OBSERVING A MULTI-SPEED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT: THE FIRST RESEARCH CYCLE OF THE MEDIA SURVEY CENTER AT SOFIA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Purpose. The article examines the first research cycle (2024–2026) of the Media Survey Center at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", a university-based center created to observe the Bulgarian media environment continuously and with several methods. It asks what the Center makes observable that international instruments covering Bulgaria do not, and what its findings reveal about the pace at which different dimensions of the media environment change. **Methods.** A single-case study of the Center combines an integrative synthesis of its seven outputs, including national surveys of journalists (n = 600 in 2024; n = 224 in 2025), year-long media monitoring, normative analysis and quantitative visual analysis, with a comparison against international benchmarks and the timeline of European regulation. **Results.** The Center links professional, technological, normative, discursive and visual evidence that international instruments record separately or not at all. Its findings reveal a multi-speed transformation: journalists' public-service role conceptions remain stable, whereas generative AI entered newsroom practice within about two years and is perceived mainly as a risk to accuracy, intellectual property, transparency and trust; binding transparency rules arrived only after almost four years. **Significance.** The article introduces the notion of normative lag between fast-changing tools and slower professional and regulatory norms. It argues that a national research center should match the frequency of its measurements to the pace of each dimension.

Keywords: Media Survey Center; media environment; journalism; generative artificial intelligence; normative lag; media monitoring; visual communication; Bulgaria

1. Introduction

Accounts of media change often refer to "the digital transformation" in the singular, as if technologies, professional values, regulation and public trust moved together. In practice, a new tool can spread through newsrooms within months, whereas the values with which journalists justify their work, the rules that govern it and the trust that audiences extend to it change over years. Deuze and Witschge (2018) argue that journalism should be studied as a field in continuous transformation rather than as a stable professional core. Their argument raises a question that is rarely asked directly: do the different components of that field transform at the same pace?

Classic social theory offers a vocabulary for the problem. Ogburn introduced the concept of cultural lag with the thesis that "the various parts of modern culture are not changing at the same rate" (Ogburn, 1922: 200); when a rapidly changing part depends on a slowly changing one, a period of maladjustment follows. Rosa (2013) later described modernity as a process of social acceleration that proceeds unevenly across technology, social institutions and the pace of everyday life. Applied to journalism, both perspectives imply that the most serious problems of transformation may arise from the gaps between dimensions that move at different speeds.

The Bulgarian media environment makes such gaps particularly visible. Comparative research shows that the media systems of Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria among them, differ above all in political parallelism, the strength of public-service broadcasting, press freedom and foreign ownership (Castro Herrero et al., 2017), dimensions first systematized by Hallin and Mancini (2004), and that relations between the media and political and business elites in the region frequently take clientelistic forms (Örnebring, 2012). These features persist. The Media Pluralism Monitor assesses the overall risk to media pluralism in Bulgaria as medium-high (64%), with the highest score in market plurality (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2026), and trust in news has fallen to 21%, well below the 37% average for the markets covered by the Digital News Report (Price, 2026).

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) adds a new and particularly fast layer to this environment. Automation has long been part of news work (Diakopoulos, 2019), but generative systems intervene directly in writing, editing and image production, the very tasks through which journalistic authority is exercised. Elsewhere, journalists who adopt such tools value efficiency gains but worry about accuracy, credibility and algorithmic bias (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2026), and that news organisations have responded with guidelines that converge on transparency and human supervision (Becker et al., 2025). European legislation has followed more slowly, as Section 3.3 shows.

Observing such uneven change requires research that follows several dimensions of the same environment over time. International instruments such as the Worlds of Journalism Study (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova & Karadjov, 2025), the Digital News Report and the Media Pluralism Monitor provide indispensable benchmarks for Bulgaria, yet each observes one dimension according to its own agenda and cycle. National research, for its part, has produced a considerable body of findings that remain dispersed and discontinuous (Valkanova, 2025; Valkanova & Mihailov, 2024). The Media Survey Center at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" was established in 2024 to address this gap by observing the Bulgarian media environment repeatedly and with several methods.

The article examines the first research cycle of the Center (2024–2026) as a case. Its aim is twofold: to establish what the Center makes observable in comparison with the international instruments covering Bulgaria, and to determine what its findings reveal about the pace at which the dimensions of the media environment change. Three hypotheses guide the analysis:

H1: By studying several dimensions of one national environment, the Center produces evidence that the international instruments covering Bulgaria provide only separately or not at all.

H2: The dimensions observed by the Center change at different speeds: professional role conceptions slowly, technological practices quickly, and media outputs unevenly across segments of the media system.

H3: Journalists experience the fastest change, the spread of generative AI, primarily as a challenge to the epistemic and ethical foundations of their work, while regulation and self-regulation respond with a delay, producing a normative lag.

The evidence supports all three hypotheses. It indicates that the Center's main value lies in connecting dimensions that other instruments keep apart, and that the frequency of observation should match the pace of each dimension.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The study is a single-case study (Yin, 2018) of the Media Survey Center. Within the case, the Center's outputs are examined through an integrative evidence synthesis and compared with external benchmarks through documentary analysis. Because the outputs differ in units of analysis, sampling and measurement, their findings are not pooled statistically. They are compared qualitatively, following the logic of convergence and divergence used in mixed methods research synthesis (Heyvaert et al., 2013) and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978).

2.2. Sources

The corpus comprises seven outputs of the Center's first research cycle that (a) report data collected within the programme or set out its framework, (b) concern the Bulgarian media environment and (c) were published or accepted for publication by September 2026: the programmatic framework of the Center (Valkanova, 2025), the 2024 survey of journalists (Media Survey Center, 2024), the 2025 survey on generative AI (Valkanova, 2026), the analysis of professional ethics (Mihaylov & Valkanova, 2026), the monitoring of media representations of civil society (Ivanova, 2025, 2026) and two studies of visual communication (Stoyanova, 2025, 2026). The data and methods of the empirical outputs are summarised in Table 1.

The external benchmarks are the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study for Bulgaria (Slavtcheva-Petkova & Karadjov, 2025), the Bulgarian pages of the Digital News Report for 2025 and 2026 (Price, 2025, 2026), the Media Pluralism Monitor 2026 (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2026), an independent media capture report (International Press Institute & Media and Journalism Research Center, 2025) and the texts of the Artificial Intelligence Act and the European Media Freedom Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1083, 2024; Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, 2024).

2.3. Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, each research line of the Center was compared with the nearest international instrument covering Bulgaria in terms of object, data and periodicity (H1); the nearest instrument was defined as the one whose object of observation overlaps most with that of the research line. Second, findings relevant to H2 and H3 were extracted from the publications as reported, without reanalysing raw data, and each dimension was assigned an indicative pace of change on the basis of three criteria: the interval between the public emergence of a phenomenon and its appearance as established practice or perception in the data; the degree of continuity with earlier benchmarks; and the dependence of change on political events, platform cycles or legislative timetables. Pace was coded as *fast* when change becomes observable within one or two years, *event-dependent* when it follows political or platform contexts, and *slow* when a pattern remains stable across independent measurements taken years apart.

Third, a hypothesis was regarded as supported when at least two independent sources pointed in the same direction and none contradicted it.

2.4. Researcher position

All three authors belong to the research team of the Center, and four of the seven outputs in the corpus are (co-)authored by them (Ivanova, 2025; Mihaylov & Valkanova, 2026; Valkanova, 2025, 2026), and the authors also edited the volumes in which most of the outputs were published. This position provides access to instruments and documentation that publications do not always show, but it also creates a risk of favourable interpretation. To reduce this risk, the inclusion criteria were fixed in advance, the Center's findings are read against independent international benchmarks, and the constraints of each source are discussed in Section 4.

3. Results

3.1. H1: The Center connects what international instruments observe separately

The Center was established in 2024 within a project funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund. Its programme starts from the diagnosis that knowledge about the Bulgarian media environment is extensive but sporadic, lacking continuity, comprehensiveness and systematicity (Valkanova, 2025). In response, it combines repeated empirical measurement, research databases and interdisciplinary cooperation among journalism and communication scholars, specialists in visual design and sociologists; its first national survey was carried out together with sociologists from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Valkanova, 2026). The first-cycle results have appeared mainly as chapters in two edited volumes of the Faculty, published in 2025 and 2026. Table 1 sets the Center's research lines against the nearest international instruments.

Table 1

Research lines of the Media Survey Center's first cycle compared with international instruments covering Bulgaria

Research line	Center output and data	Nearest international instrument	What the Center adds
Professional roles and values	Media Survey Center (2024): national online survey, March–April 2024; random stratified sample, n = 600; 18 questions	Worlds of Journalism Study: comparative survey of journalists in multi-year waves	A national instrument that can be repeated on the Center's own schedule
Generative AI in journalism	Valkanova (2026): national online survey, March–May 2025; n = 224 journalists, editors and media managers	Digital News Report: annual survey of audiences, not of journalists	Professionals' experience of AI within the same research cycle
Professional ethics	Mihaylov & Valkanova (2026): normative analysis of professional morality	Media Pluralism Monitor: annual assessment of risks to pluralism	Interpretation of norms from within the profession

Research line	Center output and data	Nearest international instrument	What the Center adds
Media representations	Ivanova (2025, 2026): monitoring, January–December 2024; 1,484 publications on 44 civil society organisations; content and framing analysis	No regular international instrument	Repeatable coding of national and local coverage
Visual-platform communication	Stoyanova (2025): design framework; Stoyanova (2026): thumbnails of nine YouTube channels coded on twelve parameters, chi-square tests	Digital News Report: platform use for news	Measurement of visual form, not only of platform reach

Note. The programmatic framework of the Center (Valkanova, 2025) is not listed. AI: artificial intelligence; n: number of respondents.

Read against these instruments, the Center's research lines are complementary rather than duplicative. The international instruments supply cross-national comparability, which a national centre cannot achieve on its own. The Center supplies regular coverage of dimensions that no instrument observes in Bulgaria, notably media representations and visual form, and the possibility of relating all five dimensions to one another within a single national framework. The inclusion of visual analysis is particularly significant, because framing research has long concentrated on texts, while visual news discourse has remained comparatively unexamined (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Its 2025 survey also shows how quickly a national centre can react: an emerging technology was examined within the same research cycle in which it entered newsroom practice. H1 is therefore supported, with the qualification that the audience dimension has only begun to be addressed (Karabeliova et al., 2026) and that media economics is not yet covered.

3.2. H2: The dimensions change at different speeds

In the 2024 survey, respondents most strongly described the journalist as an active observer of social processes whose tasks are to inform, investigate, analyse and warn society of emerging risks (Media Survey Center, 2024). This classical, public-service conception closely matches the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study for Bulgaria, where the strongest endorsement went to counteracting disinformation, drawing attention to society's problems and educating the audience (Slavtcheva-Petkova & Karadjov, 2025). Two independently designed instruments, applied with different samples and timing, thus arrive at a similar normative core. The tools changed far faster. Little more than two years after generative AI tools became publicly available in late 2022, the Center's 2025 survey could already treat their implementation, benefits and risks as part of everyday professional experience (Valkanova, 2026). Practices are reorganised on a scale of months; declared role conceptions shift, if at all, on the scale of survey waves.

Media outputs change at yet other speeds, and unevenly across segments. In Entman's definition, to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient" (Entman, 1993: 52). The Center's monitoring shows that this selection differs markedly between levels of the media system: local coverage of civil society organisations

is predominantly neutral or supportive and presents them through concrete community activities, whereas national coverage is considerably more polarised, with frames of foreign influence, threatened sovereignty and ideological deviance (Ivanova, 2025). The national pattern took shape amid politically charged legislative debates, so discursive change is here event-dependent rather than a steady trend.

Visual form shows segmentation of another kind. Stoyanova (2025) argues that visual design steers attention, supports trust and shapes how audiences participate. Her quantitative study identifies three types of visual identity among Bulgarian YouTube channels of political commentary, with statistically significant differences in style, colour, composition, symbolism and typographic choices (Stoyanova, 2026). Visual language thus works as a marker of political identity, consistent with the view that visual frames operate at several levels, from denotation to ideological representation (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Because such conventions depend on platform interfaces and recommendation logics (van Dijck et al., 2018), they can be expected to change quickly, although the cross-sectional design does not yet allow this to be measured.

Institutional trust, finally, is a slow variable that has nevertheless not stood still: trust in news in Bulgaria fell from 29% in 2024 to 21% in 2026 (Price, 2025, 2026), which suggests that slow dimensions accumulate the consequences of faster ones. The evidence supports H2. Indicatively, technological practices and platform-visual forms change fastest, discursive patterns change with political events, and role conceptions, regulation and trust change slowly.

3.3. H3: Generative AI exposes a normative lag

Table 2 summarises the main indicators of perceived risk in the Center's 2025 survey.

Table 2

Perceptions of generative AI among Bulgarian media professionals, 2025 (n = 224)

Indicator	Response option	Share of respondents
AI is likely to reduce jobs and threaten the profession	Categorically affirmative	22.8%
	Moderately affirmative	44.6%
Journalistic values perceived as threatened (multiple answers possible)	Quality and accuracy of information	66.5%
	Intellectual property	63.8%
	Transparency of sources	46.9%
	Trust	44.6%
Assessed risk to the accuracy of information	High	46.0%
	Medium	51.3%
	Low	2.7%

Note. Online survey conducted by the Media Survey Center between March and May 2025. Source: Valkanova (2026). AI: artificial intelligence; n: number of respondents.

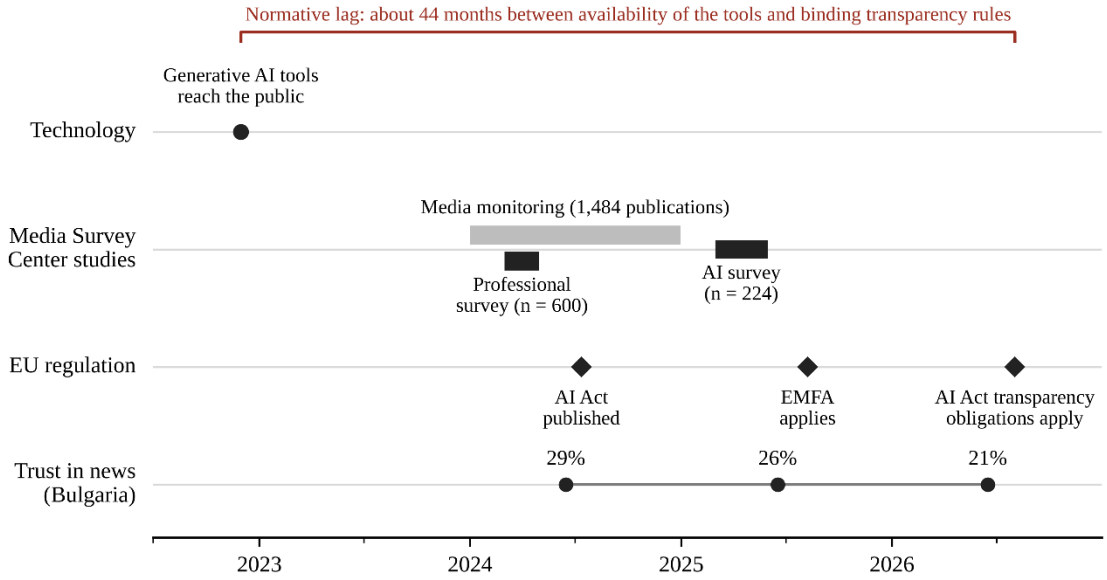
Two features of these results stand out. The near consensus that AI poses at least a medium risk to accuracy indicates that the deepest concern lies with the epistemic core of journalism rather than with any single task. The values most often seen as threatened all concern the relationship of journalism to truth, authorship and audiences; concern about employment is substantial but does not displace them. A similar pattern appears among early adopters elsewhere; as one journalist interviewed by Cools and Diakopoulos put it,

“If we produce hallucinated content, we can quickly become an unreliable source of information” (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2026: 889). Mihaylov and Valkanova (2026) treat professional morality as a regulatory mechanism that operates alongside law and self-regulation and shapes the obligations of communicators towards their audiences. Read together with the survey, their analysis indicates that the risks identified by journalists are questions of professional responsibility, which cannot be delegated to the systems that perform individual operations.

The formal norms that would give this responsibility institutional shape have arrived with a delay (Figure 1). The Artificial Intelligence Act was published in 2024, but its transparency obligations for AI-generated public-interest text apply only from August 2026, more than three and a half years after generative tools reached the public and about fifteen months after the Center’s AI survey. Tellingly, the Act exempts such text from disclosure when it has undergone human review or editorial control and a natural or legal person holds editorial responsibility for its publication (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, 2024, Art. 50(4)). The legal solution thus relies on the very professional mechanism that journalists see as being under pressure. The European Media Freedom Act has applied since August 2025, yet independent monitors report little or no tangible progress in its implementation in Bulgaria (International Press Institute & Media and Journalism Research Center, 2025; Price, 2026). Publishers abroad have adopted AI guidelines centred on transparency and human oversight (Becker et al., 2025); whether Bulgarian newsrooms have comparable rules has not yet been systematically documented. The evidence supports H3: the technology changed first, professional concern followed quickly, and institutional norms are still catching up.

Figure 1

Technological, research and regulatory milestones relevant to the Bulgarian media environment, 2022–2026



Note. The bracket marks the interval between the public release of generative AI tools (November 2022) and the date from which European Union transparency obligations for AI-generated public-interest text apply (2 August 2026). Trust values give the share of respondents in Bulgaria who trust most news most of the time. AI: artificial intelligence; EU: European Union; EMFA: European Media Freedom Act; n: number of respondents. Sources: Media Survey Center (2024); Ivanova (2025); Valkanova (2026); Price (2025, 2026); Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 (2024) and 2024/1689 (2024).

4. Discussion

The case suggests that the value of a national research centre lies less in any single study than in the connections between studies. The normative lag documented in Section 3.3 became visible only because the Center combined a survey of professional values, a rapid survey on AI and a normative analysis of ethics, and could read them against the regulatory timeline. None of the international instruments covering Bulgaria would have revealed it, because each observes only one side of the gap.

The concept of normative lag adapts Ogburn's (1922) cultural lag to journalism, where the adaptive culture that must catch up with new tools consists of professional ethics, editorial rules, regulation and audience trust. The Bulgarian data suggest that the lag is not one of awareness, since journalists recognise the risks to accuracy almost unanimously. It is institutional: the rules that would translate this awareness into routine practice are still being written while the tools are already in use. Ogburn's theory has often been read as technologically determinist, and the present case qualifies it, because the length of the lag is not fixed by technology. The Artificial Intelligence Act itself makes editorial responsibility the condition for exemption, so newsrooms that define such responsibility now can close part of the gap without waiting for regulation. The pattern also corresponds to what Rosa (2013) calls desynchronisation: institutions whose procedures require time, such as legislation and professional self-regulation, fall behind faster spheres of social life.

The Bulgarian context makes the lag particularly consequential. Where trust in news is low and has fallen in each of the last two editions of the Digital News Report (Price, 2025, 2026), where market plurality carries the highest risk among the areas assessed by the Media Pluralism Monitor (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2026), and where the implementation of the European Media Freedom Act has stalled (International Press Institute & Media and Journalism Research Center, 2025), errors produced with generative tools fall on an already fragile relationship between journalism and its audiences. In such an environment, the period before formal rules take effect is not a neutral transition; it is the period in which the credibility of the profession is most exposed.

The stability of role conceptions requires a more careful reading. Research on role performance shows that the roles journalists endorse and the roles their content enacts often diverge (Mellado, 2015), and Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) treat journalistic roles as discursive constructions through which the profession defends its institutional identity. From this perspective, the stable public-service self-image documented in 2024 may partly be a response to pressure rather than evidence that practice is unchanged, a reading that is plausible in a media system marked by clientelistic ties (Örnebring, 2012). H2 is therefore supported for role conceptions only; testing it for role performance would require linking survey indicators with content-based measures.

The Bulgarian findings on AI also differ in emphasis from some international research. Early adopters in Dutch and Danish newsrooms appreciate efficiency gains alongside the risks (Cools & Diakopoulos, 2026), and leading publishers in several countries have already formalised their responses (Becker et al., 2025). The stronger risk orientation of the Bulgarian respondents may reflect a broader sample that is not limited to early adopters, the low level of public trust in news, or both. Only a repeated measurement can distinguish between these explanations.

The case also has implications beyond Bulgaria. Smaller European media markets are covered by the same international instruments, but these are not necessarily accompanied by national programmes that relate professional, technological, discursive and visual evidence to one another. The experience of the Center suggests that a faculty of journalism is well placed to host such a programme, because several of the necessary resources, including expertise in different disciplines, contact with practising journalists and established publication outlets, are already in place. At the same time, national centres cannot produce the cross-national comparability that makes international

instruments valuable, so they are best understood as complements to these instruments rather than substitutes for them.

The main methodological implication concerns the timing of observation. Measuring all dimensions at the same interval means observing slow dimensions too often, which burdens respondents, or fast dimensions too rarely, which misses their transitions. A research centre that follows a multi-speed environment therefore needs to match the frequency of its measurements to the pace of each dimension; only repeated measurement can also show whether the normative lag narrows over time.

The study has several limitations. The case is analysed by members of the Center, which limits the distance of the assessment. The two surveys used different samples and recruitment procedures, and the concentration of the 2025 respondents in Sofia may reflect recruitment channels rather than the structure of the profession; their results are therefore not compared directly. The pace codes are inferred from cross-sectional evidence and from the timing of external events rather than measured. The trust figures come from an online survey and therefore describe the online population rather than all citizens. The corpus also includes only outputs available by September 2026, and studies still in progress may modify the picture. Finally, the platforms and AI systems that drive the fastest changes are transnational, so national evidence captures their effects but not their causes.

5. Conclusions

The first research cycle of the Media Survey Center shows what a national, university-based research centre can add to the observation of a changing media environment. Its studies connect professional, technological, normative, discursive and visual evidence that international instruments record separately or not at all (H1), and they show that a national centre can study a new technology within the very period in which it is adopted, something that surveys conducted in multi-year waves cannot do. Read together, they show that the Bulgarian media environment is not transforming as a single block: journalists' public-service conception of their role has remained stable while generative AI entered practice within about two years, and media outputs diverge across segments of the media system (H2). The fastest change is perceived above all as a threat to accuracy, intellectual property, transparency and trust, while binding rules lag behind (H3).

The theoretical contribution of the article is the concept of normative lag: the gap between fast-moving tools and the slower professional, regulatory and institutional norms that must govern them. For newsrooms, defining editorial responsibility for AI-assisted content is the quickest way to narrow this gap, and it is also the condition on which European regulation relies. For media research, observing a multi-speed environment requires measuring each dimension at the rhythm at which it changes.

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