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Digital Media Dynamics: Ethical Challenges and Accountability in the Information Age

AMAN BORA¹

ABSTRACT

Advancements in technology have transformed the communication channels and thus the form of media. Social media has emerged and revolutionised the interaction between people. Digital delivery of information offers various advantages as well as disadvantages. This paper discusses various opportunities modern technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) bring for us along with dangers. The increasing influence of media, especially social media, in shaping public opinion is also discussed in the paper. In the present world, the impact of digital media on the functioning of the government and affecting political polarisation is also discussed. The accountability of the media houses is important for a fair society. The paper also discusses the various agencies that play a role in ensuring accountability.

Keywords: Media, Deepfake, Social media, Journalism, Accountability, Ethics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The media and its medium have undergone a significant transformation in the past century, primarily due to the revolution in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This transformation has resulted in the acceleration of the flow of information and data in the contemporary world. The emergence of ICT has impacted the way information is disseminated and consumed, revolutionizing the way people interact and communicate with each other. The superfast pace of information flow in the present era has significantly impacted the way society functions and has brought about far-reaching changes in the socio-economic landscape. Social media is playing an increasingly important role as a source of information. In January 2024, 5.35 billion people, which is 66.2 percent of the global population, accessed the Internet. Out of the total global population, 5.04 billion individuals, accounting for 62.3 percent, used social media.²

The first industries to embrace digital technologies were media and entertainment. Present-day

¹ Author is a Research Scholar at JRF (Political Science), Swargiya Shri Jai Dutt Wailla Govt. P.G. College Ranikhet, SSJ University, Almora, Uttarakhand, India.

² Statista. (2024, January 31). *Worldwide digital population 2024*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

technological advancements have been accompanied by successful growth in the media and entertainment industry. The most recent news and information can be instantly transmitted to any location on the planet. The constant progress in technology is affecting the quality and dissemination of content.³ The transformation in media has led to the emergence of new communication channels, such as social media, which has revolutionized the way interactions are made between people and different societies. The development of technology is driving the revolution in the media and entertainment industries.

Information delivery via electronic means has long captivated print product publishers, including newspapers and magazines. Delivery by computer and other methods appeared to offer various advantages to both the manufacturer and the consumer, in contrast to traditional printing on paper. The media environment has been completely transformed by digital technologies. Citizen journalism and instantaneous worldwide communication are made possible by social media. While streaming services like Netflix have revolutionized the way people consume entertainment, online news platforms have upended established paradigms.

Personalized content and targeted advertising are driven by data analytics; nonetheless, privacy concerns still exist. Delivery of material has changed as a result of the dominance of mobile devices. While these developments present new opportunities, they also bring with them drawbacks like economic disruption and disinformation. Sustaining ethical behaviour, accountability and transparency are necessary for navigating this complicated terrain.

Examining media power, ethics and responsibility is crucial in the digital age. The media has enormous influence over public discourse and opinion. To prevent deception and manipulation, ethical principles are necessary for reporting and content development. Accountability promotes credibility and trust by holding media organizations responsible for their deeds. A vigilant examination of media practices is necessary to navigate the complexity of the digital ecosystem, especially in light of algorithmic biases, privacy violations and the dissemination of misinformation. In addition to defending democracy, upholding moral principles and encouraging openness also helps to create a better-informed and healthier society where digital media may be a positive influence.

II. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF MEDIA

Twenty newspapers worldwide, along with a few periodicals and newsletters, were published

³ Joshi, K., Rastogi, R., Kumar, S., Pandey, R., Saini, D.J., & Yadav, R. (2023). Role of Technologies in the Media and Entertainment Sector. *2023 2nd International Conference on Edge Computing and Applications (ICECAA)*, 463-467.

online as of 1993, primarily through websites like Prodigy and CompuServe. In 1994, there were thousands of newspapers available online. 1995 saw the arrival of electronic delivery.⁴ The digital environment is still changing, influencing how people connect, communicate and study throughout the world. News and entertainment media have been greatly impacted by the emergence of computer network technology, which has further accelerated the development of new media. In addition to changing the media landscape, these developments have sped up the expansion of the media and entertainment industry, positioning it as a major force in the world economy.

According to a report, the social news platforms with the quickest growth rates are Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube. Facebook (63%) and YouTube (61%) continue to be the most popular social networks among the more than 80,000 sample of global consumers of digital news, with WhatsApp (33%) coming in third. Following Facebook Messenger (28%) and Instagram (36%), Twitter (23%) comes in sixth place. The information serves as a helpful reminder that social media usage patterns among journalists may not always reflect those of the general public.⁵

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's 2023 Digital News Report offers insightful information about how digital news is consumed throughout the globe. These are some of the main conclusions drawn from this extensive report:⁶

- YouTube is a well-known network that focuses on news, but TikTok, a platform geared toward young people, is becoming more and more popular than Facebook and YouTube. Facebook's impact on journalism is waning, while Chinese-owned TikTok reaches 20% of news consumers and 44% of 18–24-year-olds. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, where news media and journalists continue to play a vital role, celebrities, influencers and social media personalities are the main sources of influence over news on platforms like TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.
- The public is sceptical about the algorithms used to select news content; 30% of respondents believe that choosing news based on prior consumption is not an effective approach. Even if online news has the potential to increase democratic discourse, just 22% of users are currently active and 47% do not participate at all.
- News credibility has declined. Following contentious discussions on press freedom and

⁴ Khattak, A. W., & Nasir, M. (2012). The role of information technology in media industry. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.29333/ojcm/2395>

⁵ Radcliffe, D. (2020, September 3). *5 global news consumption trends in charts*. International Journalists' Network. <https://ijnet.org/en/story/5-global-news-consumption-trends-charts>

⁶ Newman, N. (2023, June 14). *Overview and key findings of the 2023 Digital News Report*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/dnr-executive-summary>

media independence, Finland has the highest level of trust (69%), while Greece has the lowest (19%). Overall, 40% of the sample believes most news most of the time.

- In most areas, the number of traditional media consumed is falling; social and internet media consumption is not making up for it. Customers who browse online are getting less interested in and less regular access to news. 48% of the whole sample currently indicate interest in news, down from 63% in 2017, despite political and economic challenges. Around all-time highs, 36% of news consumers say they frequently or occasionally skip news across markets.

Users' media consumption is shaped by social media algorithms and personalised recommendations, which customize content to their preferences. This causes "filter bubbles" which restrict exposure to different points of view and may even reinforce preconceptions. User data is used in targeted advertising to display ads more precisely. Additionally, algorithms control viral content and shape public opinion. Nevertheless, this may result in feedback loops that limit the exposure of content. Although tailored suggestions are convenient, they could prevent unexpected discoveries. Transparency and algorithmic bias continue to raise concerns. Gaining an understanding of these mechanisms is essential for developing media literacy and a more varied and knowledgeable information diet.

III. INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON PUBLIC OPINION

From the initial form, the Media has been the source of information for the society. It has largely impacted the public opinion. The opinion of the public is shaped by the information provided by the media houses. The media has been even accused of spreading propaganda from time to time. This was evident in the Cold War. Both the American and British governments used propaganda to sway public opinion throughout the Cold War. To incite anti-communist feelings, the British Information Research Department (IRD) targeted prominent people.⁷ The distinction between government and media was blurred during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations as they surreptitiously altered news to promote their propaganda agendas.⁸

Especially in industries where audiences lack firsthand knowledge, the media plays a vital role in informing the public about global events. According to a recent Pew Research on how people keep informed and where they obtain their news updates, an increasing number of individuals

⁷ Jenks, J. (2006). *British propaganda and news media in the Cold War*. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748623143.001.0001>

⁸ Parry-Giles, S. J. (1996). "Camouflaged" propaganda: The Truman and Eisenhower administrations' covert manipulation of news. *Western Journal of Communication*, 60(2), 146–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319609374539>

are using social media to access the most recent information. According to Pew Research: “Now, half of adult US consumers get news from social media at least occasionally.”⁹

In addition to promoting group change and legitimizing strong actions, media representations can restrict and mould individual conduct. According to research, the media can influence policy and behaviour, particularly when it is connected to structural support. Factors like views, knowledge, prior experience, structural impediments, values and media accounts from the past and present are all part of the intricate process of negotiation.¹⁰ These elements have the power to encourage or prevent behavioural and attitude changes. Media representations have the power to validate particular actions, lend legitimacy and trust to particular policies, and skew discussions by raising questions and creating uncertainty.

The media is a competitive arena where dominant parties can impose their will. The public’s opinion of minority groups, the enactment of laws and the expansion of rights to them are all influenced by media coverage of topics.¹¹ A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that exposure to partisan news sources on social media significantly increased the polarization of political beliefs among users.¹²

IV. ACCOUNTABILITY IN MEDIA GOVERNANCE

A complex regulatory structure that consists of industry standards, government laws and self-regulatory organizations governs media content. Laws and policies designed to preserve social values and safeguard the public interest are referred to as government regulations. This covers content standards enforced by organizations like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the United States to maintain decency and accuracy in broadcast media, as well as content censorship legislation like China’s “Great Firewall,” which restricts the transmission of internet information. Furthermore, ownership of media is frequently subject to rules, which are put in place to guard against monopolies and guarantee diversity.

The media industries have developed their codes of conduct and ethical principles and industry standards are important. This includes content classification schemes, such as the Motion Picture Association’s film rating system, to tell viewers about appropriate content and

⁹ *Social media and news fact sheet*. (2023, November 15). Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/>

¹⁰ Happer, C., & Philo, G. (2013). The role of the media in the construction of public belief and social change. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 1(1), 321–336. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v1i1.96>

¹¹ Jengellely, D., & Clawson, R. A. (2018). Media coverage and its impact on the politics of groups and identities. *Politics, Groups and Identities*, 7(1), 148–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1555094>

¹² Huber, B. R. (2021, March 29). *Consuming online partisan news leads to distrust in the media*. Princeton University. <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2021/03/29/consuming-online-partisan-news-leads-distrust-media>

journalistic standards for reporting veracity. Ad standards authorities and press councils are examples of self-regulatory organizations that enforce adherence to industry standards and manage consumer complaints. For example, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) is in charge of overseeing journalistic standards, whereas the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) of the UK regulates advertising material.

Broadcasting standards authorities, such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), are additional regulatory entities that oversee broadcast content and enforce conformity to rules and standards. Moreover, agencies such as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in India and Ofcom in the UK regulate several media-related topics, such as information distribution, broadcasting, and telecommunications. In general, laws governing media content aim to strike a balance between the right to free speech, the interests of the public, and social norms while also keeping up with changing media environments and technological breakthroughs. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union seeks to uphold individuals' rights to privacy and make organizations—including media companies—liable for their data processing activities.

Algorithms on social media and news sites can amplify certain views and marginalize others due to biases, reinforcing echo chambers. This limits exposure to diverse perspectives, posing a threat to democratic discourse. Greater transparency and ethical considerations are needed in algorithm design to address this issue. The digital age has brought forth new ethical dilemmas for journalists. The speed at which information is disseminated online often leads to a compromise in fact-checking and editorial standards. Additionally, the pressure to generate clicks and views can result in sensationalist reporting. To uphold the principles of ethical journalism, media organizations must prioritize accuracy over speed and ensure that their content is both informative and responsible. This requires a renewed commitment to journalistic ethics, particularly in the verification of sources and the avoidance of clickbait tactics.

V. EMERGING TRENDS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

The conventional form of media has been transformed into new-age Digital Media powered by ICT. Digitalized content, whether it be information or otherwise, that can be sent via a computer network or the internet is referred to as digital media. At first, this content might contain text, audio, video and/or graphics. However, since the early 2000s, new types of journalism have emerged from many technical trends, most notably the quick adoption of smart technology, which has enhanced the number of elements available.

The future of the journalism industry is being shaped by new kinds of journalism that are made

possible by the widespread use of mobile platforms, the rise of social media as a primary news source, and the development of sophisticated technology like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR). The development of deepfake technology, which can erode confidence, sway public opinion, and aid disinformation efforts, is one impending obstacle to media regulation. Deepfakes present serious ethical issues since they use artificial intelligence to produce modified movies and audio that are incredibly lifelike. A deepfake video might, for instance, show a well-known person saying or doing something they never did, harming their reputation or possibly igniting civil unrest.

One such incident was during the 2020 U.S. presidential election when a deepfake video that appeared to depict then-candidate Joe Biden making divisive remarks made a lot of rounds on social media.¹³ Even after being disproven, these videos have the power to cause viewers doubts and bewilderment, underscoring the critical need for strict control.

Furthermore, the growth of internet platforms has raised awareness of online dangers such as hate speech, cyberbullying, and extremist content. 1479 young people in the United Kingdom between the ages of 14 and 24 answered an online survey that was distributed by the Young Health Movement and the Royal Society for Public Health, 2017 (RSPH). The results demonstrated a connection between social media use and higher rates of anxiety, despair and restless nights.¹⁴ To create comprehensive regulatory frameworks that protect user well-being without stifling innovation and free speech, governments, technology companies and civil society must work together to strike a balance between the freedom of expression and the protection of individuals from such harms.

Technology and science are essential to the media industry's iterative innovation process. Furthermore, the media sector will have a plethora of new prospects due to scientific and technological advancement. Enhancing the media matrix on mobile devices is going to be popular. Virtual reality-based news reports might also catch on and media networks will be built with a public domain.¹⁵

Accountability in digital media is a multifaceted matter, encompassing both media organisations and the platforms that disseminate content. Authorities and regulatory entities are

¹³ Simonite, T. (2020, November 16). What happened to the deepfake threat to the election? *WIRED*. <https://www.wired.com/story/what-happened-deepfake-threat-election/>

¹⁴ Taylor-Jackson, J., & Moustafa, A. A. (2021). The relationships between social media use and factors relating to depression. In *Elsevier eBooks* (pp. 171–182). <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-817676-4.00010-9>

¹⁵ Chen, Q. (2020). The potential of science and technology innovation in the future development of media. In *3rd International Conference on e-Education, e-Business and Information Management (EEIM 2020)*. <https://doi.org/10.23977/eim2020015>

facing a growing challenge in finding ways to regulate digital media while respecting the boundaries of freedom of speech. An effective strategy involves the enforcement of ethical guidelines and accountability measures for media organisations and social media platforms, such as implementing codes of conduct, to ensure compliance with ethical standards and responsibility for the content they disseminate. Moreover, there is an increasing demand for worldwide collaboration in establishing a comprehensive framework for governing digital media on an international scale. This approach aims to tackle challenges such as the spread of false information across borders and the occurrence of online harassment.

VI. CONCLUSION

The media landscape is changing due to VR journalism and AI-driven content creation, which present both exciting potential and difficult obstacles. Media companies need to change as we move through this shifting landscape to effectively engage viewers and remain relevant. The World Economic Forum's Global Concerns Report 2023 states that while cybersecurity concerns will always be a problem, technology will make inequality worse.¹⁶ Thus accountability and ethics in journalism in the digital age is a contemporary necessity. Another facet of accountability that is worth examining is the use of digital media to enforce transparency and other elements of social responsibility, along with the subsequent emergence of media watchdogs.¹⁷

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) reports that a sizable portion of the adult global population is not digitally literate. This shortcoming makes it more difficult for them to interact critically and traverse digital media and information. Inequitable access to digital literacy is impeded by the persistence of the digital divide. Information and Media Literacy (MIL) is essential to tackle the digital difficulties arising. Building confidence in media, navigating digital advances like artificial intelligence and recognizing misinformation and disinformation are just a few of the critical skills that MIL offers to address 21st-century concerns. Even though about 66% of people on the planet utilize the Internet, thorough and long-lasting MIL training is still absent.¹⁸ There is an urgent need for increased investment in media literacy initiatives and collaborations between governments, educational institutions and civil society

¹⁶ *Global Risks Report 2023*. (2023, January 11). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2023/digest/>

¹⁷ Paulino, F.O., Gomes, R. (2021). The Influence of Digital Media on Accountability and Social Responsibility. In: Ward, S.J.A. (eds) *Handbook of Global Media Ethics*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32103-5_21

¹⁸ Law, N., Woo, D., De La Torre, J., & Wong, K. (2018). A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2. *Information Paper No. 51*. <https://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/10722/262055/1/Content.pdf>

organizations to address misinformation and promote informed citizenship.
