

An Analysis of the Impact of Social Media on the Communication Ecology of Traditional News Media

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Abstract. The rapid rise of social media has dramatically altered the communications environment in which traditional news companies operate, affecting well-established ways of news generation, dissemination and audience participation. This research analyses the multidimensional effects of social media on traditional news media from three theoretical perspectives: media ecology theory, agenda-setting theory and gatekeeping theory. Drawing on empirical data from global audience studies, platform data and new communication literature, the paper discusses how social media has disturbed the attention economy, deteriorated traditional gatekeeping authority and re-aligned intermedia agenda-setting dynamics. It also reflects on the ramifications for news credibility and audience trust and examines the convergence methods with which established media firms are attempting to reconfigure their role in the altered communication environment. Our analysis suggests that while social media has permanently changed the structural conditions of journalism, traditional news media still have unique institutional resources – editorial authority, source credibility and investigative capacity – that make them important nodes in a hybrid information environment.

Keywords: Social media; Traditional news media; Communication ecology; Agenda-setting; Gatekeeping; Media convergence; News trust; Audience fragmentation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The relationship of media technologies to their communicative environments has been a core concern of communication scholarship since McLuhan's founding proposition that the medium itself constitutes the primary message — that the structural properties of a communication technology shape social perception and cultural organisation more fundamentally than any individual content it carries. Postman further developed this ecological metaphor, stating that a new medium does not only add to an existing information environment, but rather it reconfigures it, changing the symbolic inventory, the cognitive patterns, and the institutional arrangements by which a society understands public life. Since the mid-2000s, social media platforms have been precisely this kind of disruptive intervention: not simply a new channel for news distribution, but a new communicative environment that reshapes the production, circulation, selection and consumption of journalistic information at every level of the system.

For most of the twentieth century, traditional news media (newspapers, broadcast television and radio) operated in a relatively stable communication ecology characterised by concentrated gatekeeping power, linear distribution, passive mass audiences, and a distinct institutional boundary between news producers and news consumers. At the same time, social media has destabilised each of these structural aspects. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and Instagram have redistributed the authority to publish, share and amplify news content across hundreds of millions of users, fragmenting audiences, multiplying information channels and subjecting professional journalism to direct competition from citizen content, algorithmic curation and platform-native commentary.

1.2. Research Questions

This study answers three research questions. RQ1: How has social media impacted the gatekeeping and agenda-setting activities that have characterised the public role of news media? RQ2: What are the implications of the impact of social media for news credibility, audience trust and information quality? RQ3: Which convergence methods can traditional news media companies use to remain relevant and authoritative in the altered communication ecology?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Media Ecology: Communication Environments and Systemic Change

In systematising media ecology, Postman and the New York School do not consider communication technologies as neutral tools of message transmission, but as environments that impose structural conditions on thinking, perception and social structure [1, 2]. The critical analytical move is the move from analysing what is conveyed to analysing the environment that the medium through which communication takes place creates. In the present case of transformation, such a paradigm focuses attention not to any single aspect of social media: its speed, its scale, its interaction – but to the aggregate structural shift these qualities cause in the communication ecosystem as a whole. Social media is a new media environment in the Postman sense: it reconfigures the symbolic hierarchy of information types (visual, emotional and shareable content over verified, contextualised and authoritative reporting), redefines the temporal norms of news (from daily publication cycles to continuous real-time streams), and reconstitutes the social roles of news producers and consumers (from distinct institutional positions to fluid, overlapping participatory roles) [3].

2.2. Agenda-Setting Theory: From Unidirectional to Intermedia Dynamics

In their seminal Chapel Hill study, McCombs and Shaw found that the salience of issues in public opinion is strongly predicted by the salience of those issues in mass media. In other words, media do not tell people what to think but are very good at telling people what to think about [4]. The model assumed a one-way flow of issue salience from professional media institutions to passive publics, which was consistent with the centralised gatekeeping structure of 20th century journalism. Social media has completely upset this directionality. Intermedia agenda-setting research shows that social media platforms, especially Twitter/X, now have a measurable reverse influence on mainstream news organisations' issue priorities. Trending topics, viral narratives and user-generated coverage set the agenda for professional editorial decisions as often as the reverse [5]. The interaction between media agenda and public agenda has become two-way and recursive, mediated by algorithmic amplification rather than editorial judgement.

2.3. Gatekeeping Theory: From Institutional to Algorithmic Control

According to Shoemaker and Vos, gatekeeping is the process by which the mass media pick, shape and broadcast information from the huge universe of possible events and determine not just which information gets to the public but how and with what contextual framing [6]. In the classical paradigm, gatekeeping was centralised in professional journalistic institutions. Editors, producers, and correspondents exercised trained, accountable, normatively regulated judgement regarding newsworthiness, accuracy, and public importance. Social media has created what Shoemaker and Han call a tripartite gatekeeping system, whereby professional journalists, individual social media users and the platform conglomerates themselves all perform gatekeeping functions, simultaneously, though the latter through opaque algorithmic systems optimised for engagement rather than public interest [7]. This shift from expert gatekeeping to algorithmic selection indicates a structural change in the accountability framework of public information, with substantial implications for the quality and accuracy of news that reaches large audiences.

3. Disruption of the Communication Ecology

3.1. Audience Fragmentation and Attention Economy

In terms of the direct structural influence of social media on the communication ecology of traditional news media, the most important one is the breakdown of the mass audience. Mass publics were constructed by broadcasting and print journalism through the common exposure of publics to common information streams. They provided the framework for common public knowledge and democratic discourse. Social media platforms substitute this common exposure with personalised information feeds curated through algorithms, which aggregate individual attention preferences into fragmented micro-publics – what Thorson and Wells call “curated flows”, where each user’s media exposure is influenced by a distinct combination of platform algorithms, individual sharing behaviour and residual legacy media consumption [12]. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 is based on survey data collected from more than 95,000 respondents in 47 countries and documents a decade-long structural decline in direct engagement of audiences with traditional news media. Only 22% of the respondents say that media websites or apps are their main source for news, which is down about ten percentage points from previous years [8]. Among 18-24-year-olds, 44% predominantly use TikTok and YouTube for news, and social video consumption surged from 52% in 2020 to 65% by 2025 [8] — a structural reorientation, not a cyclical variation

Ad income has shifted to companies that can provide algorithmically focused audience segments at a cheaper price. This economic disruption was expedited by Facebook and X de-prioritising news material, which led to a 48% drop in referral traffic to news sites from Facebook and a 27% drop from X in 2024 alone [8].

3.2. Transformation of Gatekeeping and Agenda-Setting

The structural displacement of professional gatekeeping authority by algorithmic and user-driven selection has reshaped both the content and the normative architecture of public information circulation. Social media platforms optimise content selection for engagement metrics – shares, reactions, time-on-platform – which systematically favour emotionally resonant, conflict-oriented and identity-affirming content over the contextualised, nuanced and factually complex reporting that characterises professional journalism at its best [3, 6]. This generates a systematic bias towards sensationalism, indignation and disinformation regardless of the policies of the specific platform. Scheffauer, Goyanes, and Gil de Zúñiga’s panel surveys evidence that audiences still prefer professional journalist gatekeeping over algorithmic selection as a driver of news trust, but the platform architecture increasingly delivers algorithmically selected content regardless of this preference [9]. The gap between what audiences trust and what the algorithmic environment offers is a structural conflict at the heart of the contemporary communication ecology.

Research on intermedia agenda-setting reveals that the influence relationship between social media and traditional news has indeed become two-way. Research on agenda-setting dynamics between mainstream newspapers and Twitter shows that legacy media still sets the agenda attributes, i.e. the framing and evaluative dimensions of issues, but social media increasingly determines issue salience, forcing news organisations to cover topics that are trending on social platforms regardless of their editorial judgement about newsworthiness [5, 4]. This reversal signifies a serious loss of institutional agenda autonomy for traditional news organisations, whose editorial identity was historically characterised by their ability to choose what is publicly relevant independently.

3.3. Misinformation, Filter Bubbles, and the Credibility Crisis

Social media’s ecological displacement of professional gatekeeping has resulted in what the media ecology framework refers to as a systemic change in the information environment: the erosion of common factual ground as the epistemic underpinning of public debate. Pariser’s filter bubble idea – algorithmic personalisation that isolates users in belief-revealing information settings – has aroused empirical dispute, with some research showing little direct impacts and others confirming strong

polarisation in specific political situations [10]. What is better documented is the impact on news credibility. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 reports that average global trust in news is just 40% across 47 surveyed countries, down from its pandemic-era high, with just 22% of respondents reporting that they can reliably tell trustworthy from untrustworthy news on platforms like TikTok [8]. The share of people worldwide who shun news – a selective disengagement from the media because of perceived negative mood impact, political powerlessness and information overload – has grown from 29% of global respondents in 2017 to 39% in 2024, reaching record levels [8]. These tendencies are not simply a challenge to individual news outlets but a problem in the credibility infrastructure on which the social function of journalism rests.

4. Traditional Media Responses: Convergence Strategies

4.1. Platform Integration and Multi-Channel Distribution

In the communication ecology of the social media revolution, traditional news media corporations have pursued many convergence methods. The most common strategic response has been the integration of multiple channels, that is, the building of institutional social media presences on the major platforms, the pushing of news content in platform-native formats (short video, live streaming, interactive posts), and the use of social media audiences as top-of-funnel traffic generators for premium subscription products [11]. The strategy is based on the reach of social platforms, but seeks to funnel engaged people into the institutional brand settings — paywalled websites, TV channels, newsletters — that create sustained revenue and preserve editorial identity. However, the same algorithmic de-prioritisation of news that has reduced referral traffic, also structurally limits the efficacy of platform integration strategies: news organisations that become dependent on social platform distribution are vulnerable to unilateral algorithm changes that can annihilate their social reach without warning [8].

4.2. Content Differentiation and Credibility Positioning

The complementary strategic response is content differentiation, explicitly positioning the institutional assets of traditional media – editorial independence, verification standards, investigative depth, source accountability – as differentiators in an information environment awash with unverified social content. This approach to positioning is experimentally supported by the continuous evidence of audiences associating professional editorial gatekeeping with higher news trust, notwithstanding the high levels of social media news consumption [9]. The strategic challenge is to make this credibility gap obvious and evident for consumers whose default news environment is the social feed, where institutional provenance is visibly de-emphasised and information is judged largely through emotional and social engagement metrics [7]. Transparency measures (e.g., open reporting on editing processes, source disclosure, correction standards) hold potential for enhancing confidence with already-engaged audiences, but their use with disengaged or news-avoidant populations is still restricted [8].

RQ1 shows that social media has greatly weakened the one-way gatekeeping and agenda-setting power of traditional news media. Institutional editorial control has been replaced by a tripartite system in which professional journalists, platform users and algorithmic systems all simultaneously and conflictingly perform gatekeeping functions, and the flow of agenda-setting has been reversed so that social media trends increasingly affect professional editorial decisions.

News credibility stakes are high with global trust in news at an all-time low of 40%, record levels of news avoidance, and viewers struggling to tell the difference between credible and non-credible material, particularly on algorithmic platforms.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Hybrid Communication Ecology

The ecological revolution in media, started by social media, is not the simple replacement of traditional news media by social platforms, but the creation of a hybrid communication ecology, in which the two exist in a complex interdependence [3, 7]. Social media platforms rely on professional journalism to offer the reliable, verifiable information that distinguishes their news environments from sheer user-generated noise; traditional news organisations rely on social platforms to find audiences, especially younger ones. This interdependence creates both structural vulnerability (changes in platform algorithms directly impact news media revenue and reach) and strategic opportunity: traditional media institutions that manage to successfully navigate the hybrid ecology can capitalise on platform distribution while retaining the credibility differentiation that sets professional journalism apart from social media content [11].

5.2. Theoretical Implications

In this paper, the three theoretical frameworks used must be modified to the transformation presented. Media ecology's systemic analysis remains tremendously relevant, but has to be broadened to cover the recursive, user-driven features of the social media environment that Postman's broadcast-era formulation could not foresee [1, 2]. Intermedia influence in algorithmically mediated contexts is bidirectional and multi-actor, and so agenda-setting theory must move beyond the unidirectional mass media-to-public model of the original Chapel Hill study [4, 5]. Theories of gatekeeping must incorporate the three-party structure of contemporary gatekeeping – professional, user, and algorithmic – and create normative frames to assess the accountability of algorithmic gatekeeping that reflects the professional ethics frames set up for journalistic gatekeeping [6, 7].

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the impact of social media on the communication ecology of traditional news media is structural, not incremental: it has reconfigured the gatekeeping architecture of public information, disrupted the unidirectional dynamics of agenda-setting, fragmented mass audiences, compressed advertising revenues and created a credibility crisis whose ramifications extend beyond individual news organisations to the epistemic infrastructure of democratic public discourse. In response to RQ3: effective convergence strategies for traditional news media will require a combination of platforming for distribution reach and credibility differentiation—drawing on institutional assets of editorial accountability and verification quality—and diversified revenue models, notably subscription-based models that marry financial sustainability with audience trust rather than algorithmic engagement. The future of professional journalism in the social media age is not to imitate the engagement logic of social media, but to affirm the unique public value of verified, contextualised and responsible news in a hybrid communication ecology that needs and threatens it.

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