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# Copy, paste, and publish: a systematic review of churnalism as a journalistic practice

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## Abstract

Copy-pasting is harmless in many contexts, but in the field of journalism, it has transformed into a widely debated practice known as churnalism. Churnalism, or copy-and-paste journalism, refers to a journalistic practice in which journalists (heavily) rely on external third-party materials, leading to news stories that are (verbatim) reproductions of this material. Although the practice is accused of having become particularly widespread in digital journalism, theoretical approaches have examined the complex relationship between journalism and its sources for decades. This theoretically broad and well-established discussion is why research on churnalism not only reflects different understandings but also contains mixed findings and evaluations. Consequently, this systematic review aims to provide an overview of the research state on churnalism by qualitatively examining 46 papers from the last 25 years (1999–2024). Our findings confirm that churnalism is a multifaceted practice, understood as the recycling of both journalistic and non-journalistic material. The literature contains different indicators of churnalism and has produced mixed results on its prevalence. Influencing factors include a lack of journalistic resources and the characteristics of (non-)journalistic organizations, demonstrating that churnalism entails both benefits and risks for journalists. Further research should focus on countermeasures and the potential effects of churnalism.

**Keywords:** churnalism, copy-and-paste journalism, information subsidies, public relations, agenda setting, news production

Whether transferring data between documents, sharing information on social media, or streamlining tasks at work, the simple act of copying and pasting has become an essential part of digital communication and productivity. While copy-pasting is harmless in many personal and professional contexts, in (digital) journalism, it is a much-discussed practice—it even has its own name (Davies, 2009): *churnalism*, a combination of the words "churn" and "journalism." Churnalism—also known as copy-and-paste journalism (Saridou et al., 2017)—describes a journalistic practice in which "journalists rely heavily on external third-party material [ … ] and then use it with little verification or editorial input, resulting in stories that are either reproduced verbatim from the external source or consist of varying combinations of editorial and third-party material" (Guenther et al., 2024, p. 73). These external sources can be any person or organization (as well as their public relations [PR] department) that provides journalists with information, but they can also be journalistic sources such as articles from other media and news agencies (van Leuven et al., 2013, p. 851). Hence, in its broadest sense, churnalism refers to the use of both *journalistic* and *non-journalistic* content. Unlike casual copy-pasting, churnalism involves the uncritical reproduction of external material and pre-packaged content in news reporting (Heyl et al., 2020). Regardless of whether (non-)journalistic material is copied, this can not only undermine the journalistic norms of originality and thorough investigation but also compromise the role of journalism as a gatekeeper (Vasilendiuc & Gross, 2012).

However, churnalism is not a new journalistic practice (Guenther et al., 2024). Established theoretical approaches, such as agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) or the intereffication model (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008), have examined the relationship between journalism and its sources for decades. Nevertheless, some argue that the practice is particularly pervasive in digital (media) environments, as journalism is often seen as being in crisis, and news production faces challenges such as increasing (time) pressure and resource shortages (Almgren, 2017; Saridou et al., 2017; Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017). Journalists have "instant access to texts that can be quoted or referred to in new articles within minutes" (Skärlund, 2020, p. 70). In this working environment, churnalism can help make journalists' daily work easier—or is sometimes the only option. However, the practice cannot be attributed solely to individual challenges in the everyday life of journalists—rather, previous studies recognize churnalism as part of the complex relationship between journalism and its sources, driven by structural changes (Jackson & Moloney, 2016). The complexity is also evident when it comes to the question of the occurrence of churnalism: some studies (partly) confirm the practice, while others do not (Guenther et al., 2024)—which is why it is still unclear whether churnalism is prevalent or increasing in digital media environments. Furthermore, various viewpoints on churnalism indicate that the practice can be defined both narrowly (e.g., in the context of the use of specific (non-)journalistic sources such as news agencies or PR; Boumans, 2018) and broadly (e.g., as a general phenomenon involving the use of various (non-)journalistic sources; Perreault, 2022). Therefore, it seems that research only agrees that different outcomes regarding the prevalence of churnalism are linked to different contextual factors (e.g., Boumans, 2018; Guenther et al.,

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2024)—and presumably depend on how churnalism is understood and/or the type of (non-)journalistic sources being copied.

Consequently, a comprehensive overview that sheds light on the current state of research on churnalism and its implications is lacking. By qualitatively reviewing empirical and nonempirical academic papers from the last 25 years ($n = 46$), this systematic review aims to fill that gap and highlight the complex dynamics underlying this practice. Thus, the goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of what is currently understood by churnalism, what empirical approaches and findings exist on its prevalence, and what the practice implies for journalism, its (non-)journalistic sources, and society. In doing so, as part of our theoretical examination and empirical investigation, we found it useful to differentiate between the results involving journalistic and non-journalistic sources that are copied. This differentiation allows for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in the dissemination of information. Consequently, this study seeks not only to examine churnalism in previous research but also to provide a framework for fostering more credible journalism and identifying possible solutions for overcoming challenges and strengthening journalistic integrity.

## Journalism and its sources: a(n) (in)dependent relationship?

The relationship between journalism and its sources is at the core of churnalism (e.g., Macnamara, 2016; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). The practice is therefore examined primarily in the context of journalism and is embedded in two central approaches that address the "success" of sources in controlling the news agenda: the gatekeeping model and the agenda-setting framework. Both approaches are based on the normative assumption that journalism can provide better reporting for society than most of its sources. The *gatekeeping model* forms the starting point of the relationship, assuming that journalists are given a special decision-making and gatekeeping function by selecting news from a larger number of potential stories (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; White, 1950). Journalists are, therefore, key players in deciding whether a story is selected, and thus, they control access to the news agenda (Kristensen, 2018; Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020). Their selection process is based not only on various journalistic selection criteria (e.g., Almgren, 2017; Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and levels of influence (e.g., individual influences, media routines, organizational influences; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) but also varies depending on the origin of the story—for instance, other (agency) journalists or communicators such as PR professionals (Lorenz, 2017; Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020). However, due to digital media environments and their speed and volume, some accuse journalism of no longer being able to control the news gates (Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020) and of opening them, for example, to press releases (Vasilendiuc & Gross, 2012). Moreover, interdependencies between journalists and their sources, who may obtain control over the media agenda—and hence churnalism—are therefore seen as a failure of the journalistic profession and journalistic roles (Kristensen, 2018; Shoemaker et al., 2009). In addition to the gatekeeper role, journalists are also criticized for altering numerous other diverse journalistic roles (Perreault, 2022; Schäfer, 2017), such as storyteller, disseminator, and adversary (for an overview, see Hanitzsch & Vos, 2016).

With that in mind, *agenda setting*, to a degree, builds on the gatekeeping approach: it implies that mass media draw attention to certain issues—deciding what news is and what is not, thereby influencing the public agenda and public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting, thus, receives similar criticism as the gatekeeping approach: When sources use media relations to place their issues on the media agenda, they can manipulate the news flow, shape the media agenda themselves, and potentially affect public opinion in their favor—a process known as *agenda building* (Curtin, 1999). Previous literature, therefore, distinguishes between different levels of the media agenda construction. The first level concerns whether the sources can place their issues on the media agenda ("what to think *about*"), while the second level addresses whether the information pushed by a source is legitimized or confronted with other information ("*how* to think about"; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; van Leuven & Joye, 2014). In addition, some also point to a third level of agenda building, which is associated with the extent to which the relationship between journalists and their sources is established (e.g., through personal relationships) and transparent (van Leuven & Joye, 2014). Consequently, agenda building and setting are not only about issue salience but also about issue attribution, and thus, raise the question of whether "news become biased towards the direction of those who successfully gain access to the news agenda" (Lorenz, 2017, p. 949). In this context, so-called *information subsidies* are often discussed and are now part of the journalistic daily routine (Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017). Information subsidies refer to a strategic provision of pre-packaged information by interest groups, corporations, and PR, designed to be readily used by journalists (Gandy, 1982). Thus, they not only allow controlled access to information at no cost or effort but also create potential for bias and agenda setting by content providers, for example, through press releases, press conferences, video news, lobbying, or special reports (Gandy, 1982; Lewis et al., 2008). Moreover, literature in PR especially describes *(communication) power* as part of the agenda-building process and attributes it to whoever initiated the story (Grunig, 1990; Macnamara, 2016). The concept of *media ownership* suggests that those who (economically) control the news agenda also drive the prioritization of content that aligns with the owners' economic and political goals (Forde & Johnston, 2013). Practices such as churnalism not only reinforce this tendency but also reduce news diversity through a lack of diverse sources and voices (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021). The sources influencing and manipulating the media agenda, however, are not limited to PR practitioners and their organizations (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016); they also include other non-journalistic actors such as political figures or governments (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020), as well as journalistic actors such as news agencies or news services (e.g., Lorenz, 2017). For example, numerous studies underscore the central role of news agencies, showing that many media stories closely replicate texts of newswire services/other media or rely heavily on them (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018; Johnston & Forde, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006). The sourcing process becomes even more complex when these journalistic sources themselves depend on non-journalistic inputs such as PR materials. Previous research highlights that even news agencies often draw on such non-journalistic

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sources and describe this phenomenon as a "'multi-staged' process" or a "ladder of news sourcing" (Franklin, 2011, p. 101), which makes it more difficult to trace the original sources of news content—and to study churnalism.

Besides the gatekeeping model and the agenda-setting framework, which address the control of the news agenda by sources, other theoretical approaches focus on the relationship between journalism and its sources, especially PR. A well-known model in this context is the *intereffication model*, which describes an interrelationship between PR and journalism, with PR determining the topics and timing of news journalism (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008; Guenther et al., 2024). This means that communication activities are only possible if both sides cooperate—opening up a discourse about the symbiosis of the relationship (Macnamara, 2016; Reich, 2006). For instance, the model claims that PR professionals depend on the media to promote their stories and achieve their communication goals (e.g., gaining attention). In contrast, the media rely on PR outputs to provide accessible and reliable information to fulfill their informational function in society (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008). This extends the perspective that assumes PR solely aims to manipulate the media for self-interested purposes toward a view of PR as contributing to the truthful presentation of information to publics (Macnamara, 2016, p. 6). However, the dependence of journalists on external material and its manipulation is more frequently emphasized (Guenther et al., 2024). This is also reflected in the idea of *PR-ization*—a broader process in which journalists adopt PR attitudes and republish PR material without citing the source (Heyl et al., 2020; Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Moloney et al., 2013). It is "characterized by a swelling PR industry, blurring job roles and a growing colonization of PR mindsets amongst journalists" and refers to churnalism specifically as "the use of unchecked PR material in news" and an outcome of the process (Jackson & Moloney, 2016, p. 764). Unchecked PR material available as "page-ready content" (Jackson & Moloney, 2016, p. 769) is, in this context, an extreme version of information subsidies (van Hout & van Leuven, 2017)—and illustrates the "victimhood" of journalists who have no choice but to use PR material due to their working conditions (Macnamara, 2016, p. 6). In addition, online environments, in particular, are expanding the information flows and blurring the boundaries between journalism and PR (Fröhlich, 2022; van Leuven et al., 2014). Organizations can use the internet to distribute content across various (own) channels or platforms, making them less dependent on journalism while imitating its authority. Fröhlich (2022, p. 169) describes this as a "particular-interest oriented persuasive simulation of journalism (PIoPS)"—a situation that makes the exchange (e.g., copy-pasting) between journalism and PR even more complex and might also explain perceptions of a "love-hate relationship" (Ashwell, 2016). Consequently, beyond the exchange between journalism and PR, a certain attribution of PR dominance is also recognized—demonstrating that "models ignore the rigidity of the news process itself, and the extent to which it structures the behaviour of both parties" (Reich, 2006, p. 509). Reich's (2006) *process model* therefore assumes that news production (divided into news discovery and news reporting) is based on a process that can be traced back to many different news sources and numerous information transfers, whereby many actors can potentially influence the media agenda.

## Churnalism in journalism research over the last 25 years (1999–2024)

The different theoretical perspectives introduced raise questions and demonstrate that there are multiple ways of understanding and evaluating the relationship between journalism and its sources. Therefore, churnalism is a practice operating within a complex and tense field in which the control of the media agenda by journalism and its sources is being discussed. In this vein, Guenther et al. (2024), for example, refer to both a narrower and broader definition of the term churnalism, whereby churnalism can either be understood as part of a convergence between journalism and specific journalistic (e.g., news media, news agencies) or non-journalistic (e.g., companies, PR) sources (narrow view), or as the general use of subsidized content by various (non-)journalistic third parties (broad view). In addition to different understandings of the practice depending on the type of sources copied, divergent theoretical perspectives may also affect the methodological investigation of churnalism. Previous studies, for example, report inconsistent results regarding the prevalence of the practice (e.g., Boumans, 2018; Guenther et al., 2024; O'Neill et al., 2008). These inconsistencies may be due to divergent understandings of churnalism, as well as differences in the types of sources being copied, factors that could also affect related implications (Jackson & Moloney, 2016). Consequently, there is a lack of a comprehensive overview that sheds light on the current state of research on churnalism. Such an overview would not only encourage reflection on transparency but also prompt a reconsideration of standards in both journalism and its sources (Macnamara, 2016). To this end, we investigate the following research questions (RQs) by distinguishing between findings related to journalistic and non-journalistic sources that are copied:

*RQ1*: What are the core understandings of churnalism in previous studies?
*RQ2*: How was churnalism methodologically analyzed in previous studies?
*RQ3*: What are the key findings on churnalism and its influencing factors in previous studies?
*RQ4*: What are the central implications of churnalism in previous studies?

## Method

To examine the current state of research on churnalism, we conducted a systematic review in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). We focused on formal and content-related characteristics, as well as the key findings of previous studies.

### Literature search and data extraction

Our sample consisted of empirical and nonempirical academic papers that specifically addressed churnalism or the journalistic practice of copy-and-paste. Accordingly, we searched for academic papers written in English that explicitly focused on churnalism or copy-and-paste journalism. Using a Boolean search phrase, we performed an abstract search in the EBSCO and Web of Science databases in January 2024. Google Scholar was used as an additional database (e.g., to search for grey literature), with a divergent search string due to limited search filtering and qualifiers

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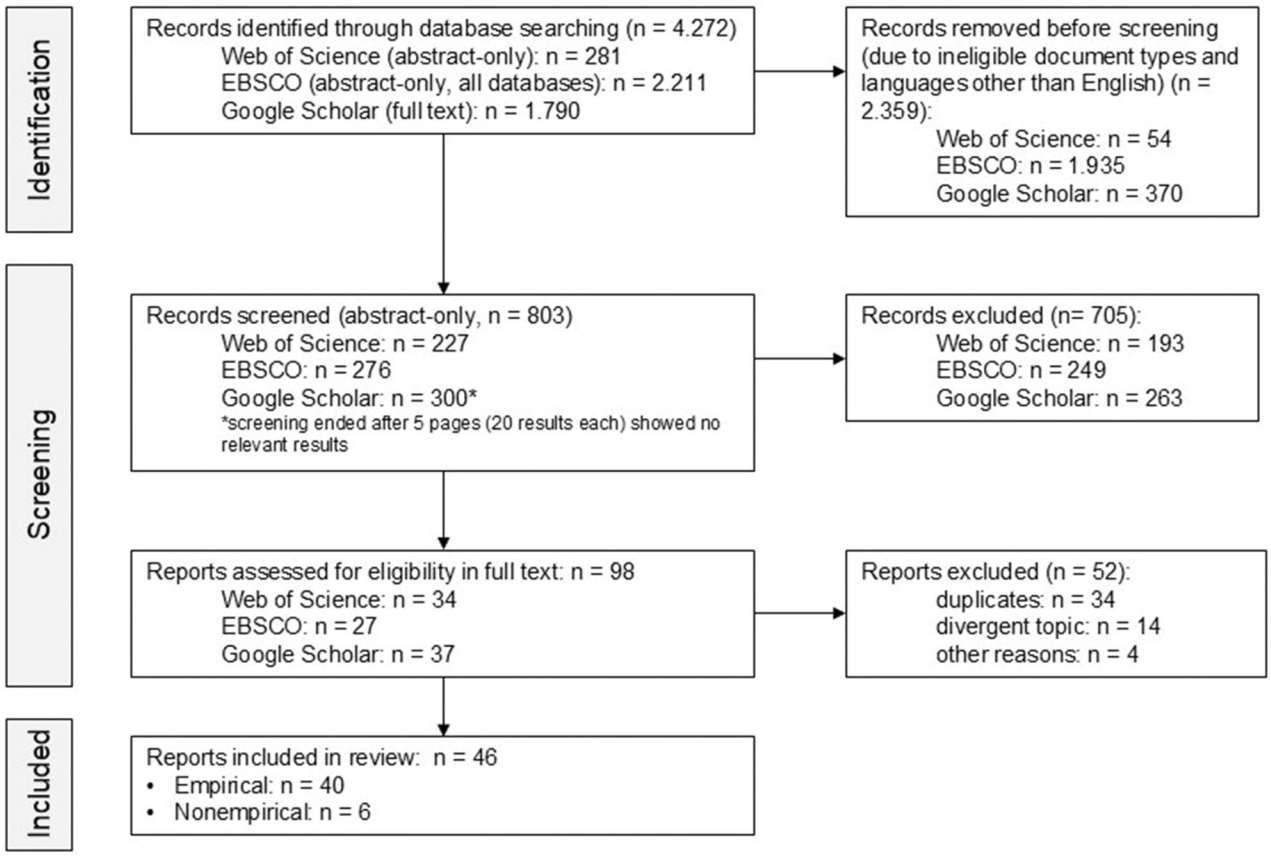


**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (adapted from Page et al., 2021).

functionality (Kruse et al., 2016). Detailed information on the development of the search strings, the systematic search process, and the inclusion/exclusion criteria is available in the pre-registration[1].

The overall search identified 4,272 articles (for full details, see Figure 1). After removing records due to ineligible document types and languages other than English, the authors screened 803 articles. We carried out a two-stage screening process in which we first checked the title and abstract of each article, followed by a review of the full text. In the first stage, we removed 705 articles due to a lack of thematic focus on churnalism (e.g., some articles were included in the preliminary sample because of copyright labels). In the second stage, we excluded 52 articles that were, for instance, duplicates or had a divergent topical focus. Thus, the final sample included 46 papers that met the inclusion criteria: 40 were empirical, and six were nonempirical. We included nonempirical work to reflect theoretical derivations and implications of churnalism and to compensate for the limited volume of existing research (a list of the papers can be found in the pre-registration). Although we were open to gray literature when sampling on various databases, we were unable to include any in the final sample due to selection criteria and quality requirements (for more details, see pre-registration).

Of the 46 papers, 37 were published after 2012, with a peak between 2016 ($n = 5$), 2017 ($n = 7$), and 2018 ($n = 6$). The oldest publication in the sample dates to 1999, and the most recent to 2023. In addition, a total of 95 authors were represented among all 46 papers (including multiple entries), most of whom were affiliated with the research field of journalism and communication science ($n = 68$). Only a few authors were affiliated with other disciplines: social sciences in general ($n = 5$), business administration and economics ($n = 4$), or engineering and technology ($n = 4$). The authors covered different countries, with a focus on Western nations such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, Australia, and the Netherlands (see Figure 2). Notably, 35 of the 46 papers do not reflect international cooperation through their authorship; single authors wrote 16 papers.

## Codebook and coding procedure

To describe our sample and answer the RQs, we combined quantitative and qualitative content analysis of relevant studies on churnalism. Accordingly, we prepared a codebook that included both formal and content-related categories. Formal categories focused on formal aspects of each study (e.g., year, (number of) authors, international collaboration, gender, discipline), which were mainly used to describe the sample. Content-related categories referred to the textual aspects addressed within each study. In line with the RQs, the content-related categories included superior categories (I, II) related to the understanding of churnalism, study focus and methodological approach, (empirical) findings, and implications (see Table 1). These theoretically derived categories were divided into more specific subcategories during the coding process, following a deductive-inductive approach. This procedure allowed us to systematically integrate existing theoretical considerations while remaining open to emerging patterns in the data, ensuring a qualitative, in-depth analysis.

[1] Pre-registration: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CB4EW; associated project: https://osf.io/7qjze

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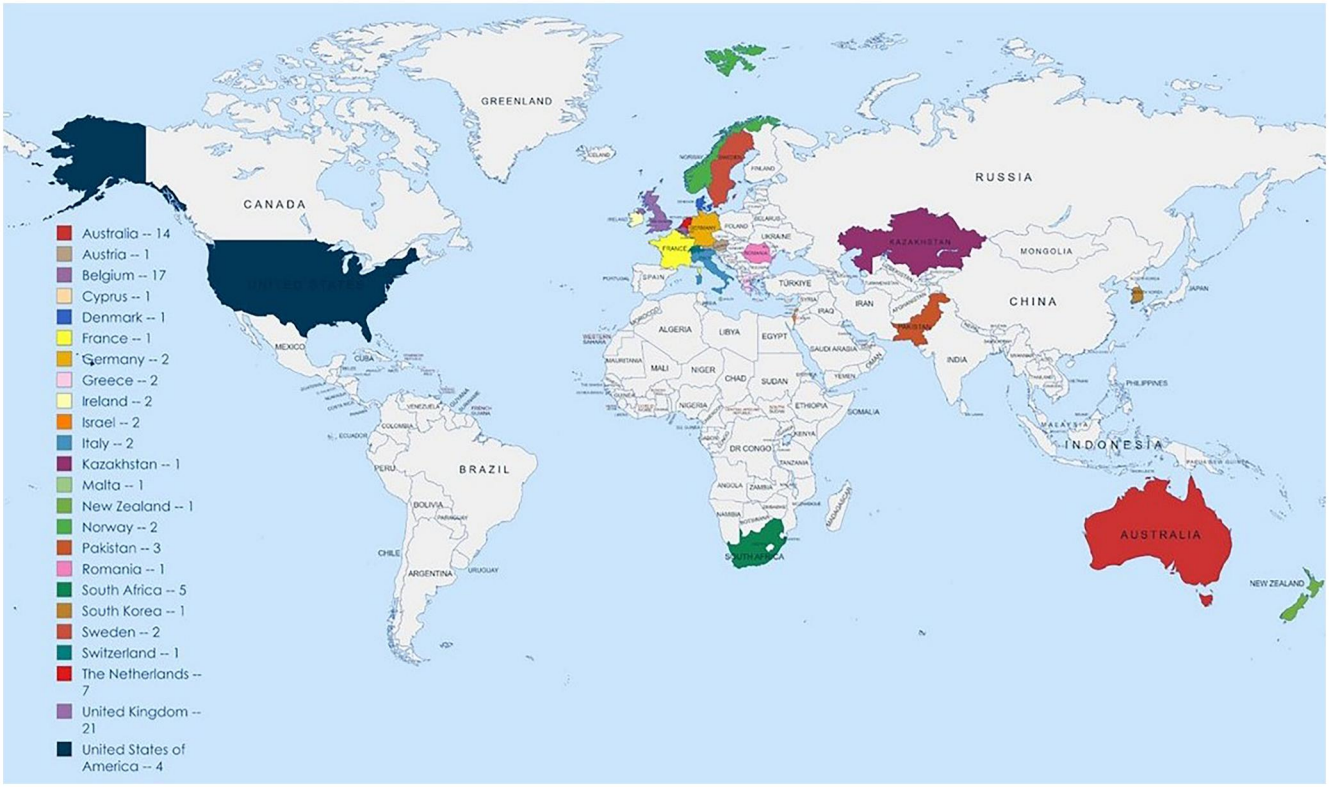


**Figure 2.** Countries of all authors named in the papers ($n = 95$).

**Table 1.** Overview of the deductive content-related categories based on the research questions.

| RQ | Superior categories I | Superior categories II |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Understanding of churnalism | Definitions<br>Benchmarks |
| 2 | Study focus | Country focus<br>Specific actors(s)<br>Type of media<br>Content/topic(s)<br>Discipline focus |
| | Methodological approach | Research aim/question(s)<br>Method<br>Study design<br>Sample characteristics<br>Variables<br>Data analysis |
| 3 | (Empirical) findings | Prevalence of churnalism<br>Factors of the occurrence of churnalism |
| 4 | Implications | Benefits/chances<br>Risks<br>Solution approaches/ countermeasure |

A codebook with comprehensive descriptions of the respective variables (e.g., overview, codes, and definitions) is also available in the pre-registration.

While the formal categories were coded using an Excel file (quantitative, deductive coding for sample description), the content-related categories were analyzed in MAXQDA 24 (qualitative, deductive-inductive coding). In most cases, the qualitative, content-related coding was based on the structure of the research articles; codes were assigned only within defined sections (introduction/theoretical background, methods, findings, discussion/conclusion) and applied to the full text, excluding the abstract. We conducted the content analysis with two coders, who developed and discussed their understanding of the text coding. Test codings—used to ensure consistency and shared understanding of content-related categories—were carried out as trial exercises on 10 papers prior to the main coding. This process improved the comprehensibility and reliability of the research. For the final coding, one coder began coding the entire sample using MAXQDA. All codes and codings were then cross-checked and discussed by both coders in regular meetings throughout the five-week analysis process in April and May 2024, while also reflecting on the theoretical foundations of churnalism. The overall aim of the process was to establish a clear understanding of the conceptual foundations of churnalism and its empirical analysis in the examined articles. Finally, similar statements found in the articles were grouped together within assigned categories and more specific subcategories. All categories and their subcategories, that is, their specific aspects, were derived from the material. An overview of the final assigned subcategories can be found in the coding trees provided in the pre-registration. The main categories identified serve as the framework for the structure of the following results section.

Moreover, during the coding process—and as a finding related to *RQ1*—we decided to distinguish between articles examining churnalism in the context of journalistic compared to non-journalistic sources such as PR. This not only helps to contextualize the results more specifically but is also in line with previous research (e.g., Boumans, 2018; Franklin, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006). We therefore categorized the papers that examined churnalism through the recycling of journalistic content ($n = 7$), non-journalistic content ($n = 16$), or both ($n = 17$). For all RQs, we analyzed the results of our codings

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to determine whether the findings were consistent or varied depending on the type of source considered. Hence, in the following, we differentiate between papers that refer to different (non-)journalistic sources in cases where results differ and report overarching findings where consistent patterns emerge. We emphasize this distinction accordingly.

## Results and discussion

The main goal of our systematic review is to provide an overview of the state of research on churnalism from the past 25 years (1999–2024). In the following, we present the results of our analysis in response to the four corresponding RQs.

### Understandings of churnalism (*RQ1*)

#### Definitions of churnalism

The understandings of churnalism are diverse. In most papers, regardless of the source of churnalism, it is portrayed as a poor journalistic practice due to a lack of independent or investigative reporting (e.g., Almgren, 2017; van den Bulck et al., 2017), as well as a lack of critical coverage or fact-checking (e.g., Lorenz, 2017; Williams & Gajevic, 2013). Rather, journalistic input is absent, and pre-packaged materials from third parties such as press or agency releases—often in a "ready-to-go" form (Kurambayev, 2020, p. 698) with self-references (Jacobs, 1999)—are copied verbatim and republished (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018; van Leuven et al., 2013). In a more general sense, some studies argue that churnalism is a broader process within news media, and thus, a structural shift in journalism. According to Jackson and Moloney (2016), churnalism is the outcome of structural and professional changes not only in journalism but also in the PR industry—raising questions regarding the journalistic role in the context of agenda setting and the gatekeeping model.

Alongside these broad concepts of churnalism, most papers further specify the practice by referring to distinct types of recycled content. This allows for a differentiation between two principal forms: (a) the recycling practice of non-journalistic material, and (b) the recycling practice of journalistic content. The first of these forms—(a) *the recycling practice of non-journalistic material*—is particularly emphasized in the papers considered. Although churnalism does not refer exclusively to the use of such content, many studies define the practice in terms of a journalistic orientation toward PR material as part of a broader PR-ization process (Jackson & Moloney, 2016, p. 764). Given the ongoing pressure to produce news content continuously, journalists are increasingly dependent on material from external non-journalistic third parties, such as PR from various (commercial and public) actors (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018; Perreault, 2022). By processing and republishing external (PR) content unaltered (e.g., Heyl et al., 2020), journalists become passive information processors (e.g., Lorenz, 2017; Skärlund, 2020; Taj et al., 2019).

In addition to non-journalistic content, various studies describe churnalism as a general (passive) processing of news material and information (e.g., Forde & Johnston, 2013)—and thus, point to (b) *a recycling practice of journalistic content*. Rather than being solely dependent on non-journalistic material, journalists can also rely on information subsidies from a range of media sources, "including news agencies, other media, and sources seeking media attention" (van den Bulck et al., 2017, p. 50). Churnalism therefore describes the reproduction and re-publication of news texts across multiple media platforms, different channels, and in large quantities (e.g., Erdal, 2009; van Leuven et al., 2013). However, this aspect of churnalism has rarely been discussed in previous theoretical approaches concerning the relationship between journalism and its sources.

#### Indicators of churnalism

As there is no agreed-upon definition of churnalism or its practices, the papers reviewed provide different indicators—rather than consistent benchmarks (as originally intended in the codebook)—for determining when a practice qualifies as churnalism. The indicators are as diverse as the understandings of churnalism, ranging from general to specific aspects, regardless of whether the content in question is journalistic or non-journalistic. For this reason, we do not explicitly distinguish between papers or findings that consider different (non)journalistic sources in this subchapter.

Poor journalistic practice is generally reflected in *deficiencies in journalistic news generation and processing*. These can include inadequate verification of facts (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020; Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020), missing source attribution (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018; Saridou et al., 2017), or a lack of added value due to insufficient (public) content relevance (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020; Nicholls, 2019). Moreover, the recycling practices of (non-)journalistic material are characterized by the direct *(re-)use of (non-)journalistic content* in news articles. This occurs, for example, when journalists use this material as their key source (e.g., Kristensen, 2018; van Leuven et al., 2014), maintain personal relationships with (non-)journalistic actors (e.g., Eliott et al., 2017; van Leuven & Joye, 2014), or rely on (reliable) institutions with vested interests (e.g., Ashwell, 2016). More specific indicators of the practice include either *directly copying and pasting* (non-) journalistic content from various sources into journalistic work or *relying on information subsidies*. Copy-and-paste journalism is evident in the extent to which (non-)journalistic stories are reproduced and recycled (e.g., Boumans, 2018; Saridou et al., 2017). This is reflected in the similarity of content (e.g., Carrino et al., 2023), the verbatim use of material, and direct quotes from source texts (e.g., Lorenz, 2017; van Leuven et al., 2013).

Regarding *RQ1* and in line with the definition by Guenther et al. (2024), our findings show that the understandings of churnalism are multifaceted and refer to different types of the practice depending on whether it involves the adoption of journalistic content (e.g., from news agencies) or non-journalistic material (e.g., PR releases). Moreover, not only are there different understandings of churnalism, but it is also difficult to define standards that determine when journalism is considered churnalism. Instead, we identified aspects that may indicate churnalism, regardless of whether the content is journalistic or non-journalistic—showing that although different studies refer to churnalism (or copy-and-paste journalism), they investigate different aspects and types of the practice.

### Methodical approaches (*RQ2*)

To answer *RQ2*, we rely exclusively on empirical papers or papers that have analyzed (their own) data ($n = 40$). Based on the results of *RQ1* and in addition to a general overview, we differentiate between papers that examine churnalism through the recycling of journalistic content, non-journalistic content, or both.

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Churnalism or related aspects were overall mainly approached through content analyses ($n = 17$), particularly using a quantitative design (e.g., Almgren, 2017; Boumans, 2018; Heyl et al., 2020; Saridou et al., 2017; van Leuven et al., 2013). However, a few studies have also examined churnalism from the perspective of qualitative content analysis (e.g., Eliott et al., 2017; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018; Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017). In particular, (qualitative) content analyses mainly investigated churnalism in the context of recycling both journalistic and non-journalistic content ($n = 8$). The research aims of those papers were not only to investigate the prevalence and understanding of churnalism (e.g., news sharing on Facebook, Almgren, 2017; range of churnalism in the Greek media landscape, Saridou et al., 2017) but also to examine the main challenges in journalism (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008) and the influence of (non-) journalistic sources in the media landscape (e.g., Skärlund, 2020; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018). Approaches that examine churnalism based on the recycling of non-journalistic content refer to content analyses ($n = 6$) that explore the adoption and influence of organizations and their PR releases, for example, private-sector companies (e.g., Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020), non-governmental organizations (NGOs; e.g., Boumans, 2018; van Leuven & Joye, 2014), or universities (e.g., Heyl et al., 2020). Finally, the recycling of journalistic content is examined through content analyses ($n = 3$), for instance, in the use of automated agency content (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018) or content shared between newspapers (e.g., Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021). However, content analyses in the context of recycling (non-) journalistic content differ greatly in terms of the time period they consider. While some studies examine trends in relation to two time periods (e.g., Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021; Saridou et al., 2017), other studies refer to several (constructed) weeks or months (e.g., Heyl et al, 2020; van den Bulck et al., 2017; Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017), single years (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018; Schafraad & Van Zoonen, 2020) or even analyze several years (e.g., Boumans, 2018; van Leuven et al., 2014; Williams & Gajevic, 2013). Interviews, in contrast, are conducted exclusively through qualitative approaches ($n = 9$) with individuals affected by or involved in churnalism. The interview studies focusing on recycling non-journalistic content ($n = 5$) explored interviewees' perceptions (e.g., journalists, PR practitioners) regarding churnalism and/or the relationship between journalism and PR (e.g., Ashwell, 2016; Franks et al., 2023), as well as their general viewpoints and role perceptions (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Macnamara, 2016; McKinnon et al., 2018). In addition to non-journalistic content, the remaining interview studies focus on the recycling of both journalistic and non-journalistic content ($n = 4$) and exclusively cover journalists (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020; Vasilendiuc & Gross, 2012), for example, from news agencies (e.g., Lorenz, 2017).

Mixed-method and exploratory approaches illustrate the nature of examining the complex processes of churnalism and were used in a few studies. For instance, studies that focus on the recycling of non-journalistic content combine content analyses and interviews to examine and understand access to news and the success of news generation (e.g., Kristensen, 2018; Williams & Gajevic, 2013), or they conduct case studies on media coverage of a scientific article (e.g., Broer et al., 2016). Papers that explore churnalism as the recycling of both journalistic and non-journalistic material analyze news flows more generally (e.g., Forde & Johnston, 2013) or combine specific methodological approaches (e.g., news diary combined with focus group discussions, Rulyova & Westley, 2017). Finally, studies that focus on the recycling of journalistic content aim to link reproduction tendencies with the perceptions of journalistic interviewees (e.g., Erdal, 2009), with different news content analyses (e.g., Carrino et al., 2023; Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021), or with other specific methodological approaches (e.g., a simulation study, Gross, 2021).

In examining churnalism involving journalistic or non-journalistic content, most empirical studies primarily used content analyses to focus on variables such as *copying content*, for example, by using a churnalism index (e.g., Boumans, 2018) or analyzing textual overlap of (exact) words (e.g., Broer et al., 2016; Saridou et al., 2017). Another aspect of the practice involves the *crediting of (origin) sources* (e.g., Almgren, 2017; Heyl et al., 2020), their agenda-building capacity (e.g., Boumans, 2018), and verification practices (e.g., Saridou et al., 2017). A third aspect concerns the *originality* in (journalistic) content, for instance, the inclusion of additional information and sources (e.g., Heyl et al., 2020; Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020), indicators of prepackaged material (e.g., Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017), a critical approach (e.g., Heyl et al., 2020), or a change in tone or opinion (e.g., Broer et al., 2016). Moreover, empirical studies considered *media (article) related variables*, such as the news category (e.g., Almgren, 2017), the writing style (e.g., van den Bulck et al., 2017), and news selection criteria and news factors (e.g., Lorenz, 2017; Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020).

Taj et al., 2019), Israel (e.g., Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018), and Central Asia (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020). The few papers comparing (Western) countries justified their approach by pointing to the existence of different media systems (e.g., Broer et al., 2016; Macnamara, 2016; Nicholls, 2019).

Hence, to answer *RQ2*, it can be concluded that the methodological focus of previous studies was primarily on content analyses examining the extent of churnalism—for very different time periods—regardless of whether churnalism was understood as recycling of journalistic, non-journalistic, or both types of content. This is problematic not only because of the different operationalizations that stem from divergent understandings or considered sources but also because researching churnalism is inherently challenging: The use of third-party material is often not obvious, and there are no formal regulations (Fröhlich, 2022; Lewis et al., 2008). Therefore, it is even more striking that Boumans (2018) developed a churnalism index (see also Boumans et al., 2018). The few mixed-methods designs and case studies show that the complex dynamics of the practice have been little researched so far. Moreover, non-Western media systems or country comparisons are rarely the subject of study.

## Key findings on churnalism and its influencing factors (*RQ3*)

### Prevalence of churnalism

As in the previous section and based on the results of *RQ1*, we also differentiated between papers that examine churnalism through the recycling of journalistic content and non-journalistic content when answering *RQ3*. Papers addressing

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both types are categorized according to their respective findings.

Regarding the key findings of the empirical papers on the recycling of journalistic content, most confirmed the prevalence of churnalism or its aspects—at least to some extent (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018; Carrino et al., 2023; Forde & Johnston, 2013). Boumans et al. (2018, p. 1776), for example, found that "nearly half of the news content (48.4%) is based on agency copy"—which, in some cases, is not disclosed as the original source. Lewis et al. (2008) and Forde and Johnston (2013) also reported similar results depending on the extent of copy-pasting, ranging from verbatim adoption to extensive reliance on such material. An automated analysis also showed that reusing newswire content is more likely than non-journalistic (PR) material as a source (Nicholls, 2019). A difference in the proportions of sources for churned content was also found by Saridou et al. (2017). Since the recycling goes beyond the use of direct quotes in most cases, researchers and interview partners classify this as plagiarism (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020; Nicholls, 2019). News agencies, in particular, are the most frequently used journalistic source (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008); their material mainly influences "lightweight news" (e.g., entertainment, sports; Almgren, 2017), which is also confirmed in the case of celebrity news—for both elite newspapers and popular dailies (van den Bulck et al., 2017). However, the style of the adopted texts differs between the news outlets and is, for example, rewritten in a more neutral tone in elite newspapers (van den Bulck et al., 2017). Mixed results or no confirmation emerge from the adoption of articles in a Belgian newsroom. Although about 50% of news articles are reused across all newspapers, the article overlap appears to vary between different newspapers and journalistic genres and, for example, decreases over time in the case of political news (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021). Thus, agency releases are often just a starting point for unique journalistic articles serving as a reference for the newsworthiness of topics, a story angle, or as an additional source (e.g., Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021; Lorenz, 2017).

Besides the reproduction of journalistic content, studies on the recycling of non-journalistic content also confirm this practice (e.g., Ashwell, 2016; Heyl et al., 2020; Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Williams & Gajevic, 2013). The verbatim use of PR releases was found in the analyzed media content (e.g., van Leuven & Joye, 2014), which has presumably gained importance over time (e.g., in a comparison between 2013 and 2016 on Greek news websites; Saridou et al., 2017). It can also include texts from journalistic sources, such as news agencies (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008; Taj et al., 2019). However, the extent of this practice also varies: while dependencies on PR releases are acknowledged in some studies (e.g., Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020) and are more likely in shorter texts (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008), others show that only a minority of the articles were copied verbatim and often included additional information (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008; van Leuven et al., 2013). In particular, interviewees confirmed the (verbatim) use of PR releases as a journalistic practice (e.g., Ashwell, 2016; Lorenz, 2017; Macnamara, 2016). Moreover, the results show that PR practitioners seek to influence journalists and their reporting with pre-packed, page-ready information (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016), although more PR releases do not necessarily lead to greater media coverage (e.g., van Leuven & Joye, 2014). Interviewees recognized not only journalists' dependence on PR but also the diffusion of power relations (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016). However, this is often not disclosed. As with the recycling of journalistic content, previous studies affirm the lack of non-journalistic source references (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2014; Vasilendiuc & Gross, 2012). For example, van Leuven and Joye (2014, p. 174) found that "quotes from press releases are presented as if the journalist contacted the organization." Beyond that, further findings are mixed. Most papers focusing on recycling non-journalistic content do not specifically assess the degree of churnalism or confirm its prevalence. Instead, they focus on several individual aspects of the practice and, thus, demonstrate, in many cases, varying degrees of churnalism based on different variables and contextual factors. For example, Boumans (2018) examined the differences between the agendas of free and popular newspapers. He showed that neither outlet's agenda tends to be initiated by press releases, except for NGO releases, which are more likely to lead to reporting in free newspapers. At the same time, a churnalism index was used to determine that the content of free newspapers is more similar to press releases than the content of quality and tabloid newspapers (Boumans, 2018). Moreover, Skärlund (2020) found that—contrary to previous findings—sources are predominantly attributed, and some interviewees stated that they do, indeed, check the facts in their news reports (e.g., Franks et al., 2023). Consequently, whether copy-and-paste practices are confirmed depends on the interview partner (e.g., Franks et al., 2023)—a paradox between denial and victimhood (e.g., Macnamara, 2016). For instance, "lone wolf correspondents" tend to use and copy PR material more than newsroom journalists (Lorenz, 2017, p. 956). However, this practice is less common among high-pressure, named, salaried journalists (e.g., Knight, 2011). As with journalistic content, some journalists claim that they only use non-journalistic sources (such as PR) as inspiration, from which they may use quotes at most (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008) but note that the practice is quite common among others (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018). Furthermore, most content analyses face the limitation that some PR content cannot be verified as a source due to the complexity of the identification approach (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008). As a result, previous studies illustrate a considerable number of articles with a mix of PR and original content (e.g., Knight, 2011; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018). Here, journalists rewrite press releases in their own words but do not add any additional information (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2013). Hence, the recycling of non-journalistic content can lead to divergent interpretations of the original material (e.g., Skärlund, 2020). Lastly, only a few studies do not confirm (aspects of) churnalism based on recycling non-journalistic content, for example, when measuring the extent of literal copy-pasting and replication of PR releases (e.g., Boumans, 2018). Rather, these studies report a decrease in churnalism over time (e.g., between 2004 and 2013 in Dutch print media) (Boumans, 2018) and that only a small part of the news originates from PR (e.g., compared to newswire content) (Nicholls, 2019). To explain the low incidence of (aspects of) churnalism, McKinnon et al. (2018, p. 573) refer to the aspect of "press release saturation, where the volume of press releases has increased so much that many journalists read very few of them"—thus, journalists cannot distribute every story. Others claim that the quality and

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standards of PR communications are insufficient (e.g., Lorenz, 2017).

### Influencing factors

As the findings on the prevalence of churnalism in the context of recycling both journalistic and non-journalistic content are inconsistent, it is reasonable to assume that the practice is—beyond its multidimensional nature—complex and depends on many influencing factors. According to previous empirical papers, factors affecting the prevalence of churnalism practices can be summarized in three overarching areas: (1) limited journalistic resources, (2) characteristics of journalistic institutions and sources, and (3) characteristics of non-journalistic institutions and sources.

Most empirical papers on the recycling of both journalistic and non-journalistic content agree that churnalism is substantially influenced by (1) *limited journalistic resources*. In the case of science reporting, journalists often lack scientific expertise because they are not trained in scientific reporting (e.g., Franks et al., 2023; van Leuven & Joye, 2014), and, overall, they face the economic pressure of the industry (e.g., Forde & Johnston, 2013). On the one hand, researchers and interview partners name time and staff shortages, combined with financial tightness (e.g., small salaries), as the main reasons for copying material (e.g., Ashwell, 2016; Heyl et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2017)—although not all interviewees agreed to copy (non-)journalistic material verbatim for this reason (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018). On the other hand, there is a growing need for desk-bound journalists (also in news agencies) who cannot actively gather stories and, thus, rely on external material (e.g., Forde & Johnston, 2013; Vasilendiuc & Gross, 2012). The associated constant need to produce (online) news results in reliance on external material (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020; McKinnon et al., 2018) or content management systems (CMS), which reinforce changes (e.g., Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2021). Hence, the copy-pasting of (non-)journalistic material is a consequence of an attempt to reduce the workload efficiently (e.g., Franks et al., 2023; Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017).

At a more general or institutional level, (2) *the characteristics of journalistic institutions and sources* also affect the prevalence of churnalism, especially in the context of recycling journalistic content. Due to the opportunities offered by the online environment, previous studies suggest a shift in the nature of news and in the role of the journalist—from finding information to gathering it from other news providers (e.g., van Leuven & Joye, 2014; Vasilendiuc & Gross, 2012). Nevertheless, some argue that this shift also negatively influences the quality of the news (e.g., Choi & Yang, 2021; Taj et al., 2019). Moreover, the newspaper type and format affect the practice of copy-pasting. For example, there is evidence that reports from free and general interest newspapers are more similar to external (non-)journalistic content than those from quality newspapers (e.g., Boumans, 2018), and churnalism is more likely to occur in online news than in print (e.g., Saridou et al., 2017; Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020). This is also mainly due to the high and constant demand for news on certain platforms such as television, radio, or the internet, where external (non-)journalistic material at least serves an agenda-setting function (e.g., Erdal, 2009; Lewis et al., 2008). But reach is also a crucial variable: National news can choose between more external (non-)journalistic sources (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016), while local newspapers rely more on limited sources (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2008). However, this is not the case for celebrity coverage, which also points to churnalism in elite newspapers or shorter news (in brief) that depend largely on (non-)journalistic material or cite fewer sources (e.g., van den Bulck et al., 2017). Furthermore, using external (non-)journalistic content is more common in smaller newsrooms (e.g., Ashwell, 2016), which is why the size of a media organization affects the prevalence of churnalism. At the same time, material from small news agencies is taken up less frequently (e.g., Lorenz, 2017). In addition, the use of (non-)journalistic content also differs in the respective countries investigated (e.g., Broer et al., 2016), presumably due to different media systems (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2013), their implied levels of journalistic critical thinking, or government dependence (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020).

The final overarching factor influencing the likelihood of churnalism, especially in the context of recycling non-journalistic content, is (3) the *various characteristics of non-journalistic institutions and sources*. One important finding is that, as journalists report, PR professionals have been pushing their stories harder in recent years, although this can cause not only journalistic but also public mistrust (e.g., Ashwell, 2016; Jackson & Moloney, 2016). Non-journalistic sources often provide pre-packaged information and follow the formal requirements of news reporting to make material adoption as easy as possible (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Jacobs, 1999). In doing so, they are oriented toward a high frequency of news factors that make journalistic follow-up reporting more likely (e.g., Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020). Furthermore, journalists tend to rely more on (PR) sources whom they know as "good contacts" or who are regarded as elite or trusted sources (e.g., Macnamara, 2016; Saridou et al., 2017). The non-journalistic organizational sources, therefore, differ not only in their credibility but also in their trustworthiness, making the copying of their texts more or less likely (e.g., Ashwell, 2016)—or leading to scientific press officers writing directly for the media (e.g., Franks et al., 2023). Hence, it is important to distinguish between different categories of non-journalistic sources, as they imply divergent degrees of churnalism and its evaluation (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2013). For example, business organizations were more frequently mentioned in reporting than NGOs, suggesting that official sources are more likely to be taken up (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008); however, van Leuven and Joye (2014) do not fully confirm this finding, pointing out that the results depend on the specific (non-governmental) organizations being compared.

Accordingly, the findings regarding *RQ3* show that the empirical papers (partially) confirm and, at the same time, refute the prevalence, both in the context of recycling journalistic and non-journalistic content. Particularly, papers that focus on churnalism via the recycling of journalistic content mainly confirm churnalism, for instance, through the (verbatim) use of, and dependencies on, journalistic material such as that from news agencies, indicating an interrelationship between journalistic actors. Compared to findings related to the recycling of non-journalistic material, a clearer confirmation was shown here. When referring to churnalism in the context of recycling non-journalistic material, such as PR content, interviews mainly acknowledge the influence and use of PR. However, given both approaches to churnalism, mixed findings (a combination of original and source content

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with no additional information) or no confirmation of the practices were evident in both contexts. This is likely because the studies examine different contexts and time periods. Interviewees differ in whether they confirm the practice of churnalism—a variation that may be linked to social desirability effects. Nevertheless, little reuse or even a decrease of (practices of) churnalism is reported only in a few studies and rather in the case of recycling non-journalistic (PR) material, which can be attributed to an increasing amount of non-journalistic (PR) material. This also underlines the fact that there are no benchmarks (or numbers) for when one can speak of churnalism, as well as the complexity of investigating churnalism. Since the extent of (practices of) churnalism varies, our findings suggest that the prevalence depends on other influencing factors. Consequently, factors from both journalism and (non-)journalistic sources influence the extent of churnalism, and thus, presumably also the varying findings. In terms of organizational characteristics, this could mean that there are different categories of (non-)journalistic sources (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2013) and that particularly authoritative sources (e.g., science PR), which are seen as more credible by journalists, have easier and broader access to the media agenda—giving them a special role in the public (e.g., Heyl et al., 2020).

## Central implications of churnalism (*RQ4*)

Finally, *RQ4* addresses the implications of churnalism. Here, too, based on the findings from *RQ1*, a distinction is made—where appropriate—between outcomes related to recycling from different (non-)journalistic sources.

### Benefits of churnalism

In the context of recycling journalistic material, one main argument is that, particularly in challenging times for journalism, churnalism *reduces workloads and lowers costs* (e.g., Eliott et al., 2017), allowing journalists to use their resources for investigative, "real" journalism (e.g., Erdal, 2009). Journalists presumably rely on sufficient journalistic preparation when using material from news agencies. Consequently, the quality of agency reports can also benefit from churnalism, as they are considered more relevant and can be combined with other information (e.g., Lorenz, 2017), as well as smaller, non-established news (sources) that can, thus, gain access to news (e.g., Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017). At the same time, journalistic material is often used as a *starting point and inspiration for journalistic work* (e.g., Skärlund, 2020). Therefore, some argue that not adopting pre-prepared material would be inappropriate, as it can contain valuable information and make the work easier (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2013).

Likewise, papers referring to recycling non-journalistic content consider (practices of) churnalism as positive. Besides reducing workloads and costs and the inspiration from source texts, it widens access to non-journalistic (PR) sources (e.g., Moloney et al., 2013) and rewards the generation of page-ready material (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Kurambayev, 2020). This points not only to a "natural relationship" between journalism and (non-)journalistic sources (e.g., Kristensen, 2018) but also to an improved accuracy of information in press releases (e.g., Ashwell, 2016); the general influence of non-journalistic (PR) sources is increasingly recognized by the public, according to some interviewees (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016). Furthermore, the practice of churnalism can, in a broader sense, be *a positive contribution to the public*: for example, if (public health) experts offer material that meets journalistic standards (e.g., Eliott et al., 2017), make useful and significant information available (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018), or—in the case of NGO releases—counterbalance other (official) sources (e.g., van Leuven et al., 2013; Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017).

### Risks of churnalism

The majority of studies state negative consequences for both recycling journalistic and non-journalistic content. The main reason is that copy-pasting results in a *loss of diversity in the media landscape*: A few leading news agencies have a dominant role and control over the media agenda, raising concerns about the degree of homogeneity and lack of diverse viewpoints in news (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018). The same, though more extensively, is assumed when it comes to the recycling of non-journalistic sources: Predominantly commercial and organizational interests and not public interests are communicated. Therefore, non-journalistic (PR) actors gain exclusive and privileged access to news and increase their agenda-building power (e.g., Sleurs & Jacobs, 2005; van Leuven & Joye, 2014). This calls into question the credibility of such texts (e.g., Almgren, 2017; Franks et al., 2023; Jackson & Moloney, 2016) and is also referred to as propaganda (e.g., Moloney et al., 2013; O'Neill et al., 2008). Depending on the organization and the "key client message" in its content (Saridou et al., 2017, p. 4), this can be highly problematic—especially in restrictive regions, where churnalism can reinforce the lack of diversity and accuracy in political content, and thus, threaten a balanced public discourse (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020). Even in science reporting, critical journalistic coverage is central to the journalistic quality of a media article (e.g., Murcott & Williams, 2013)—and thus, crucial for a democratic society (e.g., Almgren, 2017). Hence, a lack of diversity in the media landscape can reinforce information spirals (in light of the reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs, echo chambers, and filter bubbles; see Schäfer, 2017) and might foster the spread of fake news (e.g., Kurambayev, 2020).

Closely linked to the definition of churnalism as a journalistic weakness, some studies—focusing on the recycling of both journalistic and non-journalistic content—also fear *a decline in journalistic professionalism*. In the case of recycling journalistic material, this is reflected in the dominant role of news agencies (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018) or an orientation toward media attention (e.g., Eliott et al., 2017). It also carries the risk of a lack of transparency in journalistic reporting (e.g., Boumans et al., 2018), which is why some studies warn of plagiarism related to churnalism in the context of journalistic sources (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008). In the case of recycling non-journalistic material, the decline is evident not only in the growing client dependence (e.g., Moloney et al., 2013; Skärlund, 2020) but also in the lack of original and critical reporting due to the copy-pasting of non-journalistic single-source content without further checks (e.g., Heyl et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2017). As a result, journalistic roles can no longer be fulfilled (e.g., Murcott & Williams, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2008).

Finally, churnalism—in the context of both recycling journalistic and non-journalistic content—is not only a consequence but also *a contributor to the crisis of journalism*.

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Several studies assume, for instance, that the practice harms trust in both journalism and (non-)journalistic sources (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2008), leading to tensions between personal and professional identity (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016) or a distorted public image of science (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018). In addition, the reliance on external (non-)journalistic sources fosters the loss of journalists' gatekeeping role (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2008), and hence, has various (negative) consequences for the role of journalism in society, which increasingly blurs the line between journalism and its sources, such as PR (e.g., Macnamara, 2016). Local media and small media markets, in particular, are affected by this—as well as by the general crisis in journalism (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2008; Skärlund, 2020).

### Countermeasures to churnalism

A few papers, regardless of whether they focus on recycling journalistic or non-journalistic content, discussed possible solutions for dealing with the practice. One approach is to *maintain the quality of journalism*, for example, by refocusing and affirming the journalistic role as an independent critic (e.g., Franks et al., 2023; Perreault, 2022). There are even calls for a renewed focus on print products (e.g., Wheatley & O'Sullivan, 2017), or at least for greater acknowledgment of the structural changes in the online news world, such as the features of social media (e.g., Choi & Yang, 2021). However, it is more important to ensure greater transparency—by declaring independence, naming (non-)journalistic sources, or using labels in cases of news recycling (e.g., Moloney et al., 2013; Perreault, 2022). Furthermore, in the context of recycling non-journalistic content, *(PR) education or training* seems to be a necessary means for both PR managers and journalists to be aware of the practice and its implications (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018; Moloney et al., 2013). This is a fruitful idea not only for new employees but also for professionals. It could be combined with maintaining a close *dialogue with (academic) experts* and benefiting from their thematic expertise (e.g., Broer et al., 2016; Williams & Gajevic, 2013).

To conclude, the findings on the implications of churnalism (*RQ4*) show that the papers focusing on recycling both journalistic and non-journalistic content discuss the opportunities as well as the risks of churnalism. However, since most understandings of churnalism carry negative connotations, fewer opportunities than risks were mentioned. The predominant risks mentioned in the papers highlight that the motives of both journalistic and non-journalistic sources must be questioned to ensure that the diversity of the media landscape and the integrity of the journalistic profession do not suffer from this practice. However, when it comes to the question of how affected actors should deal with the risks of churnalism, clear answers are difficult to find. The papers mainly contain statements about ensuring journalistic quality, the need for (PR) education or training on both sides, as well as a better dialogue with (academic) experts. However, how journalists should implement this, given the increasing pressure and workload, remains an open question.

## Conclusion: churnalism as a multifaceted practice

This systematic review showed that churnalism is a complex journalistic practice that can not only be understood from different (theoretical) perspectives but also leads to varying results and evaluations. As previous research has examined the relationship between journalism and (non-)journalistic sources comprehensively and from various perspectives, but with different evaluations and findings on churnalism, we aimed to provide an overview of the current state of research on the practice. In the following conclusion, we first summarize our results, then, discuss the findings in light of previous research and theoretical approaches, and finally, provide an outlook on future research.

As part of the first research question (*RQ1*), we identified different elements and indicators of the understandings and practices of churnalism, which already illustrate the complexity and multidimensionality of the practice (e.g., Jackson & Moloney, 2016). Churnalism was understood as two different practices: (a) the recycling of non-journalistic material and (b) the recycling of journalistic content. However, these practices are often not clearly differentiated in many studies, which limits the application of some theoretical approaches (e.g., the intereffication model) that refer to the exchange of material between journalism and PR. The second research question (*RQ2*) addressed the different methodological approaches of previous research. The findings showed that churnalism has been predominantly investigated in news coverage using (quantitative) content analysis for different time periods but remains under-researched outside of Western countries—regardless of whether churnalism was understood as recycling of journalistic, non-journalistic, or both types of content.

Regarding the findings on the prevalence of churnalism and its influencing factors (*RQ3*), the systematic review shows that the empirical papers (partially) confirm, but also refute, a prevalence of churnalism, both in the context of recycling journalistic and non-journalistic content. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for papers focusing on churnalism through the recycling of journalistic content to confirm the practice, especially when it involves news agency material. In the context of recycling non-journalistic content, interviews primarily confirmed the influence (particularly PR), though several findings are mixed and vary depending on the research object. This suggests that factors from both journalism and (non-)journalistic sources influence the extent of churnalism, and thus, presumably, also the varying findings. Finally, the findings on the implications of churnalism (*RQ4*) suggest that, in the papers examined, the risks of the practice are discussed more often than its opportunities, while countermeasures receive even less attention.

The current state of research, therefore, illustrates that studies on churnalism examine different practices of copy-and-paste journalism, which are often referred to by the same term. While the distinction between the recycling of journalistic and non-journalistic material is analytically sound, most of the papers do not make this distinction—making the separation in this systematic review difficult in some cases. Compared to journalistic sources, most studies that follow a narrow understanding of churnalism focus on non-journalistic sources and refer exclusively to the recycling of PR content. However, not all studies examine only one source type. Some studies define churnalism in terms of the recycling of both journalistic and non-journalistic material and empirically examine both types of content. Thus, they point to a broad understanding of churnalism and a lack of selectivity, which is particularly problematic when discussing

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(the implications of) the results. One reason for this could be that even theoretical approaches (e.g., agenda setting) do not make a comprehensive distinction between journalism and different types of sources. For example, hardly any approach discusses the layered nature of news sourcing, where news agencies can act as sources that are themselves influenced by non-journalistic (PR) material (e.g., Franklin, 2011). Therefore, it is not only necessary for current research to specify its understanding of churnalism, but also for theoretical approaches to clarify their reference to sources. Furthermore, the divergent practices are evident not only in the inconsistent findings but also in the wide range of implications. Mainly, our findings reveal that, regardless of whether journalistic or non-journalistic sources are recycled, journalists do not (or cannot) entirely fulfill their gatekeeping functions, and other actors co-determine the media agenda. On the one hand, it seems problematic when actors with vested interests use their communication power to pursue their own goals rather than act in the interest of the common good. On the other hand, the crisis in journalism suggests that an interrelationship between journalism and its sources is hardly avoidable and likely not entirely harmful. For non-critical topics, time can be saved by using agency copy, and, for example, redirected toward investigative journalism. Depending on the (non-)journalistic source, some actors also follow journalistic standards and have the common good in mind (e.g., news agencies, public actors such as universities). However, this depends on, among other things, a country's culture and political system. To summarize, (non-)journalistic sources should at least be aware of their (new) responsibility. However, how this should be addressed in practice and how churnalism should be managed has not yet been answered by current research.

Against this background, we conclude not only with the limitations of our systematic review that must be kept in mind but also with various ideas for future research. Due to our qualitative analysis—which is uncommon in systematic reviews—and the openness of our research questions, we can only make limited statements about the extent of churnalism. However, the qualitative approach enabled us to focus on the different understandings of churnalism and its influencing factors. Nevertheless, our sample was limited to 46 papers, of which only six were nonempirical. We could have focused solely on empirical papers but decided against this and instead adapted the coding process to include the nonempirical papers. The sample size reflects the limited research explicitly addressing churnalism (or copy-and-paste journalism); there might be other keywords or terms describing similar practices that the authors were not aware of (for additional terms, see van Leuven et al., 2013). Lastly, our review includes papers from selected (though fairly broad) databases as well as exclusively English-language publications. It is possible that different disciplines are not evenly represented in the databases, that the algorithmic search on Google Scholar is not reproducible, and that country-specific articles might be written in languages other than English.

Future research should, therefore, use the different elements of the understanding of churnalism as search terms and include multiple languages and countries in such studies (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018). Given the review's findings and the identified influencing factors of churnalism, a comparison of countries, and thus, media systems, seems worthwhile (e.g., Schäfer, 2017). Moreover, comparing churnalism across different media outlets and other platforms, such as social media, requires further research (Almgren, 2017; Ashwell, 2016). Further studies (e.g., interviews) should focus not only on traditional journalists but also on agency journalists, thereby shedding more light on this area of journalism (e.g., Forde & Johnston, 2013). In the area of non-journalistic/PR sources, it must be noted "that not all PR (or other information subsidies) are, by definition, problematic" (Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020, p. 719). Hence, future research should examine press releases in content analyses as well as differentiate between various PR sources, compare them, and examine authoritative non-journalistic/PR sources (e.g., science PR) in more detail (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2018; van Leuven et al., 2013). The systematic review particularly shows that very few studies address which content is copied and which textual elements or relevance criteria (e.g., news values) increase the likelihood of copying (e.g., Schafraad & van Zoonen, 2020). In this context, future research is needed, particularly regarding the second stage of agenda building, which may be advanced by different actors through churnalism. A central question that goes along with this is how artificial intelligence (AI) may affect practices of copy-pasting. Finally, it is notable that none of the studies have examined the effects of churnalism (on audiences) or in terms of countermeasures. For example, a label indicating that content is copied from a particular source might reveal churnalism, but it would not necessarily reduce trust in journalism. Common to all suggestions for future research is the need for a framework that defines the different practices of churnalism, the levels it encompasses, and how its complex nature can be studied. Our overview serves as a starting point.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [JB], upon reasonable request.

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## Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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