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Exploring Gamification in Online Journalism: Perspectives from Media Owners Through Interviews

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Abstract

The integration of gamification in online journalism and communication is an emerging trend aimed at enhancing user engagement and interactivity. As a digital marketing strategy, gamification involves incorporating game-like elements into non-game contexts, such as news websites, to motivate user participation and increase retention. This study explores the topic of gamification within the context of online journalism, advances in digital journalism, and the impact of technology in media and journalism, focusing on the perspectives of media owners through in-depth interviews. By exploring how media owners perceive and implement gamification elements in online journalism, this research aims to uncover valuable insights into the integration of game mechanics to enhance user engagement and content delivery. The methodology involved conducting interviews and analyzing the data qualitatively to identify key themes and patterns, shedding light on the challenges, opportunities, and best practices associated with gamification in the digital news landscape. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of gamification in shaping the future of online journalism and offers practical recommendations for media organizations looking to leverage gamified strategies for audience interaction and retention.

Keywords: journalism; gamification; digital marketing; online journalism; media

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1. Introduction

Gamification has emerged as a significant strategy for enhancing user engagement across diverse domains, including education, marketing, and online communication (Khosrawi-Rad et al., 2023; Gegenfurtner & Kollar, 2025). Broadly defined as the application of game design elements in non-game contexts, gamification seeks to motivate behavior, sustain attention, and create more enjoyable user experiences (Khosrawi-Rad et al., 2023). In journalism, where capturing and maintaining reader interest is a persistent challenge, gamification offers the potential to transform the consumption of news into a more immersive and participatory activity (Antonopoulos et al., 2015; Karyotakis et al., 2018). News organizations are increasingly exploring interactive features such as point-collection systems, leaderboards, quizzes, and personalized rewards to deepen audience engagement and loyalty (Gegenfurtner & Kollar, 2025; Antonopoulos et al., 2015). The

research suggests these elements can encourage users to spend more time on news platforms and interact more frequently with content (Przybylski et al., 2010). The underlying rationale draws on motivational theories that emphasize the role of feedback, progress indicators, and social competition in sustaining user involvement (Przybylski et al., 2010). However, while gamification promises to revitalize digital journalism, it also raises critical questions about its ethical implementation, impact on editorial integrity, and potential for audience segmentation or exclusion (Antonopoulos et al., 2015; Karyotakis et al., 2018). Despite growing interest in this area, the existing research prioritizes user experience design and audience-focused evaluations over the perspectives of newsroom leaders who make strategic decisions about adopting these innovations (Antonopoulos et al., 2015). Not much is known about how media owners and editors-in-chief interpret the value of gamification, assess its compatibility with professional norms, or plan for its integration within organizational workflows. Understanding their views is essential for evaluating not only the opportunities of gamified strategies, but also the structural and cultural challenges that may influence their adoption. Moreover, as digital journalism increasingly intersects with emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (Sonni et al., 2024), questions about technological innovation, professional ethics, and audience trust have become central to scholarly debates. Investigating gamification through the lens of newsroom leadership can help illuminate how such innovations are negotiated within real-world constraints, balancing commercial goals with commitments to credible, meaningful journalism. Against this background, the primary objective of this study is to explore how media owners and editors-in-chief perceive gamification as a tool for enhancing user experience and engagement in online journalism. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, a theoretical framework is presented discussing the Normalization Process Theory as an analytical lens for understanding the integration of innovations like gamification in journalism. This is followed by a review of the existing literature, identifying key debates, findings, and gaps that motivate this study. The methodology is presented next, including data collection and thematic analysis procedures. The results of this study are organized thematically and supported with participant quotes. The discussion section considers the implications of these findings in relation to the existing literature. Finally, the paper's conclusions outline the limitations of this study and suggest directions for future work.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Normalization Process Theory (NPT) as its primary conceptual framework to examine how media owners and editors-in-chief perceive and consider integrating gamification within their journalistic practices. The NPT was originally developed to analyze the implementation of complex interventions in healthcare settings, but its applicability has expanded to a wide range of organizational contexts where new practices or technologies must become embedded in routine work (May et al., 2020). In journalism studies, the NPT has been recognized as a valuable lens for understanding how innovations are normalized within newsroom cultures, beyond simple adoption decisions (Vos & Perreault, 2020). It emphasizes the processual and relational work required to make new practices meaningful, sustainable, and collectively enacted. This is especially relevant given that much prior research on gamification in journalism has focused primarily on user experience design or audience reception (Antonopoulos et al., 2015; Karyotakis et al., 2018), often neglecting the organizational and managerial dynamics that shape its adoption. The NPT comprises four interrelated constructs that guide analysis.

- Coherence: The sense-making work by which stakeholders understand and define the innovation.
- Cognitive participation: The relational work to engage others and secure buy-in.

- Collective action: The operational work of embedding the innovation into existing routines and systems.
- Reflexive monitoring: The appraisal work of evaluating and adapting the innovation over time.

Applying the NPT in this study allows for an in-depth exploration of how media owners and editors-in-chief interpret gamification's purpose, mobilize support, manage its practical implementation, and assess its value. This is crucial because gamification is not merely a set of design features but a strategic choice with implications for editorial values, audience relationships, and organizational identity (Przybylski et al., 2010). Moreover, as journalism increasingly engages with emerging technologies—including artificial intelligence and advanced analytics—understanding how innovations are normalized within professional cultures has become an urgent question (Sonni et al., 2024). The NPT offers a systematic way to examine not only whether media leaders see gamification as beneficial, but also how they conceptualize its role, anticipate challenges, and evaluate its alignment with their editorial mission. By adopting this framework, this study responds to calls in the literature to move beyond surface-level adoption metrics and to investigate the underlying organizational processes that shape how technological innovations are interpreted, enacted, and institutionalized in newsrooms (May et al., 2020; Vos & Perreault, 2020). This approach helps illuminate the complex balance that media owners and editors-in-chief must strike between engaging audiences through gamified features and upholding core professional and ethical standards.

3. Literature Review

The integration of gamification into online journalism is a complex and evolving development in digital media strategy (Bogost, 2015). Gamification, broadly defined as applying game design elements in non-game contexts, has gained popularity for boosting user engagement, promoting loyalty, and improving user experience in areas like education, marketing, and civic participation (Khosrawi-Rad et al., 2023; Hickman, 2010; Hassan, 2017). In journalism, gamification aims to turn passive news consumption into an active and interactive experience. This change can improve information retention and user behavior (Robson et al., 2016; Su et al., 2015). Techniques like point-collection systems, leaderboards, quizzes, and badges have been shown to increase time spent on the site and encourage repeat visits (Bogost, 2015; Hickman, 2010). Combining storytelling with gamified elements can deepen emotional involvement and help users understand complex social issues (Su et al., 2015). These features also fit with broader trends toward personalization in digital media, where users expect customized, interactive experiences (Simões et al., 2013). Motivational theories explain these effects. For instance, the self-determination theory highlights the importance of feedback, progress indicators, and social competition for keeping users engaged (Przybylski et al., 2010). These mechanisms meet the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, promoting an ongoing interaction with news platforms. Despite these benefits, scholars warn that gamification can trivialize serious news content and damage journalistic credibility if not carefully implemented (Foxman, 2015a; Dowling, 2020). Ethical concerns include the risk of manipulating users through reward systems, intrusive data collection, and prioritizing engagement metrics over quality reporting (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011; Sonni et al., 2024). Also, not all audiences respond positively to gamification. Factors like age, comfort with technology, and media literacy greatly influence how users react (Hofacker et al., 2016). The research on Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) provides guidance for creating gamified systems that balance engagement with usability. Good gamification should keep things simple, set clear goals, and offer appropriate feedback to avoid overwhelming users (Carroll, 2003;

Gross, 2014). These design principles help ensure that gamified journalism platforms focus on the user while fulfilling their informational role. Communication theories provide further insights into the appeal of gamification. The Uses and Gratifications theory suggests that audiences actively seek media that meets their needs for entertainment, information, and social connection (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The mass communication theory also highlights the shift toward more interactive and participatory audience roles (McQuail, 2010). These frameworks imply that gamification both responds to and drives changes in how people consume media. The research on gamified civic engagement platforms shows that well-designed game elements can increase user participation in democratic processes and public discussions (Hassan, 2017). This finding indicates that gamification in journalism can not only boost engagement with news content, but also enhance involvement in public life. Several empirical studies note that poorly designed gamification can cause negative outcomes, like user fatigue, disengagement, or feelings of manipulation (Nicholson, 2014). Consequently, scholars recommend mixed approaches that blend serious games, augmented reality, and adaptive interfaces to improve user experience (Yang et al., 2024; Lampropoulos et al., 2023). Personalized gamification, in which features adjust to individual user profiles and preferences, is also a growing area of interest (Mora et al., 2017). Moreover, gamification is increasingly viewed as a potential revenue source in journalism, through models based on micropayments, unlocking exclusive content, or reward-based subscriptions (Daugherty et al., 2008). However, these strategies must balance commercial goals with maintaining audience trust and perceived value (Paavilainen et al., 2013). While much existing research has focuses on user experience design and audience perspectives, there has been less focus on the organizational factors that influence the adoption of gamification in journalism (Karyotakis et al., 2018; Bogost, 2015). This study addresses that gap by applying the Normalization Process Theory (NPT) (May et al., 2020). The NPT offers a structured way to examine how new practices become meaningful, adopted, and sustained in professional settings. It highlights the work that individuals do to integrate innovations into routine practice through four concepts: coherence, cognitive participation, collective action, and reflexive monitoring (May et al., 2020). In journalism, the NPT has been used to analyze how newsroom leaders discuss innovations like gamification, affecting whether they are adopted or resisted (Vos & Perreault, 2020). Using the NPT in this study allows for an analysis of what owners and editors think about gamification, how they understand it, how they engage colleagues, how they implement its features, and how they evaluate its impact in their organizations. Recent research has pointed out the complexities, risks, and debated value of gamification. For example, Bogost et al. (2010) introduced news games, exploring designs that go beyond simple points and badges to encourage critical engagement and complex storytelling. Foxman's work (Foxman, 2015b) warns against oversimplifying content and losing editorial control. Dowling (2020) provides a detailed account of how gamification is implemented in newsrooms, highlighting the tension between audience metrics and journalistic ethics. Other studies show both the opportunities and the professional resistance to adopting standard gamification elements (Allan, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the preliminary results from the EU project CALYPSO intend to build a crowdsourcing environment where individuals may volunteer to counteract disinformation efforts by engaging in a game for good. These communities bring together professional journalists, specialists, and regular residents to combine their different talents and collaborate to discover and fast-check suspected examples of misinformation in real time (Sotirakou et al., 2022; Svensson, 2018). Another study provides the context and theoretical foundation for the Level Up project, which aims to engage teenagers in local news by creating game-based interactions to pique their interest. Gamification and models for engagement and play as well are investigated and critiqued in relation to the

historical and cultural context of conventional and digital news production. It is important to mention that Badreldin et al. (2025) states that employee resistance and low participation are common causes of digital transformation failures. Gamification, the incorporation of game aspects into non-game situations, addresses these concerns. A five-month trial of a gamification strategy involving 164 journalists was implemented. The results revealed a considerable rise in digital transformation measures, suggesting effective behavior change. Points, ranks, and badges were the most successful features. Arafat (2020) examines two games: Pirate fishing, an interactive investigation, and #Hacked Syria's Electronic Armies, for the most common general news frames used in interactive gamified situations. The researchers mentioned that news gamification is one of the creative technology-driven techniques lately employed by a variety of media companies. Distinguished by the combination of numerous audiovisuals, Gamified news seeks to customize news content and assets for individual gamers, to increase user engagement and immersion.

While these studies have broadened the understanding of the potential and challenges of gamification, they largely overlook the perspectives of media owners and editors-in-chief, who have primary responsibility for making strategic decisions in news organizations. This study aims to fill that gap by emphasizing the views of regional Greek media leaders and examining how organizational context influences both the adoption and skepticism of gamification strategies. Besides Plewe and Fürsich (2020), the present findings from semi-structured expert interviews with pioneers in German newsgame creation have shown good results. Established models of border work often highlight the adversarial connections between journalists and newcomers. According to their findings, these models fail to account for the interactional component of current news generation in border tests. Communication, teamwork, and product management challenges are common among diverse teams, both within and beyond the media industry. As online content creation has converged, newsrooms are collaborating more closely across professional positions. It is also important to mention that Ferrer-Conill (2017) explores how digital journalism practices are becoming more quantifiable, with a focus on reader interactions and the usage of game mechanics. Data and metrics are mostly used to evaluate journalists' abilities, although automated quantification and competitive leaderboards are seen as motivators. García-Avilés et al. (2022) examine how novel narratives, aided by a combination of fun techniques and technical convergence, might reconfigure digital news storytelling. Newsgames combine two competing logics: journalism's culture of veracity and trustworthiness, and gaming culture, which is defined by the development of imagined words, persuasion, and mechanics. The investigation of two newsgames, The Amazon race and The ocean game, reveals distinct procedural strategies while sharing the same aim and decision-making method. The Amazon race uses standard rhetorical formulas with visual and textual components to create its arguments. While procedural formulas are also used, they are often portrayed honestly. On the contrary, The ocean game develops its major arguments in a generative way, with visual and textual features confined to establishing the many answer possibilities and their repercussions.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to explore in depth the perceptions and experiences of media owners and editors-in-chief regarding gamification in online journalism. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the richness and complexity of participants' interpretations and to allow for the emergence of nuanced themes that structured surveys might overlook.

4.1. Sampling and Participants

Ten interviews were conducted with owners and editors-in-chief from regional media outlets in Greece, representing diverse formats, including newspapers, radio stations, television channels, and online news platforms. Participants were selected to reflect varied perspectives across different media types and geographical regions.

4.2. Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of 13 open-ended questions designed to encourage reflective and detailed responses. Topics included participants' familiarity with gamification, their evaluations of specific gamified elements, perceptions of user engagement and experience, and views on administrative features. Interviews were conducted in person or remotely between August and October 2024, lasting 20–45 min each. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines.

4.3. Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo 12.2 software for systematic coding and thematic analysis. Coding was conducted both inductively, allowing themes to emerge from participants' own words, and deductively, guided by the constructs of the Normalization Process Theory. Themes were examined in relation to how participants made sense of gamification (coherence), engaged others (cognitive participation), operationalized strategies (collective action) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and evaluated their effectiveness (reflexive monitoring). This analytic approach enabled a structured yet flexible interpretation of the complex organizational work involved in adopting gamification.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review summarized interpretations of their responses. An audit trail was maintained documenting coding decisions. Reflexive notes were kept throughout to interrogate researcher assumptions. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

4.4. Ethical Consideration

This research adhered to recognized ethical guidelines for qualitative studies involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. To protect confidentiality, personal identifiers and specific news outlet names have been removed from the reported findings. Instead, participants are referred to using anonymized codes (P1–P10), and outlets are described by general type (e.g., newspaper, online news platform, radio station) and region (e.g., Crete, Athens) without naming them (details in Table 1). These steps ensured that participants' identities and organizational affiliations could not be directly linked to their responses, thereby upholding their privacy and minimizing any potential risk.

Table 1. Greek local media professionals that were interviewed.

Greek Local Media	Website	Region
Antenna West Crete (Local radio station)	https://antennafm.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete
The Press Project (News website)	https://thepressproject.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Athens
Haniotika nea (Newspaper)	https://www.haniotika-nea.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete
Parakritika (News website)	https://www.parakritika.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete
Nea Tv (Tv station)	https://www.neatv.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete

Table 1. *Cont.*

Greek Local Media	Website	Region
Flash News (News website)	https://flashnews.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete
In Town Chania (Magazine)	https://intownchania.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete
Xronos Kozanis (Newspaper)	https://xronos-kozanis.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Western Macedonia
Nea Kriti (News website)	https://www.neakriti.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete
Kriti 24 (News website)	https://www.kriti24.gr/ (accessed 27 April 2025)	Crete

The reason why this specific qualitative method was chosen was to gain a better understanding of gamification and a first evaluation of the plug-in to see if the application was sufficient. In addition, qualitative research helped to identify the appropriate variables and factors to be measured. Through the interviews, we better understood how the questions should be formulated while ensuring that they are understandable by the sample. As mentioned at the beginning, the questions were open-ended to delve deeper into the issues and questions we wanted to analyze and, of course, allow for freedom of speech and opinions (Macey et al., 2025). Before conducting the interviews and formulating the questions, a literature review was conducted to ensure that the questions covered all aspects of the topic. Also, from the secondary research, the questions and the design of the plug-in emerged. Of course, great importance was given to the conceptual validity of the questions; therefore, the questions were formulated in such a way that they reflected the research questions while at the same time providing the possibility of understanding and expanding the concepts that were presented. At the same time, interpretive validity was carried out on the questions, and we examined whether the participants understood the questions in the way we wanted. The formulation of the interview questions was guided by the approach used by Palla and Kostarella (2025), who emphasized the importance of aligning question design with the lived experiences and professional perceptions of media practitioners. Drawing inspiration from their methodology, the questions in this study were constructed to encourage reflective responses and uncover nuanced views, particularly in relation to journalism and digital tools. This framework ensured that the interviews remained both relevant to the research objectives and grounded in the current realities of the media landscape. The interviews conducted for this study did not involve the collection of personal or sensitive information. All participants were over 18 years of age, took part voluntarily, and responded anonymously via a structured form. Given the non-invasive nature of the data and the absence of identifiable details, this study posed minimal ethical risk. Consequently, and to achieve this, the language was clear and understandable while there was also the possibility of clarifying questions to avoid misunderstandings. Another important aspect of qualitative research is intersubjectivity. It is important that the participants in this study can clarify their answers and verify them. Furthermore, the techniques used included "member checking", i.e., rechecking of the participants' responses. NVivo was used to process the interviews. This specific program has many advantages over other programs while offering a more flexible way to organize the data. Specifically, instead of getting lost in creating folders and files, the researcher enters his/her data into the program, organizes it, and processes it there. NVivo organizes the data better and makes it easier to manage and code them. What does coding mean? Coding, which refers to the attribution of meaning to smaller or larger sections of text, is essentially the basic analytical strategy for qualitative research. The data were entered into NVivo following these detailed steps:

Step 1. Each interview was transcribed using a journalistic audio-recorder. Each interview was saved in the Word program by saving each interview using the letter P and a serial

number from 1 to 10 (we did not use the name of each interviewee to ensure personal data) and saved them in a folder.
Step 2. All data were imported into the NVivo program.
Step 3. For each interview, codes and nodes were created based on the interviewees'responses, using relevant keywords. The codes are essential for working with NVivo and enable the collection of material so that searches can be made for ideas and other patterns. The nodes are the themes that exist in the files. They can be either descriptive or analytical.
Step 4. Then, an electronic recording was made of the corresponding quotes of the answers provided by the interviewees, which constitute the references on each node. Specifically, in the display of the number of references in the list where the sources are displayed, the references are the count of the number of options related to this source, which have been coded in any of the nodes. If there is the same option that is coded in two separate nodes, it can be counted as two references.
Step 5. The same procedure was followed in each interview, so that in each question fewer or more references emerged based on the answers of the interviewees.

4.5. Research Question

This study was guided by the following central research question: How do media owners and editors-in-chief perceive gamification as a tool for enhancing user experience and engagement in online journalism? This question reflects an exploratory, qualitative orientation aimed at capturing participants' interpretations, assessments, and reflections rather than testing specific statistical relationships.

5. Results

Analysis of the ten semi-structured interviews revealed several key themes concerning media owners' and editors-in-chief's perceptions of gamification in online journalism. These themes highlight both perceived opportunities for enhancing user engagement and significant concerns regarding credibility, audience segmentation, and monetization strategies.

5.1. Perceived Benefits of Gamification

Many participants viewed gamification as a promising strategy to increase user engagement and encourage longer visits to news websites. Features such as point-collection systems, leaderboards, and interactive buttons (e.g., "like/dislike", "saved button", etc.) were seen as tools to create a more engaging and participatory user experience, "I think it can make people stay on the site longer, but it has to be done professionally" (P3), while others emphasized the potential for gamification to support editorial planning through improved data analytics and administrative features: "It's pretty good to have clear data about user actions, it help us plan better" (P1). These perspectives suggest that while gamification is often discussed in terms of user-facing design, its value for media owners also lies in providing actionable insights about audience behavior and engagement patterns.

5.2. Concerns About Credibility and Professionalism

Participants highlighted the need to balance interactive features with the perceived authority and trustworthiness of news content (P7). Interviewees also drew attention to differences among audience segments in their likely receptiveness to gamified features. Several participants noted generational divides in expectations and digital literacy: "Older readers don't care about these things. It's suitable for the young" (P2). These reflections underscore the importance of considering audience diversity in the design and implementation of gamification strategies, avoiding a one-size (fits all) approach.

5.3. Skepticism Toward Monetization Strategies

Another issue involved cautious attitudes toward revenue models based on gamification, such as selling points packages. While recognizing the commercial potential of such strategies, some participants expressed concern: "Although selling points might benefit the website by increasing income, some people may be wary of this and view it as a commercialization of media" (P5). Overall, these findings reveal that media owners and editors-in-chief simultaneously recognize the potential benefits of gamification for audience engagement and business strategy, while remaining acutely aware of the risks to journalistic credibility and professional ethics.

Table 2: Core thematic categories and distribution

Table 2 offers a structured overview of the core thematic categories (nodes), their subcategories (child nodes), and the distribution of responses across interview participants (cases). This framework supports a clearer understanding of how different aspects of gamification were perceived, discussed, and prioritized by the respondents. The frequency of references associated with each theme provides insight into what participants considered important, relevant, or engaging.

Table 2. Classification of NVivo 12.

Nodes	Child Nodes	Cases
Perception of gamification User experience User engagement	Perception of gamification User experience User engagement	Owner Editor

Table 3: Consistently referenced features

From the data in Table 3, it becomes evident that certain gamification elements consistently emerge as high-priority topics. For instance, the collection of points, the ranking table, popular hashtags, the "like/dislike" feature, the "saved" option, and news sharing were not only discussed by all participants, but also referenced a total of 10 times across 10 different files. This repeated and widespread presence indicates strong consensus regarding their perceived value.

Table 3. Qualitative research data.

Name Nodes	Files	References
Owner involvement	5	5
Editors-in-chief involvement	5	5
Gamification knowledge	3	3
Social media game elements	3	4
Website impressions	10	10
Game elements	5	5
Collecting points	10	10
Buy a package	9	10
Game	6	6
Avatar	5	5
Crossword	2	2
"I like/dislike"	10	10
Explore fake news	5	5

Table 3. *Cont.*

Name Nodes	Files	References
Chatbot	7	7
"Saved"	10	10
Ranking notification	4	4
Popular hashtags	10	10
Leaderboard	10	10
Money	10	10
Encourage users	7	7
News sharing	10	10
Discussion of articles	8	8
Website review	10	10
Site improvements	3	3
Opinion on administrative	10	10
Satisfaction with the administrative	10	10
Comments on the administrative	10	10

5.4. Monetization and Engagement Features

Similarly, buying packages to collect points also showed a high presence, appearing in 9 files with 10 mentions, suggesting that monetization elements are acceptable to stakeholders when integrated meaningfully into the user experience. Positive impressions of the website overall were also a dominant theme, receiving 10 mentions. This reflects not only the participants' openness to a gamified environment, but also an appreciation for user-centered digital design. The discussion around administrative tools—including satisfaction with site management and the ability to interact with admin functions—was likewise significant.

5.5. General Impressions and Usability

It was referenced in all 10 interviews, reinforcing the view that gamification should not be limited to front-end user interaction, but should also empower platform governance and transparency.

5.6. Low-Priority Elements

In contrast, certain topics exhibited a low frequency, suggesting limited interest or relevance. The crossword puzzle, for instance, appeared in only two files and had just two mentions, indicating that participants did not view it as a valuable or engaging gamification element. Similarly, knowledge about gamification received only three mentions, reinforcing an earlier theme in the data: that while interviewees often recognized specific game elements when presented with them, they lacked formal understanding or familiarity with the terminology. This finding is especially important as it suggests a gap in the digital literacy and reveals an opportunity for targeted training or awareness-raising among media professionals. Another low-frequency theme was the question of whether participants observed game elements on social media, which received only four mentions.

5.7. Moderately Received Elements

This may suggest either a disconnect between the application of gamification in journalism and its manifestation on social platforms, or simply a lack of attention from the participants to this cross-platform dimension. Interestingly, themes like the avatar feature received moderate attention (5 files, 5 references), and opinions were mixed—some viewed

it positively for personalizing the user experience, while others did not see it as necessary in a journalistic context. Meanwhile, tools like the chatbot stood out as promising, with 7 mentions across 7 files. This reflects an increasing acceptance of automated assistance in digital platforms and the potential of conversational interfaces to drive user engagement.

5.8. User Participation and Content Creation

Additional topics of interest included user-generated content, such as news sharing by users (10 mentions) and discussion of articles (8 mentions), which were valued for their ability to foster community and participatory engagement. However, while users were vocal in their feedback (as indicated by 10 mentions of website criticism), their interest in suggesting specific improvements was relatively low, with only 3 mentions, perhaps indicating satisfaction or a lack of technical expertise to suggest detailed enhancements.

Table 4: Individual engagement levels

Table 4 presents a breakdown of the coding distribution per participant (p1 to p10), offering a quantitative lens through which to assess individual engagement levels. Participants such as p1, p3, and p5 stood out with the highest numbers of codes and references (10 codes, 10 references), indicating high engagement and thematic diversity in their interviews. p2 and p7 also demonstrated strong contributions (9 codes/references), while p8 contributed the least (5 codes, 5 references), possibly due to limited familiarity with the topic or less elaborative responses. Participant p6 presented an interesting case: with 7 codes but 8 references, this respondent appears to have revisited certain themes more frequently than others, suggesting deeper reflection or repeated emphasis on specific issues. This contrast between the number of themes and the depth of commentary provides insight into the varying cognitive or experiential engagement of the respondents.

Table 4. Results of a preliminary investigation.

Name	Codes	References
1.P1	10	9
7.P7	10	9
4.P4	7	7
9.P9	8	8
8.P8	5	5
5.P5	10	10
2.P2	9	9
6.P6	7	8
3.P3	10	10
10.P10	8	8

Table 5: Media types and institutional influence

Lastly, Table 5 outlines the types of media represented in the sample. Although the content of this table was not elaborated in the original description, it plays a crucial contextual role. It allows for a potential cross-comparative analysis between participants from different media formats (e.g., online-only platforms, local print media with digital extensions, hybrid models), which could further illuminate how institutional characteristics influence perceptions of gamification.

Table 5. Categories of the media we interviewed.

Types	Media
Media group	Nea kriti
Newspaper	Haniotika nea, Xronos kozanis
Magazine Portal	Intown
Radio Station	Antenna of western Crete
Tv station	Nea Tv
News Website	Parakritika, Kriti 24, The Press Project, Flash News

5.9. Summary of Key Findings

The analysis demonstrates that gamification, while still a developing concept for many in the media industry, is being embraced in practice—even if not in name. Elements that align with users' need for interaction, recognition, and personalization were consistently valued. On the other hand, features perceived as overly playful or unrelated to core news consumption behavior were often dismissed. Moreover, the variable levels of conceptual understanding among participants highlight the need for ongoing professional development in digital innovation practices. In future applications, designers and editors should consider integrating high-value gamification features—such as point-based systems, interactive voting, social sharing, and user feedback tools—while avoiding features that may feel superfluous or distract from the editorial integrity of the platform. The relatively balanced participation of most interviewees also strengthens the reliability of these findings, confirming the presence of shared views across diverse media contexts.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that media owners and editors-in-chief generally perceive gamification as a promising and strategic approach for enhancing user engagement and enriching the digital news experience. This perception reflects a growing recognition of the need to adapt traditional journalistic practices to the interactive and participatory dynamics of contemporary digital media landscapes. Specifically, key gamification features—such as point collection systems, leaderboards, popular hashtags, the "saved" function, and interactive mechanisms like "like/dislike" options and news sharing—emerged as particularly effective in capturing user interest and sustaining interaction. These elements were consistently highlighted by participants as contributing positively to audience retention and satisfaction. This finding aligns with prior empirical work by Bitrián Arcas et al. (2023), who emphasized that point-based reward systems and leaderboard rankings serve as powerful extrinsic motivators in digital platforms, effectively driving sustained user behavior and fostering loyalty over time. Likewise, the conclusions drawn by Regalado et al. (2021) support the present study's observations, noting that gamified news experiences—especially those incorporating interactive features like quizzes, badges, and feedback loops—not only enhance the perceived enjoyment of users, but also significantly bolster community engagement and content consumption patterns within digital news ecosystems. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis also uncovered a more critical stance toward certain gamification elements that were perceived as less impactful or even misaligned with the expectations and informational goals of users. Features, such as crossword puzzles and educational tools focused on misinformation, or "fake news" were deemed of limited utility by several participants. These findings echo the work of AL-Kaabi (2024) who pointed out that the effectiveness of gamified features is closely tied to their contextual relevance and perceived value from the user's standpoint. When content appears disconnected from

users' primary motivations—such as seeking timely, credible information—its ability to foster meaningful engagement diminishes considerably. Entertainment elements, while beneficial in light settings, may clash with the perceived seriousness or credibility expected in a news context. Another notable theme that emerged from the interviews was the generally low awareness of the term "gamification" among participants, despite their familiarity with and appreciation for individual game-like features. While respondents could clearly identify and evaluate specific elements—such as points or rankings—they often lacked a formal understanding of the overarching concept. This finding resonates with the conclusions of Arnab (2020) who argues that many professionals working in traditional media structures may encounter or even deploy gamified systems without possessing the theoretical vocabulary or digital literacy to contextualize their usage. This gap suggests a potential area for future training or professional development initiatives aimed at media stakeholders, particularly as digital transformation accelerates within the news industry. An additional point of interest was the cautious stance adopted by participants regarding monetization strategies embedded within gamified environments. While many acknowledged the potential of features like "buying packages to collect points" as tools for both engagement and revenue generation, several expressed concerns about over-commercialization. These concerns primarily revolved around the risk of undermining journalistic values or compromising editorial integrity if gamification were perceived as overly profit-driven. This nuanced position reflects arguments made by Kerrigan and Preece (2022) who warn that the integration of aggressive monetization strategies into gamified news products must be handled with care to avoid damaging user trust or eroding the perceived credibility of journalistic platforms. Moreover, participants responded positively to administrative and feedback-oriented tools, such as data dashboards, activity summaries, and ranking notifications—features that help both users and editors track performance and engagement. This response supports broader findings within the field of Human–Computer Interaction (HCI), particularly those of McDonald (2014) and Fogg (2002), which demonstrate that well-designed feedback mechanisms enhance perceived usability and empower users by reinforcing a sense of control, progress, and participation in digital environments. In this context, the implementation of transparent and responsive feedback loops may serve as a critical mediator between user satisfaction and long-term platform loyalty. Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature that explores both the advantages and limitations of gamification in journalism and digital communication. However, this research contributes novel ideas by focusing specifically on the perspectives of media owners and editors-in-chief—a stakeholder group that is often overlooked in gamification research, which tends to prioritize users or developers. Their insights offer a grounded understanding of how gamification is perceived, applied, and evaluated at the institutional level. In doing so, this study not only broadens the scope of gamification research, but also provides a practical direction for the development of more nuanced and context-sensitive engagement strategies in the evolving digital media landscape. While participants generally viewed gamification as a promising strategy for enhancing user engagement, they also expressed important objections. Concerns about journalistic credibility were frequently raised, with several participants warning that gamified features might undermine the perceived seriousness of news content. Others highlighted audience segmentation challenges, noting that older or less digitally literate readers might reject or ignore such features. Skepticism about monetization strategies was also evident, with participants cautioning that paid point systems could alienate users or appear overly commercial. These critical perspectives align with broader scholarly concerns (Allan, 2010) about balancing innovation with professional values, suggest-

ing that the successful implementation of gamification in journalism requires careful, context-sensitive designs.

This study makes an important contribution by centering the perspectives of media owners and editors-in-chief, a stakeholder group that has received limited attention in the previous research on gamification in journalism. While much existing literature focuses on users or developers, newsroom leadership plays a critical role in determining whether technological innovations are successfully adopted and integrated (Dowling, 2020) (see details in Table 6).

Table 6. Summary of key comparisons.

Our Findings	Literature Insight
High appeal of points, leaderboards, "saved" options, likes/dislikes	Bitrián Arcas et al. (2023) confirm such features boost engagement
Low success of crosswords and educational games for fake news	AL-Kaabi (2024) emphasizes the need for relevance to user goals
Low initial knowledge of gamification among owners	Arnab (2020) highlights low digital literacy regarding gamification concepts
Concerns about aggressive monetization	Kerrigan and Preece (2022) point out risks to credibility if gamification focuses too much on revenue
Positive feedback on admin tools, rankings and user metrics	McDonald (2014) argues feedback loops improve engagement and user control

By applying the Normalization Process Theory, this study highlights the organizational processes through which gamification is made sense of supported operationalized and evaluated within newsrooms. These insights underscore that successful adoption is not only a design or user experience challenge, but also an institutional and managerial process. Addressing this gap offers a practical direction for news organizations seeking to embed gamified strategies in ways that align with professional values, editorial goals, and audience expectations.

7. Limitations and Future Work

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has certain limitations. The primary limitation is the relatively small sample size, comprising ten interviews with regional media owners and editors-in-chief in Greece. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research, while offering deep insights, does not allow for statistically validated conclusions regarding broader trends or correlations in the media industry. Furthermore, language limitations also existed, as interviews were conducted and analyzed in Greek, with NVivo software used primarily for organizational support rather than automated semantic analysis. Moreover, future research should aim to expand the scope and generalizability of the findings. A key direction will be the implementation of a quantitative study using two separate structured questionnaires: One targeted toward journalists and media owners, to collect broader data on their attitudes toward gamification, and a second designed for users/readers, to understand their real behaviors, preferences, and responses to gamified journalism experiences. By comparing these two datasets, future research can identify the gaps between industry expectations and audience reception, offering more robust and actionable insights for the implementation of gamification strategies in online journalism. This dual quantitative approach will help validate and build upon the initial qualitative findings of the current study, providing a clearer roadmap for media organizations aiming to innovate in a competitive digital environment.

8. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight that participants perceived certain gamification elements as particularly impactful in the context of digital news platforms. The most frequently referenced topics, appearing in all ten interviews and corresponding reports, included point-collection systems, popular-hashtags ranking tables, and interactive website features, such as the "saved" and "like/dislike" buttons, and the ability to share news. These elements were described by media owners and editors-in-chief as familiar, intuitive, and likely to encourage longer user visits and greater participation. Participants also valued administrative features, offering positive assessments of management tools, user satisfaction tracking, and opportunities for website improvements. Additionally, monetization strategies, such as offering packages in exchange for points, emerged as a notable topic of discussion. Interviewees viewed these as potentially viable ways to blend engagement with commercial goals. However, it is important to emphasize that these findings represent the views and preferences of participants, shaped by their specific organizational contexts and perceived audience needs, rather than universal best practices. Their emphasis on relatively simple, familiar gamification techniques may reflect practical constraints, such as limited resources, time pressures, and gaps in digital literacy or design expertise. Conversely, features like crossword puzzles and educational components aimed at raising awareness about fake news were mentioned far less frequently and received limited emphasis. This suggests that participants viewed such features as less aligned with their editorial goals or audience expectations. Notably, the theme of "knowledge about gamification" also ranked low in frequency, underscoring a broader lack of formal familiarity with the concept. While many participants could identify and evaluate specific gamified features, they often lacked the conceptual vocabulary or training to think about gamification as a structured, strategic design approach. This gap in the digital literacy and conceptual understanding is an important finding. It indicates the need for professional development opportunities to help media leaders critically evaluate, design, and implement gamification strategies that go beyond basic engagement metrics. Addressing this could enable the adoption of more innovative, ethically grounded, and context sensitive approaches that maintain journalistic integrity while meeting evolving audience expectations. Overall, this study does not claim that these simpler forms of gamification are universally "good" to use. Rather, it reports that media owners and editors-in-chief interviewed here perceive them as effective and feasible in their specific settings. Their views highlight both the opportunities and the challenges of adopting gamification in journalism, underscoring the need for careful, audience-aware designs and an ongoing dialog about aligning technological innovation with core journalistic values. The insights gained from this research can thus serve as a foundation for future work aimed at developing user-centered, participatory news platforms that balance engagement, ethical considerations, and the mission of achieving credible, impactful journalism.

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