

# CHALLENGES OF MANAGING NEWS AGENCIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: TRANSFORMATION EXAMPLES OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL

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## ABSTRACT

*The topic of agency journalism (AJ) and news agencies (NA), where it is primarily practiced, is unjustifiably on the margins. This represents a paradox, considering its significance for the global role of the media industry and the characteristics of the journalistic profession as a whole. That is especially true over the past two decades, during which the entire communication landscape has rapidly changed due to the impact of new technological tools, and considering the fact that NAs are among few traditional media that have successfully responded to these changes. The subject of this article, therefore, is the specificities and importance of AJ and NA, the challenges they are currently facing, and the strategies they undertake in this regard. In the first part we will present the characteristics and significance of AJ and NA, alongside an overview of the circumstances in which they operate today. We will then examine the current transformation models, with a special emphasis on the three globally most influential NAs (AFP, Reuters, and the AP). After that, we will highlight the connection between the basic features of NA and AJ and the successful management models among them today. This also serves as an argument for the reasserted importance of AJ and NA today, reflected in their specific work models, allowing us to conclude that this is the foundation of their success in the current market. Given the evident lack of recent relevant research, our goal is also to describe more concretely how this segment of the media industry functions today, by using examples from the globally most influential NAs. In this way, they are the best illustration of current changes and adaptations to them, as well as a useful guide for other media outlets, such as those that exist in Serbia.*

**Keywords:** news agency journalism, news agencies, news agency management and transformation, technological development, internet, media industry

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of the AJ is a testament of the evolution of journalism and the media industry as a whole, as well as to modern humanity in microcosm. Many media theorists acknowledge such importance. Michael Palmer notes that “the history of international news agencies reveals the evolution of media practices and the impact of technology” [1], and that NAs have “historically been pivotal in the dissemination of global news, influencing public perception” [1]. At the same time, as Terhi Rantanen emphasizes “the transition from telegraph bureaus to cyberfactories illustrates the profound changes in news agency operations” [2]. Therefore, it also reflects the impact of various technological revolutions: from the telegraph and Morse code to the advent of the internet and current technological tools. Despite all, NAJ and NAs are secondary in focus compared to other media entities. The attention of both theorists and practitioners has been more focused on other types of media companies (MCs). This is even more visible today when the most attention is given to the decline of former print and TV giants and the influence of internet media, along with the global reshaping of the communication landscape.

This represents a paradox considering the development and the current state in the media industry and journalism, which are directly related to the influence of NAJ and NAs, as we will further demonstrate. Namely, the NAJ directly influenced the formation of the basic principles of journalism and the functioning of MCs as a whole — from the “lead” and “inverted pyramid”, to the insistence on clarity of style, the importance of involving all potential sources and the verification of facts — the foundations of journalism.

Along the path of defining these principles, NAs successfully incorporated all innovations, always finding ways to turn each challenge into driving force for their growing influence, which then positively spilled over to other parts of the media. The impact of the internet or AI development are also among them. Therefore, Oliver Boyd-Barrett rightly observes that “research on news agencies must consider their historical context and evolution in the digital age” [3], as they are “vital for understanding the dynamics of global communication flows in general” [3].

We will attempt to demonstrate this by showcasing the characteristics and importance of these media and journalism, which we see as the basis for their influence. At the same time, we will examine successful models of transformation, by analysing current strategies of the three most influential NAs (AFP, Reuters and AP). These points to directions for success that will be discussed further, which can be summarized in a few fundamental observations. AFP is more focused on client relationships, the development of a multimedia approach, and its stance towards citizen journalism, by defining three key challenges: speed, audience, and multimedia. Reuters is expanding its network of collaborators to have a significant impact in every part of the global market, while AP is paying the most attention to AI challenges and the protection of its copyright within such context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Serbia, over the past two decades, no more than ten relevant research papers have been published on the topic of NAs and NAJ, including monographs that can be counted on one hand. Noteworthy among them are *Agencijско novinarstvo* (Jovanović & Lazarević, 2008), *Diskurs agencijskog novinarstva* (Gruhonjić, 2011), *Osnovi menadžmenta medija* (Miletić, 2018), and *Agencije: Fabrike vesti* (Petrović, 2018). All published over five years ago with focus on earlier models of NAJ, which indicates a lack of relevant sources that track current changes.

The situation is slightly better outside, but even there this topic is often inadequately treated, with only few works holistically addressing the importance of this area in the current environment. Notable exceptions include: *News Agencies Anachronism or Lifeblood of the Media System?* (Jukes, 2022), *International News Agencies: A History* (Palmer, 2019), several works by Oliver Boyd-Barrett such as *Interfax: Breaking into Global News* (2014), also as Terhi Rantanen's *News Agencies: From Telegraph Bureaus to Cyberfactories, The Future of National News Agencies in Europe* (2019), and study *Introduction to Special Section on News Agencies in Europe* (2020).

We will present some of their findings more specifically later on, but this short overview also confirms the deficit of adequate sources, especially in the past five years, during which the global communication has rapidly changed, while analyses of AJ and NA have been reduced to media articles and insights provided by the agencies themselves, presenting their strategies and the results of their adaptation to current challenges.

## SPECIFICITIES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NAS AND NAJ

NAs are MCs specialized in collecting, processing, and distributing news. However, they are also regarded as “factories and shops of news” [4] because they are both the source and seller of content to other MCs, which further tailor it to their nature and audience. Therefore, NAs can be described as dealing in “wholesale information” [4] because all agency products are offered for sale, through subscriptions to their services. The primary recipients of agency content are the media, which adapt it according to their specifics and audience, often shortening it (print, radio, TV), changing headlines (print, internet), adding subheadings (print, internet), and broadcasting it to the audience, with an obligation to respect the agency’s authorship and usage rules.

To universalize these processes, NAs have “factory” characteristics:

- *continuous work, with assembly line-like operations – 24/7;*
- *the agency journalist is depersonalized;*
- *agency news is the primary product intended for the market [4].*

The development of NAJ would not have been entirely possible without an understanding of the importance of objectivity and the provision of fully verified information. Therefore, the main features of NAs’ work include:

- *teamwork, with content creators often defined as such;*
- *rapid, accurate, and objective gathering of significant information;*
- *presented content must be clear and easy to navigate;*
- *concisely and neutrally crafted, in a suitable agency format;*
- *information is universal and understandable to all types of users, regardless of their level of knowledge or geographic location” [5].*

The main characteristics of NAs' work are:

- *an extensive network of correspondents covering large geographical areas;*
- *the ability to access information faster than the users of their services;*
- *a standardized skillset for preparing and formatting content and delivering it quickly so that users can easily process and publish it to end consumers (audiences).*

The core segments of NAs are their central office and correspondent network, while the classification of NAs is based on the nature of their news offerings (general or specialized), and their size, i.e., the area they cover (global, national, or local).

When discussing the influence of NAs in the global communication framework, we can begin with Rantanen’s assessment [6] that they play a “critical role in shaping public discourse and media landscapes”. The essential of the NAs, which have shaped fundamental journalistic standards, include:

1. *Speed: every piece of news is published as quickly as possible, without delay.*
2. *Accuracy: verification is always mandatory.*
3. *Clarity: the report must be understandable to everyone.*
4. *Precision: achieved by adhering to the first three principles.*

These principles, established within the NAs and NAJ, continue to be relevant today, becoming the canon of professional media and journalism in general. NAs were born from the professional necessity to summarize and immediately communicate new information, which in turn inspired headlines and motivated audiences to keep engaging with the presented content. This approach shaped the first journalistic “leads,” which remained the most frequently content-processing methods in journalism as a whole. The same logic underlies another fundamental point in journalism education, the so-called “inverted pyramid” model, in which facts are organized by decreasing importance. Following this dynamic, led to a universal approach to news creation, by attempting to answer five key questions related to a given event: *who, what, where, when, and why.*

The style of crafting agency content has always needed to be concise and clear—understandable to diverse audience profiles. This working method has not changed with the development of global communication, as NAs have responded to new trends. They still emphasize facts, verify every detail, separate fact from opinion, and cite sources.

Considering the influence of NAs, we can also conclude that "news agencies play a crucial role in shaping national development and can perpetuate information imperialism" [7], which possibly "address global inequalities" [7]. Ifeanyi Nwokeocha discusses the continued dominance of major Western news agencies in shaping global news narratives [8], and emphasizes the need for a more pluralistic and decentralized news ecosystem to ensure diverse perspectives [8]. Therefore, it's also important to consider that the effects of NAs work is also measured in the heavy reliance on them as sources, which can lead to the "homogenization of news narratives across different platforms" [9]. This phenomenon should be considered alongside the role of globally influential NAs, which will be further discussed in this article.

## NAS IN THE NEW MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

The contemporary digital era strongly affected the media and journalism, bringing "comprehensive technological changes, particularly the influence of the internet, the emergence of new communicators, and so-called new media" [10], consequently causing a "crisis of the traditional media business model" [10]. MCs have been forced to adapt, by using different strategies "shaped by the nature of each media outlet" [10]. For survival, they must "have a clear editorial organization, precise task distribution, stable work operations, and functioning staff, which implies a clear market orientation, responsible editorial process organization, and a consistent editorial policy" [10].

Boyd-Barrett notes that "the rise of the Internet has drastically altered the function of traditional news agencies" [11], and that they "must adapt to survive in a rapidly changing media environment characterized by fragmentation" [11]. NAs, like other media, "struggle with balancing timely crisis news coverage with maintaining journalistic standards" [12], and the key challenge therefore is: "How to balance financial sustainability with public service responsibilities?" [12]. While they face the competition from online media, they are also threatened by the unauthorized use of their products, because such companies mostly do not pay royalties for the use of their content on which they generate profits (it mostly goes to companies like Google and Facebook). Stephen Jukes, therefore, warns that NAs must continue innovating to stay relevant, which involves not just technological advancements but also new business models to compete in a world dominated by platforms like Google and Facebook [13].

The same can be observed in the Serbian media landscape, where domestic NAs may serve as an example. Such case is Tanjug, once a highly influential agency on a global scale, which has long sought its modalities for survival, aiming to find them through a current multidimensional approach to market organization and work processes.

However, NAs have been more successful than other media in adapting to the changes. They have leveraged the internet as a powerful communication tool, utilizing it to improve the gathering, processing, and dissemination of information. They are also not always immune to instances where speed and profit take precedence over truth, leading to the spread of insufficiently verified information and a uniformity of style, a byproduct of the dominance of media commercialization and the race for exclusivity and audiences.

*Table 1: Impacts of new technologies on NAs and NAJ*

<i>Positive effects</i>	<i>Negative effects</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - Easier access to information sources through websites.</li> <li>• - Faster database and documentation operations to provide news "background";</li> <li>• - More efficient expansion of readership beyond traditional subscribers, with a broader influence on public opinion.</li> <li>• - Enhanced and simplified newsroom operations, particularly for audio services and video content acquisition;</li> <li>• - Faster and easier access to interview subjects (email interviews);</li> <li>• - Quicker transmission of text, audio, and video content;</li> <li>• - News from the field reaches the editor's desk more swiftly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• - Unreliability and the potential for deception;</li> <li>• - The spread of unverified information due to the anonymity of online sources;</li> <li>• - Uniformity, lack of creativity, and loss of style.</li> </ul>

*Source: Authors*

The internet, however, has not "shut down" NAs as it has with some other formerly influential MC, as they have embraced its advantages to enhance their efficiency. On the other hand, internet media lack the organizational breadth and journalists who risk their lives nor do they have editors to verify the information from the field. By incorporating the internet, NAs have avoided the greatest threat to their survival, and continue to be indispensable due to their systematic, organized 24-hour operations, adapting their product to meet the needs of their users. Embracing technological innovations helped attract new users and retain existing ones.

## GIANTS OF AJ – EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION

Over time a few of NAs have emerged that have dictated the pace of general media development. These agencies have followed the pulse of the societies they originated from and global conditions, which continuously evolved. As a result, the most prominent still are *Reuters*, *Associated Press* (AP), and *Agence France-Presse* (AFP). Stephen Jukes discusses how traditional NAs, such as Reuters and AP, now have to adapt to the rapidly changing digital landscape, because they are essential to providing credible, reliable information in a fragmented media ecosystem [13].

So far, those agencies have managed to withstand the test of time by finding ways to revitalize their informational potential, and that is why some of these models can be observed through the examples of the three aforementioned NAs.

## THE EXAMPLE OF AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Agence France-Presse (AFP), as one of the three most influential global NAs, appears to have timely recognized the advantages of the Internet and AI, utilizing its existing potentials and thereby increasing its efficiency.

A notable illustration of AFP's adequate approach to new challenges was presented by its former CEO, Emmanuel Hoog, at the 2012 European Alliance of News Agencies meeting. In his speech, he emphasized that the question was not whether the Internet would create new revenue streams for news agencies but rather how they would maintain their presence online. Starting from this thesis, Hoog underscored that agencies must establish a new relationship with the public by not only delivering content but also informing audiences about how news is produced. Among other points, he wanted to show that the issue at hand was related to improving the brand and knowledge online, not solely revenue generation.

Thus, AFP embarked on the journey of creating a new relationship with its clients in a timely manner. The oldest of all global news agencies understood that it had to enter the race defined by three key challenges: speed, audience, and multimedia, especially in the context of the Internet [14]. The first challenge relates to speed, as NAs have held a monopoly on it for centuries, especially when working with clients in different time zones. Those clients were not concerned about timely news delivery, even with strict printing or broadcasting deadlines for TV and radio programs. With technological advancements, AFP found itself, as Hoog also pointed out, in a paradoxical situation, fearing that its clients might become competitors on the Internet. Discussions also emerged around the potential loss of monopoly over breaking news. The focus was certainly on acceleration, as technological development made it possible for information to appear online even before agencies could broadcast it. This drastically reduced the time gap between when an event occurred and when it was reported [14].

On the other hand, the rise of professionals, as well as amateurs involved in the modern model of so-called citizen journalism, due to the continuous dissemination of news on social media, further complicated matters. This increased the risk of blurring the line between news and rumors, and the overload of information became a concern for the public.

Lastly, Hoog justifiably reminded that agencies once belonged exclusively to written journalism, where the focus wasn't on photographs, animated images, graphics, or audio and video recordings. The advent of the Internet changed this dynamic, placing visual elements at the forefront in the creation and distribution of content [14]. During this meeting, a proposal was made on how NAs, including AFP, could address these challenges. Regarding speed, the emphasis was placed on finding a compromise between reliability and speed. It was stressed that the goal should not be to be first, regardless of whether the information is accurate, but rather to ensure reliability. The solution to this second challenge was found in providing depth alongside the news. It was expected that news agencies would help readers, listeners, or viewers understand what is happening, not just deliver facts. Naturally, AFP also took on the challenge of citizen journalism on social media by launching numerous Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and blogs to offer context to events.

This visibility and content distribution created a new space for adapting to the third challenge: multimedia. This involved the collaboration between photographs, texts, and video recordings. AFP created a model where all these elements converged with written words, forming a multimedia editorial system. Hoog previously announced that the Internet should be seen as a playground, not just for development but also for building new relationships with clients, with a common goal of coverage and traffic transfer between Internet pages [14].

## THE EXAMPLE OF REUTERS

A unique but equally successful response to the challenges of the Internet era was made by Reuters through its 2017 launch of a multimedia platform named Reuters Connect [15]. This platform represents a model of AI-based content with specific recommendations personalized for each user based on previous activities. Reuters defined project as "the most comprehensive digital platform powering the news ecosystem" [15].

This platform demonstrated that Reuters currently generates and creates a vast amount of news reporting from across the world, with over 2,500 reporters at 200 locations [15]. The platform offers access to various types of content through subscription, with efficient search tools and planning features, allowing users to receive alerts, tips, and editorial calendars. This system provides real-time coverage of all types of content (in different formats) ready for publication, while also offering access to rich archives, unedited video recordings, and 24/7 customer support [15].

An indicator of Reuters' commitment to planning was the announcement of seven new strategic partnerships in 2020 with agencies such as AAP (Australia), Anadolu (Turkey), Belga (Belgium), Bernama (Malaysia), DPA (Germany), Latin American News Agency (Argentina), and Scanpix (Scandinavia/Baltics). Through these partnerships, Reuters content became available to clients on Reuters Connect, which, three years after its launch, offered over 20 million stories, videos, and photographs in one place [16].

By the first anniversary of the platform, Reuters had revealed several key developments. First, there was a clear trend toward convergence, as users began utilizing all forms of content, from photographs to video recordings. Second, live streaming emerged as a prominent trend, with a 100% increase in the number of live streams used by clients. In 2017 alone, live video usage grew by 58%, while in 2018, an average of about 700 live feeds were broadcast monthly. Third, pre-planned live events surpassed breaking news in popularity, except for major stories. For instance, the lunar eclipse, a pre-scheduled event, led to a 10% increase in users regularly subscribing to Reuters' calendar alerts for upcoming events. Fourth, speed was crucial, with 25% of content used by other media within two hours of being posted on the platform [15].

## THE EXAMPLE OF ASSOCIATED PRESS

Another global NA that has kept pace with technological innovations is Associated Press (AP). Its current strategic solution was found in a platform similar to Reuters', named: *AP Newsroom* [18]. *AP Newsroom* enables users to access multimedia content from anywhere, at any time, and on any device. It was designed for easy searching, thanks to an interface optimized for use on computers and phones, allowing users to browse and download AP's latest content [17].

Similar to Reuters', *AP Newsroom* offers scheduling for planned and new event coverage [18]. Users have access to all formats—text, photographs, audio, video, graphics, or live streaming from various events—with filters that refine the content based on the expressive possibilities of the media. Like Reuters, AP personalizes the user experience by tracking topics and saving searches, while their global news desk updates the news 24/7, almost in real time [17].

The AP has recently demonstrated its seriousness and anticipation of changes by making a strategic decision to confront the challenges posed by AI. Namely, this global media giant is also one of the first media companies in general to have taken a clear stance on AI in a timely manner and signed a long-term agreement with OpenAI for the use of content. This agreement is aimed at preventing potential harm that these technological innovations may bring, such as misuse and unauthorized use of the media content they produce. Alongside signing this agreement, AP has also gone a step further by preparing and publishing its "Code of Artificial Intelligence Usage" in the process of content production [19].

## DISCUSSION

Steph Jukes rightly highlights that NAs still are trusted sources of information in an age of misinformation and fake news, because their role and importance in verifying facts and distributing news to various platforms ensures their continued relevance [13]. Summarizing the specificities of NAs and its journalism on one side, and examples of current strategies of the most influential among them on the other, we can draw to several notes attached to this Jukes' note.

Firstly, we must acknowledge that NAs are also facing "significant challenges in monetizing news, leading to innovative business models" [19], considering the necessity for "crisis-resistant models stemming from declining trust and changes in audience behavior" [20]. Consequently, we must recognize that their traditional working model is "under threat, necessitating a reevaluation of how news is produced and consumed" [21], and "requires innovation in content delivery and audience engagement strategies" [21]. This aligns with the Rantanen's observation that "digital advancements challenge traditional news agency roles, necessitating a shift in strategy and function" [2].

Considering that fact, and the impact of new technology and user-generated content on NAs, we should also note the challenge of balancing speed with accuracy, and point to another Jukes' remark who insists that while news can spread instantly online, the rigorous standards of traditional agencies remain vital for maintaining journalistic integrity [13]. Despite the necessity for changes, it is, therefore, crucial to emphasize that the imperative for their success still lies in adhering to the ideals of the journalistic profession, formalized through the NAJ. Namely, as Palmer emphasizes "quality control mechanisms are essential for maintaining the credibility of news agency outputs in a competitive market" [22], especially since the struggle for survival have intensified competition among IAs, leading to "diversification in content and service offerings" [22].

Confirmation of such assessments, as well as an illustration of success when understood adequately, can be found in the described management of Reuters, AP, and AFP. These organizations base their strategies on the traditional strengths of this type of journalism, while simultaneously incorporating them into a meta-media approach, anticipating all the changes to come. This can be seen in the example of new platforms such as *Reuters Connect* and *AP Newsroom*, or through the recognition of the need to strategically position themselves in response to AI challenges, protecting their authorship and market rights (AP's "Code of Ethics" is such example). Serbian Tanjug has recently also adopted a similar strategy, but due to the complexity of its history and the circumstances in which it operates, it will be interesting to monitor the long-term results of such a decision.

Their general success brings both positive consequences for MCs and society at large, although it is necessary to keep in mind the possible negative outcomes of current processes of adaptation, caused as the unprofessional approach of certain media actors, and non-compliance with the above-mentioned imperative.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The general importance of NAs and AJ is evident in their significant influence on contemporary journalism and media industry, and it remains substantial. Given the trends of reducing newsrooms and the universalization of tasks within them, let us try to imagine any media outlet in the world without access to the information sent by the most influential global NAs or even those local NAs that "feed" them with the information from its (local) context. Is it then conceivable to envision optimally sustainable type of media outlet without the role played by NAs?

If we agree that it is difficult, we indirectly arrive at a renewed affirmation of the importance of this media domain, as well as the most concrete illustration of the paradox we began with, with the hope that we have contributed to its unraveling.

In the new, digitalized environment, NAs also face numerous challenges. Boyd-Barrett concludes that their success depends on their ability "to adapt to changing political and media landscapes" [23], while Rantanen warns that their future is correlated with capacity to adapt to "technological changes and audience expectations" [6], but also believes that "collaboration and innovation are key for agencies to remain viable amidst global competition" [24], which is a useful suggestion for all of them, including those in our country.

These challenges are only a small part of the puzzle confronting the entire media industry. Some have addressed them more successfully than others. NAs have generally been more successful, although they are also facing with the effects of the global media crisis and the necessity to adapt to the new operational context, often at the expense of the quality of media content. If we want to look for the reasons behind their success, they lie in the flexibility and approach to the innovations.

Therefore, the logic of organizing NA operations and journalism within them is easiest to compare with online media. This is easy to conclude from the adaptation modes of the globally most influential NAs. With one important caveat in this comparison—the tradition of respecting journalistic principles within NAJ, which is often not the case with online. Such models are also a guide for those NAs that are not doing as well or are still searching for their place in the new media ecosystem.

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