning rather than confrontation and discussion” (Bentivegna and Boccia, 2021). For Tumber and Waisbord (2021), digital media ecosystems “are conducive to the kind of polarized, anti-rational, post-fact, post-truth communication” (p. 1), which has fostered populist leaders in many Western countries. Nevertheless, as an essential premise, it is useful to avoid the mistake of adopting an interpretative approach characterized by a superficial communicative *reductionism* (Barisione, 2020), which absolves both political actors and media companies from responsibility, considering the global development of social media as the unique cause of the profound crisis of Western democratic systems. On the contrary, it is evident that there are numerous extra-media factors in the global scene, as well as in Italy, where phenomena such as voters' abstention or the success of various forms of populism can be explained also in connection with social and political processes dating back to pre-social media contexts, like the

end of traditional ideological mass parties and the success of infotainment logic in journalism (Mazzoleni, 2021). From this perspective, political actors and journalists must be considered as co-responsible for the process of spreading hate and verbal violence, through divisive discursive practices in everyday interactions. In addition, all the contemporary concrete possibilities of digital manipulation of information, exponentially multiplied by AI technologies, can foster, even in democratic systems, the creation of illiberal public spheres, where social media play as central actors and citizens are immersed in a hyper-fragmented ecosystem, connected to the structural logic of algorithms so that people “see what they want to see or what an algorithm believes that they are interested in seeing” (Chambers, 2021, p. 148). This inevitably creates biases which often promote the rise of hatred incitement and foster “political incivility” (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024) or the spread of disinformation (García and Oleart, 2024). In other words, the pervasiveness of online violence and hate speech can be seen as one of the most dangerous global outcomes of planned efforts to build enemies and fuel hatred against them, propagated primarily through narratives spread on social media: stories shared online daily offer models of hate, which trigger a dangerous emotional contagion. In this debate, the concept of “fringe democracy” (Boccia Artieri et al., 2025) has recently raised the issue of the problematic growing visibility of illiberal marginal groups in digital spaces, where hate speech and extremist opinions are normalized (Schulze et al., 2022), bringing about dangerous consequences for democratic participation mechanisms (Citron, 2014; Quandt, 2018) and challenging the traditional meaning of the social role of journalism (Citron and Norton, 2011; Cheruiyot, 2024; Hastuti et al., 2025).

The next section begins with an overview of the most recent transformations of the Italian informative system, describing the process of digitization and its main consequences on journalism, both at an economic and at a reputational level. The following pages offer a reflection on the dynamics at work between the logic of platforms and their impact on journalistic practices, focusing on Italian local news media: the contemporary critical conditions of local media market are presented, underlining how they affect journalists' work, forcing them to stay online and become more exposed.

2 The case study: Italian local media and hate speech

2.1 Journalism and platforms in Italy: a genetic transformation of the media market

In the last decade, Italian journalism has been deeply changed by the process of digitization, which brought about an economic and a reputational crisis of TV and print journalism: as Splendore (2023) pointed out, a process of systemic hybridization emerged as a distinctive trait of Italian journalism, which is both the result of the dismantling of the traditional news organizations and the consequence of relevant changes in professional logic due to new ways of interacting with readers.

According to Reuters Digital Report 2025, in the Italian media market new balances among different owners and new information sources are emerging, with relevant consequences for journalism (on channels, on contents and on revenues): traditional media and social

networks coexist and, while legacy news organizations dominated the online news market for many years, from 2022 the main TV broadcasters and the most important newspapers have been surpassed by digital-born players and digital advertising revenues have become predominant (AGCOM, 2025). Observing different sources of data, recent developments in the press sector highlight the ongoing challenges facing traditional print media (Mangani, 2024). TV news use has stabilized after years of decline, while print continues to shrink, and online news shows a modest drop compared to previous years. Moreover, International tech companies like Google, Meta, and Netflix dominate online revenues, challenge domestic traditional media players, while the rapid rise of digital platforms is changing news producing and consumption (Rizzuto, 2023). In addition, relevant changes in Italians' information habits show that new trends in news consumption now coexist with some traditional peculiarities of this media system: for example, from 2013 to 2025 television as source of news has declined 74 to 65%; print newspapers have fallen from 59 to 12% while social media have risen from 27 to 39% (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2025, p. 93). Consequently, a traditionally "weak" and politicized profession must face new challenges, since different logics and practices have been redefining not only the news values, but also the concepts of news professionals and audience (Solito and Sorrentino, 2023).

The use of different technological tools, the pervasiveness of social media in the daily experiences of individuals as well as the growing influence of search engines have been indicated as the main factors of a *genetic transformation* in the Italian context of news production, traditionally dominated by a strong political parallelism, so that, for decades, Italian journalists had produced news mainly for political leaders rather than for ordinary readers/citizens (Hallin and Mancini, 2021; Mazzoleni, 2021). Only from the 90s the market logic became central for the Italian information system, due to the success of commercial private televisions: one of the most relevant consequences was that the emotional logic became predominant in news, adopting a dramatizing perspective. In the new *emotainment* informative products (Santos, 2009), journalistic narration of reality is focused on the ability to capture audience's attention and, consequently, dramatic and conflictual component of events are privileged (Marinov, 2020; Rizzuto, 2019). In sum, the "digital revolution" has transformed the journalistic field, favoring the transition from traditional sequential processes (selection, verification, hierarchization, presentation, fruition) to a de-spatialized simultaneity, in which production, distribution and consumption are inexorably intertwined.

2.2 Crisis of credibility for journalism

The presence of social networks strongly impacted on Italian news professionals, in terms of compression of time, speed of communicative flows, availability of information, but also on the perceived meaning of their traditional role. However, the recent drastic crisis of the social significance of Italian journalism cannot be attributed exclusively to the radical changes of the media market brought about by digital technologies. Once again, the changes in the profession and its social perception must be read in connection with the cultural context, now characterized by the predominance of a problematic irrelevance of the boundary between truth and plausibility (Corner, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Joux, 2023), as well as with the new political Italian landscape, radically changed after 2022 elections. Therefore, it can be argued that in contemporary Italian journalism a new declination of

the interpenetration between the logic of entertainment and participation can be traced, which, by giving greater and greater importance to the emotional component, is contributing to the decline in credibility of traditional mediation actors, as authoritative and reliable sources of truth. In the perspective proposed by Solito and Sorrentino (2023), the legitimacy of the credibility of Italian journalism has been modified: while it historically resided in its ability to guarantee a "public service," they argue that there is the risk of a potential collapse of the gatekeeping function in a context where many non-professional journalists have greater space in news selection and production practices, linked to the pervasiveness of the smartphone (García-Orosa et al., 2020; Solito and Sorrentino, 2020).

Many reports (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2025) show that social media are increasingly used by Italians as the central axis and source of information and that journalists have incorporated social networks into their work as a tool to produce and disseminate information more efficiently and to be connected more directly to their audiences. In this context, the proliferation of online verbal attacks poses concrete risks not only at an institutional level (to counter them), but also for the informative profession, since its reputational crisis, added to the online violent flows, may favour the general loss of trust in the news media ability to "report" facts as (Zelizer, 2009; McIntyre, 2018), as data confirm: in Italy trust in news remains relatively low at 36% (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2025), confirming the collapse of the traditional relationship between Italian journalists and their audience, historically based on ideological belongings and party proximity (Hallin and Mancini, 2021; Mazzoleni, 2021).

2.3 National media vs. local media in Italy: trends in 2024–2025. Towards an information desert

In Italy, there is a broader discussion concerning the state and the viability of local media outlets: even if policymakers and industry professionals recognize the importance of sustaining local independent media for the sake of democracy and pluralism, experts describe their contemporary conditions as critical. The historical presence of local media (municipal, provincial, regional, or multi-regional) is diminishing above all for technological and economic factors: consequently, local media outlets must compete for a significantly declining source of revenue, while most media activities have shifted online. The incessant crisis of Italian print national and local newspapers is evident if we look at the data produced by ADS (Associazione Diffusione Stampa) and AGCOM, which show that the decline in sales of the local newspaper segment has been even more severe: from January to April 2025 total national print copies were approximately 95 million (51.8 million sold by national newspapers and 42.7 million by local ones) and local newspapers represent almost half of total print copies (45%), but at significantly lower levels than in previous years. In comparison with 2024, print sales fell by 8.0%, even if the local newspapers lost 8.8% and the national ones 7.3%: therefore, the decline is more relevant in the local areas, affecting regional and provincial newspapers, small entities that have traditionally generated overall volumes, even higher than those of the most important national newspapers. In addition, the crisis of local distribution channels and the decrease of the number of local television and radio stations (after the switch-over between 2008 and 2012) are contributing to a structural decline in Italian local news coverage (AGCOM Osservatorio sulle

comunicazioni 2025). Therefore, data confirm the progressive disappearance of many local media, whose contraction is also affecting the digital segment: in 2025 local digital copies fell from 4.8 million to 4.4 million (−8.3%) and this reduction in revenues, brought about a consequent decrease in human resources. As The European Report on News Deserts (CMPF/EUI, 2024) underlined, in 2024 in Italy there were approximately −50% local journalists in comparison with 2008/2009, producing the typical conditions of the so-called *information desert*: territories and communities where access to reliable, continuous, and pluralistic local news becomes irregular or not sufficient (Mangani and Pacini, 2022).

2.4 More exposure and more risks for journalists

As editorial resources and coverage decline, daily accurate reporting about government, healthcare, justice, and environment ends: the most problematic consequence is that the agenda shifts toward press releases and spokespeople, with less independent fact checking and a greater standardization of sources. In this context, public conversations migrate to local social networks platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, where fragments, rumors, and polarized contents freely circulate, without a professional editorial control. When resources become scarcer, journalists are increasingly forced to “stay online” and smaller newsrooms and cumulative tasks reduce time for investigative journalism, while the individual visibility of reporters increases: therefore, the greater presence on social networks implies heavier workload and heightens public exposure and exacerbates professional risks, up to harassment of journalists. The most recent data confirm an increase in the number of attacks against Italian journalists: in 2024, *Ossigeno per l'Informazione* recorded 516 targeted Italian journalists, + 3.2% in comparison with 500 in 2023; moreover, the *Ministry of the Interior's Coordination Center* recorded 114 acts of intimidation in 2024 (+16%), with an increase in the online component as well (37 incidents, compared to 30 in 2023) (Vigevani et al., 2025) and 81 incidents of intimidation against journalists were recorded from January to June in 2025 (+76% compared to the same semester in 2024). Within this quantitative increase, three out of four cases were from social media posts (*Ossigeno per l'Informazione*, 2025), confirming that digital exposure is now one of the main vectors through which hostility is manifested and calling for more critical reflection on journalistic vulnerability.

3 Research questions

The literature review has shown a growing body of research examining the presence of social media in the informative practices as well as an increase of online hate speech. While previous studies have addressed journalists' perceptions in different national contexts, in Italy there are limited insights on how local journalists interpret the role of social media in news practices, the presence of hate speech and how they face digital hostility.

To address this gap, the research questions refer to following three thematic macro-areas: (1) the impact of social networks on journalistic practices in Italian local news media; (2) the presence of hate speech and its influence on journalists and on their work; (3) concrete actions to find strategies against insulting and hate in the digital *agora*.

The research questions (RQs) were:

RQ1: In Italian local news media how is the presence of social media understood and recognized at a theoretical level and in practice? Which is the relationship between journalists and their audiences?

RQ2: Which is the connection between the benefits coming from the use of platforms and the presence of hate speech or verbal violence? How does it impact on the professionals? Is gender a factor in online harassment?

RQ3: Which are the actions to counteract hate speech? Are they institutionalized at a newsroom level or individually promoted? Are European and Italian laws considered as adequate to face hate speech?

4 Methods

This article is based on an exploratory study, one of the first to investigate Italian local journalists' perspectives on hate speech in news-related online environments. The study employs a qualitative research design based on 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with journalists working in Italian local media (Strauss, 1987).

4.1 Participants

The participants were 10 local journalists working in print and television news organizations who were regularly involved in digital publishing and audience interaction. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure variation in professional role, length of experience, and organizational context. Interviews were conducted between August and September 2025. All participants were between 26 and 61 years of age: five respondents were born before 1980 and five after 1980. The sample included five men and five women. Their professional experience ranged from 5 to 35 years. All participants had personal social media accounts and also used social media through their news organizations' platforms. Respondents held different professional roles within local media organizations, including editors, editors-in-chief, and reporters. For the sake of simplicity, all participants are referred to as “journalists” throughout the article. They worked for different types of organizations, including four newspapers, five television broadcasters, and one freelance journalist, collaborating with local media outlets. At the time of the interviews, all respondents were employed by regional commercial and private media organizations not affiliated with national media corporations, political parties, or public broadcasters. Regional editions of national media were excluded from the sample. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min. Interviews were conducted in Italian, the native language of both the participants and the researcher, with informed consent and were fully transcribed. The excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by the author. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality. To protect their identities, all respondents were anonymized in the transcripts and subsequent analysis. Quotations are identified using “M” for male journalists and “W” for female journalists, followed by a numerical code (e.g., M1, W2).

4.2 Data collection and analysis

The interview guide explored journalists' use of social media in news production, their exposure to online hate speech, the professional and personal consequences of such exposure, and the individual and institutional strategies adopted to face it. A qualitative pattern-matching strategy was employed for data analysis (Yin, 2018), which is particularly suitable for theory-driven qualitative research. Pattern matching involves the systematic comparison of empirically observed patterns emerging from the data with theoretically expected patterns derived from existing literature. Expected patterns were defined prior to and during the initial phases of analysis, drawing on research on the digitization of Italian journalism and online hate speech targeting journalists. Previous studies indicate that, in the Italian context, social media have substantially transformed journalistic practices, the news market, and relationships with audiences, while simultaneously increasing journalists' exposure to online hate speech. On this basis, expected patterns included the framing of online hate speech as both a professional and personal risk, the use of editorial, technical, or institutional countermeasures, and assessments of the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks. The analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage process. First, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. Second, transcripts were coded using a combination of deductive codes derived from the expected patterns and inductive codes emerging from participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding focused on journalists' descriptions of social media use, experiences of online hate speech, perceived risks, and counter strategies. In a subsequent step, codes were grouped into higher-order themes representing empirically observed patterns, such as editorial practices, the normalization of hate speech in local contexts, and risk-avoidance strategies. These empirical patterns were then systematically compared with the theoretically expected patterns. Areas of convergence and divergence were examined to refine interpretations and strengthen the analytical contribution of the study.

5 Materials and discussion

The main findings are shown below for the three macro thematic areas investigated, and significant excerpts from the interviews are quoted in the text.

5.1 A Copernican revolution for journalism

The interviewed journalists point out that in the last decade the use of social networks has become a daily practice in their professional work, also in local reporting: they describe the use of platforms as a structural phenomenon and argue that *"it radically changed the way of being a reporter"* (W2) and that it is not possible to avoid them as sources of information. In general, it emerges that the social networks are used for several professional needs in the newsmaking process, but respondents express ambivalent opinions, arguing that there are both advantages and disadvantages, bringing about a strong psychological pressure on their daily work which produces negative consequences. In many local newsrooms social media have become a natural extension of journalistic work, using not only the profiles of the media

outlets, but also the personal accounts of the journalists, as it is clear from the following extract:

"Social media have become essential to reach readers or potential new readers who increasingly rely more on them rather than traditional websites. I usually repost my articles both on my personal account and on the institutional accounts of the editorial team I work with. In addition, I use social media extensively to stay updated on events that aren't organized by institutions or associations and therefore remain outside of traditional press channels, like spontaneous demonstrations or strikes" (M3).

This daily use of social networks means that journalists inextricably link their private sphere to their professional work, using both the "institutional" accounts of the newspaper/television they work for and their personal ones for different professional practices like, for example,

"To monitor reports, verify facts, contact sources, disseminate articles, as well as to express critical perspectives. I manage both my personal accounts, which I use when I need to be a free voice, to intervene into a public debate as well as to counter hate speech, or to stimulate conversations. In other words, I've learned to use these tools as strategic levers, not just "means." (W3).

Interviewed journalists use both institutional and personal accounts to achieve a much better connection with their audiences, to interact more directly with them in a shared space: they are allowed to have real-time feedback on news products as well as to identify current trends, implementing cross-media experiences during live broadcasts where it is possible to read listeners' comments and react to them. Therefore, social media let news professionals have:

"A rapid access to direct sources that would otherwise remain invisible; the ability to give visibility to stories that no one would want to touch; and the professional support networks that are built (colleagues, NGOs). Social media can amplify marginalized voices and bring attention to hidden pain. The fundamental advantage is having new methods to gather news as well as photos and video contributions. Another advantage may be that, to a certain extent, the distance with the reader has been shortened" (M3).

Respondents point out that they operate in a radically changed informative context and clearly outline the distinction between the traditional professional duty of verifying each informative *pill* they propose to their audiences, and a "new" influence on news values coming from social media users they are connected to. From this perspective, they underline that growing digital information has stimulated the acquisition of new skills not only at an individual level, but also in their news organizations, where the social networks are now fully institutionalized instruments in many phases of the journalistic routines rather than a simple "integration" of the traditional professional practices. Therefore, they show to understand the importance of the presence of the social media both a theoretical level and in practice, and point out that the main consequence is the transformation of some pillars in traditional news making:

"The changes are enormous. Before: truth, relevance, in-depth analysis. Now: immediacy, emotional impact, engagement. The

question has become “how fast” and “how far does it reach,” rather than “how verified” or “how useful.” A paradigm is emerging in which virality becomes the main news value. And it might destroy everything else: quality, depth, context. I’ve seen in local investigations that certain stories do not have visibility not because they are unimportant, but because they do not generate enough immediate clicks” (W3).

In other words, all the interviewees clearly show to perceive the relevance of the transition for journalism in the social media era, both in terms of news searching and dissemination, even though they are all concerned about the decline of the traditional social meaning of the profession itself. From their perspective, the presence of a professional is becoming more necessary than ever to verify information in the contemporary context, where plausibility seems more relevant than truth and the “emphasis is on speed, spectacularity and simplicity of the texts, often neglecting in-depth analysis and verification” (M4). Consequently, there is no doubt that “news production has undergone a true Copernican revolution, and that social media can be useful to find facts or stories but, of course, they must always be verified by journalists” (M5).

In general, the massive use of social media seems justified, beyond the dissemination of its products and articles, firstly by a new, increasingly interconnected relationship with readership, and, secondly, because it also enables them to be always connected among colleagues in the same media organization in a de-spatialized context, which means in a more fragmented form of interaction, dominated by speed and by the absence of traditional deadline.

“With colleagues we are often geographically distant, connected via groups, chat, Zoom, and email. Work is done across many platforms. New roles have emerged, social media editors, community managers, fact-checkers, that previously did not exist or were marginalized. However, time pressure has increased. This leads to frustration and, in some cases, to an excess in competition for visibility, often unhealthy” (W3).

Moreover, from the interviews it emerges a factor that has recently become a topic of Italian scientific debate (Sorrentino and Splendore, 2022; Solito and Sorrentino, 2023): a totally different perception about the daily use of the social networks among different generations of journalists. Aged professionals perceive the presence of the social media more as a menace for their social role and their autonomy rather than a resource, because news can be more and more produced and disseminated by non-professionals: in sum,

“Those born after the 1980 simply adapted themselves to the arrival of social media, using them in their ordinary professional practices; on the contrary, journalists born before, felt “usurped” by the advent of social networks even from the freedom to “write inaccuracies” (M1).

5.2 Normalization of hate speech, vulnerability, and a “limited” journalistic activity

The ability to be connected more easily with the audience and the immediacy of these interactions have been offset by increased production rates to levels considered exhausting, which do not reflect a

professional’s traditional criteria for selecting and verifying sources. This has exposed the interviewed local journalists to constant judgment, criticism, and hostile messages from the audience. Respondents say they feel vulnerable online, not only in their professional lives, but also in their private lives; unfortunately, this fear is confirmed by the fact that most assert they experienced hate speech, both on their institutional and personal accounts. From their perspective, there is a strong connection between the benefits coming from the use of platforms and the normalization of hate speech or verbal violence which deeply impacts on profession. Therefore, it emerges that due to the direct relationship with audience, journalists feel more exposed than in the past decades, “journalism has always been exposed to different forms of readers’ criticism, from denigrating messages to threats, but, nowadays, hate messages have increased exponentially” and consequently, on social media “I always feel under scrutiny.” (M3).

The general view is that:

“Vulnerability is real, both professionally and personally, with an inevitable intersection of gender. Expressing an opinion, exercising critical thinking, exposing oneself: all of this involves risk. When the attack reaches your body, family, living spaces, it stops being “just online” and it becomes heavy. Online attacks can translate into real-life intimidation, with an emotional and practical impact on your life” (W3).

Respondents believe that they are negatively influenced by the new context at many other levels, above all on decisions concerning contents or news they would like to present in their informative products:

“Constant exposure to insults and hate speech; time pressure that reduces in-depth analysis; misinformation that spreads faster than corrections; and psychological pressure. Moreover, if you are a woman, all of this is multiplied: your personal, physical, and private spheres become targets beyond your professional activity” (W3).

Consequently, they assert to often self-limit their editorial freedom and reporting methods: in some cases, self-censorship is used to prevent insults and threats, or to avoid legal actions (such as retaliation) due to problematic contents shared on social media. Therefore, the perceived risk of being target of online harassment as well as the experienced legal problems often undermine the professional norms and the proper practice of journalism. In addition, it is argued that another relevant factor impacts on the editorial choices: the growing dependence on the platforms’ logic which strongly interferes in the decision-making process, as it is pointed out by these extracts:

“I’ve had to hold back from publishing a content when I perceived the risk of being banned by the algorithm, as the content was deemed sensitive or otherwise unsupported by the algorithm” (M3).

“When I communicate via social media, I tend to limit certain content to prevent certain “attacks.” This, due to the speed of response, occurs more frequently on social media than on other media, where response times also influence the need for greater reflection, necessary before answering a message” (M4).

“I did not publish some stories, some investigations remained in the drawer. “Uncomfortable” topics, those that touch on local

power, organized crime, and marginalization, expose me to strong reactions. The risk of lawsuits and the lack of institutional protections can also lead to proactive self-censorship. When you receive slaps, not just physical ones, but also psychological and emotional ones, these have a profound impact on an individual, on his words, on the way he reports” (M3).

In addition, respondents emphasize that the vulnerability due to the risk of becoming victims of online haters must be considered as a concrete and systemic threat for journalists not only at an individual and professional level, but also for their relationship with audiences in the democratic circuit:

“Attacks on journalists, especially those conducted via social media and amplified by those in power, are not simply a personal squabble but represent a concrete and systemic threat to the public as a whole and to the health of democracy. The threat does not end with verbal aggression or lawsuits, since it changes the context of information: the constant climate of hostility, and the real risk of costly legal reprisals push professionals, particularly freelancers and less structured newsrooms, to avoid “sensitive” topics such as corruption, abuse of power, or investigations into organized crime. The attack, especially when it comes from high-level political figures (heads of government, ministers), creates a deterrent effect that leads journalists to self-censorship, with a rational calculation of personal cost/benefit (financial, psychological, and security)” (W3).

Another important factor is presented as a key element of the contemporary journalistic vulnerability in the digital agora: the economic weakness of news professionals, connected to the recent changes of Italian media market and to its digital transition, has brought about new organizational risks, and imposes a reduced coverage of controversial issues that increases journalists’ burnout. It is evident in this extract:

“In Italy journalism is now suffering from widespread precariousness. Publishers are paying less and less, and many are refusing contract adjustments. Wages are extremely low, and fair compensation is a dream, despite the efforts of professional Italian associations like Assostampa and FNSI (Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana). Undoubtedly, legal, and personal safety risks arise if there are no adequate safeguards from the news organizations and institutions (W2).

The most frequent motivation behind this hate speech directed at interviewed journalists appears to be readers’ disagreement with the reported news or its narrative. Every topic seems to be a potential source of conflict; gender, however, appears to be a determining factor behind hate speech: it is often present even if not always explicit. Respondents agree on this, and three out of five female journalists interviewed report having received sexist comments, while two male professionals confirm having seen attacks against female colleagues in their newsroom. It emerges that the violence of these comments not only aims to delegitimize female journalists as professionals, but it also affects their private lives. Female journalists assert having felt “persecuted” and, in some cases, they admit having suffered serious menaces and online attacks that forced them to seek concrete protection measures. So negative experiences made the

victims feeling not safe and inadequately protected by their news organizations and this interfered with their professional as well as private life.

Therefore, gender factor is not simply an accessory: on the contrary, it amplifies and specializes verbal violence, turning it into a true professional delegitimizing strategy, since online attacks against female journalists are often a mix of different elements like sexist insulting, threats against their private life as well as professional delegitimizing and political accusations. As a matter of fact, being a female journalist imposes, as an additional burden, the risk of having to manage attacks that are not merely professional and becomes systematically personal.

In general, the interviewed female journalists report sexist attacks on social networks, more frequently than their male colleagues; as a consequence, they feel much more vulnerable than their male colleagues, who assert to have received more ideological or political violence from online users. Therefore, hate speech directed at women journalists is peculiar: comments coming from users criticize, attack, marginalize or threaten them because of their gender or sexuality; therefore, social media cannot be considered as a neutral ground, but as an arena where violence becomes sexist, that reinforces the structural inequalities that persist in journalism and society as a whole, as it clearly emerges from this extract:

“One receives insults about her private sphere and threats aimed at delegitimizing her authority not as a journalist, but as a woman. The target is not the fact that one is reporting, but the person reporting it, because the ultimate target is the very idea of a woman in a position of power and visibility. The persistent asymmetry at the top of the Italian newsrooms confirms it: despite the fact that women are a fundamental component of Italian news organizations, recent data show that women directors in newspapers, televisions or their media outlets are a tiny minority” (W3).

5.3 Individual strategies and institutional actions to counteract hate speech against local media journalists

From the interviews a fundamental paradox in the relationship between social media and journalism emerges: while media organizations encourage their staff to maintain an active presence on these platforms, they often become a sphere that heightens the risk of harassment for news professionals. This dual nature of digital tools means that, although they offer increased visibility and opportunities for audience engagement, they also expose journalists to harmful interactions more frequently than in the past (FNSI, ‘Minacce’, 2023). The respondents’ perspective is that they often feel to be alone against online haters: this sense of loneliness in front of all forms of hostility encountered during their professional activities is exacerbated by the fact that newsrooms rarely adopt concrete strategies to face and fight hate speech or other forms of harassment. It is pointed out that the reaction is mostly up to the attacked professional who must decide *if* and *how* to respond to the insults.

Loneliness in front of all forms of hostility encountered during their professional activities is exacerbated by the fact that newsrooms rarely adopt concrete strategies to face, and fight hate speech or other forms of harassment. Interviewees who experienced hate speech independently decided on their own strategy, whether it was responding,

ignoring, or reporting about it, if and when they deemed it appropriate, as it clearly emerges from this extract:

“I reacted with pragmatism and networking: I reported, when necessary. In the most serious cases, I involved press freedom organizations, I took practical measures for personal safety, and I sought support from colleagues” (W3).

While the newsrooms actions and strategies at a local level are lacking in this area, the normative rules, both Italian and European, are considered as generally adequate but too abstract, and it is perceived a strong difficulty to apply them in the different national informative contexts. In particular, the European regulatory framework about hate speech is generally considered as a valid scheme in principle, but lacking in implementation: consequently, many respondents call for a faster and more effective enforcement. According to the participants, the European framework is useful because it establishes common principles and guidelines, but its effectiveness depends on national normative actions and the concrete commitment of platforms, so that any regulatory framework, without rapid and concrete enforcement tools, risks remaining ineffective.

At the European level, one of the most relevant guidelines is the *EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online* (European Commission, 2016), based on a close collaboration among the EC, ICT platforms and a network of organizations (NGOs and national authorities) located in different EU countries. This code was signed in May 2016 by the EU Commission with four major ICT companies to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online. From 2018 other companies joined the Code and on 20 January 2025, the Commission announced the integration of a revised *Code of conduct+ on countering illegal hate speech online* into the framework of the *Digital Services Act* (2022). ICT companies undertook to develop internal procedures and personnel training to examine the requests to remove hateful content and, where appropriate, delete or make them inaccessible. In Italy there are no specific binding regulations aside from relatively broad definitions at the European level. The available concrete legal instruments to defend news professionals are still linked to a pre-social networks informative context: Italian legislation on online hate speech makes reference to the traditional criminal provisions that punish propaganda and incitement to hatred or violence based on racial, ethnic, or religious grounds (e.g., Article 604-bis of the Italian Criminal Code), or defamation aggravated by discrimination (e.g., Article 595 of the Italian Criminal Code). There are debates and legislative proposals to specifically define online hate speech and better integrate digital platforms in the fight against it, as demonstrated by several proposed laws, which aim at balancing the fight against hate speech with the constitutional right to freedom of expression, protected by Article 21 of the Italian Constitution (Nicita, 2025). From 2022 AGCOM (National Authority for Communications) regulates content on audiovisual media, to fill regulatory gaps for the use of web platforms; however, respondents consider all these normative actions too slow and sometimes inadequate to face rapidity and pervasiveness of online violence and crimes:

“In Italy legal tools exist, but they often prove too slow and inflexible when faced with the speed and breadth of the digital phenomenon. Procedures for threats and hate speech must be accelerated, and law enforcement and the judiciary must be specifically trained on online crime. But there’s a paradox: in Italy, those who are

supposed to legislate, protect, or monitor are too often also part of the problem, some politicians use or foster aggressive language toward the press, contributing to undermining the credibility of the regulatory framework. When public authorities use a hostile, not merely critical, tone toward journalists, the legislation may appear hypocritical or unenforced” (W3).

Another important topic emerges from the interviews: respondents are all very concerned for the frequent legal actions aimed at blocking the actions of journalists and/or activists. According to them, one of the most dangerous limits of the Italian normative system is the frequent recourse to legal actions against journalists, promoted above all from prominent political figures, including members of the government, who start many defamation lawsuits or other forms of actions. From 2022 to 2024, 132 legal actions against 290 journalists have been documented and most lawsuits or damage claims were promoted by public institutions (56%), above all by local administrators (Ossigeno per l’Informazione, 2025). The general view is that the menace of these legal actions acts as a fuel to individual perceived restrictions of freedom so that news professional may be less “encouraged” to cover “sensitive” issues, especially in local journalism, already burdened by reduced staff, economic crisis and growing exposure. In this context, respondents propose some practical improvements to face hate speech, like a social media manager in each newsroom to check fake profiles more accurately, more severe court decisions against haters, urgent procedures to remove threatening content, protection programs and psychological support for journalist victims, and concrete obligations for transparent moderation and reporting platforms. However, they all agree that in the local informative context they work in, the most relevant change must be *cultural*:

“There’s still much to do formal digital and personal security plans, mandatory training on online risks, and protocols for promptly reporting and managing threats are needed and useful. Nevertheless, we need to work on people, on empathy, and on finding support tools for a profession that is becoming more difficult for many reasons” (W3).

6 Conclusion

This study investigates the role of social media in news production and how they influence journalistic practices at the local level, focusing on the presence of harassment and hate speech directed at journalists. The experiences shared by the respondents demonstrate a strong awareness of the radical changes brought about by the presence of social media in their practices as well as in the relationship with their audience and colleagues.

In Italy, in the last years, models of news production and consumption totally changed the local media market, but this transformation seems full of contradictions. Italian informative system has always been economically weak and not autonomous from politics; however, its contemporary crisis seems different from that discussed in the last decades. In the contemporary scenario of Italian journalism, we can observe the compresence of trends deriving from *not new* processes (such as the spectacularizing of news or the decline of the traditional gatekeeping function of the print politicized newspapers), but also from the affirmation of information practices, linked to the cultural

context of post-truth. In few years Italian news system has gone from an information system that followed traditional rhythms (from TV news to newspapers and magazines with their different moments of metabolization of the news) to a sudden fracture of all the existing paradigms and previous business models. In the digital era everything has changed: the distribution, the temporal synchronization with the facts, the meaning itself given to journalism. Our results highlight a peculiar complex interplay between local journalism and the Copernican revolution brought about by platforms: the interviewed journalists assert that they must face broad structural challenges affecting their organizations, since private commercial local media, not tied to national corporations or to public media, can hardly have sustainable business models. The responses from participants working in regional media confirm a growing dependence on the platforms' logic, which strongly interferes in their decision-making process during informative practices.

In sum, the findings reveal consistency with previous studies that argue that social media are not only new instruments, but they transformed news making and editorial practices: they have evolved into infrastructural elements of local journalism, becoming simultaneously channels of dissemination and interactive spaces of audience engagement, displacing the traditional static and vertical model of news. Fostering speed, emotional reactions, which are often in contrast with fact-based reporting and investigative journalism practices, and making the journalists more exposed, social media contribute to produce a hostile context with a problematic consequence: the perception of being vulnerable. The findings highlight the complex ways in which local journalists in Italy experience and face hate speech in digital media environments, offering both empirical and theoretical insights. It is confirmed that hate speech and verbal violence are strictly connected to the characteristics of the contemporary hybrid media system: the spectacularization of news promoted by the commercial logic in the Italian informative system and the structural features of platforms have facilitated the rise and salience of emotions-based and divisive messages, so that the growing reliance on social media both in producing and searching information has become a phenomenon that has amplified the potential reach of hate speech and online violence. Consistent with prior research on digital harassment in journalism (Cuellar and Chaher, 2021; Pena-Fernandez et al., 2025), journalists in our study reported growing exposure to abusive content. The findings also confirm the gendered dimensions of victimization, with women journalists experiencing heightened vulnerability, consistent with international studies on harassment in media work. Importantly, our analysis revealed that journalists employ counter-hate strategies above all at an individual level, since they feel alone and without any support from their news organizations as well as not adequately protected by legislation. These strategies include self-censorship, (selectively not responding to certain comments to minimize personal risks) and removal of abusive comments. Therefore, divergences from theoretical expectations emerged in the reliance on institutional support and legislative protective routines. This suggests that while professional norms guide responses, organizational and institutional local contexts do not help protecting journalists from being victims of hate speech.

In sum, an alarming picture emerges both at the economic and professional level: the infrastructural fragility due to the decline in sales is compounded by a growing pressure on professionals, who are more and more obliged to face both online hostility and the use of lawsuits promoted against them, factors acting as constraints on press freedom, especially in local newsrooms. Respondents confirm that, in this context, individual visibility is increasing without a corresponding

increase in internal protocols, resources, and actions to protect journalists, bringing about three main consequences: less time for investigations and verification, a bigger exposure to haters and litigations, and a greater risk of self-censorship. In conclusion, from this study negative factors emerge: rather than empowering journalists, social media impact negatively on the profession, on the person and on citizens, reducing journalists' freedom of expression and discouraging or hindering participation in public debate.

The failure of regulatory and protection standards adopted in Italy, the presence of self-censorship, but above all within a menacing hostile climate, fueled by many Italian political leaders and their legal actions against news professionals, represent a concrete danger for Italian democracy. This danger is even bigger in small communities, where the decline in sales is damaging local media outlets, creating "information deserts," precisely where local presence is most needed. Local journalists occupy a vulnerable position within digital public spheres due to their visibility, proximity to audiences, and frequent legal actions promoted by political leaders; on the contrary, it might build bridges and enforce the sense of belonging, giving voices to different positions, contributing to create digital communities and connect to concrete geographic contexts; as Molino pointed out "the real challenge for Italian local journalism will therefore be this: remaining relevant because it is rooted. Cultivating trust, not only overseeing information, but contributing to building meaningful landscapes, networks of relationships, and vibrant and informed local systems. Being, even in the digital world, architectures of trust. Not simply a news channel, but a place of mutual recognition, capable of generating the future" (Molino, 2025, p. 77).

This study also has some limitations. On one hand, the analysis focused on local media, which could have biased the results toward a highly polarized national context: this limits the generalizability of the conclusions. On the other hand, the sample included only 10 journalists, all very active online, which may not reflect the experiences of harassment and hate toward journalists with less exposure. Therefore, their perspectives do not represent practices and views of all Italian local media organizations. Future lines of research might include a longitudinal analysis of hate speech over an extended period, a comparison of the occurrence of harassment in other regional European contexts or an analysis of different regulatory landscapes.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: <https://mastergiornalismotorino.it/progetti/digital-news-report-italia/>. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

FR: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Investigation, Software, Methodology.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. I received a financial support from my University Università degli studi di Palermo Project: U-GOV PJ_UTILE_2022_VQR_Misura_C_D02.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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