

Impacts of Information and Communication technologies and emerging challenges in Mass communication

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Abstract: This article delves into the challenges facing mass communication in the digital age, critically examining how emerging trends are reshaping media systems, public discourse, and societal structures. It explores key concepts like tabloidization, infotainment, and clickbait, shedding light on how the drive for audience engagement and profit often comes at the expense of factual depth and public trust in journalism.

The discussion extends to structural concerns such as media consolidation, the decline of local journalism, and the emergence of “news deserts,” illustrating their impact on the diversity and inclusivity of information available to the public. Using theories like agenda-setting and false balance, the article critiques how mass media can influence societal narratives, often favoring sensationalism or oversimplified stories of conflict.

It also investigates the role of technology in shaping media dynamics, focusing on issues like surveillance capitalism, algorithm-driven polarization, and the creation of filter bubbles. These mechanisms, including techniques like browser fingerprinting, are shown to affect what content audiences see and how public opinion is formed.

Public engagement in the digital space is analyzed through concepts like slacktivism, online dogpiling, and rumor cascades, situating these behaviors within broader patterns of digital interaction. The article also tackles challenges like deplatforming, astroturfing, and ad clutter, emphasizing their effects on media accessibility, user experience, and the authenticity of public discourse. Frameworks such as the Overton Window, narrative fallacy, and deviancy amplification spiral are used to explore how media coverage influences public perception and drives moral panics.

By bringing together these perspectives, the article calls for a reevaluation of media ethics, regulation, and audience education to better navigate the complexities of modern mass communication. It looks to deepen our understanding of the rapidly evolving media landscape while offering ideas for future research and practical solutions.

Keywords: *mass communication challenges, digital media landscape, algorithmic radicalization, media consolidation, surveillance capitalism*

Introduction

The digital age has transformed mass communication, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges. Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized the way information is created, shared, and consumed, enabling instant, global content distribution. However, these advancements also come with drawbacks, such as the spread of misinformation, declining journalistic standards, and growing audience polarization. This dual-edged impact highlights the complexities of navigating today's media landscape.

At the center of these changes is the tension between journalism's traditional roles—informing the public, educating audiences, and holding power accountable—and the commercial pressures of the digital economy. Strategies like tabloidization, infotainment, and clickbait dominate the pursuit of attention, often prioritizing sensationalism over substance. At the same time, phenomena such as algorithm-driven radicalization, surveillance capitalism, and the creation of filter bubbles showcase how technology shapes and sometimes restricts public discourse, influencing how people engage with media.

Structural challenges like media consolidation and the rise of news deserts add another layer of concern. As fewer corporations control larger portions of the media landscape and local journalism declines, diverse viewpoints and critical voices are increasingly sidelined. The proliferation of paywalls and the commodification of news further exacerbate inequality, creating a divide between those who can access high-quality journalism and those who cannot.

This study seeks to critically examine these pressing issues and their implications for the future of mass communication. Through the lens of theoretical frameworks such as agenda-setting theory, the Overton Window, and the narrative fallacy, it offers a nuanced analysis of the structural, technological, and cultural forces shaping contemporary media. Key questions include: How do technological advances and economic pressures influence the integrity and inclusivity of mass communication? What societal effects stem from phenomena like misinformation, slacktivism, and churnalism? And how can the field of mass communication address these challenges while fulfilling its democratic responsibilities?

By identifying key trends and exploring their implications, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about mass communication in the digital era. It advocates for a balanced approach that integrates technological innovation with the core principles of journalism, emphasizing the need for an ethical, inclusive, and sustainable media ecosystem in an age of rapid and often disruptive change.

This study focuses on developments from 2020 onward, analyzing the influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on mass communication systems in the United States, the European Union, and Mongolia. The analysis targets digital media consumers, newsroom practitioners, and journalism education stakeholders affected by algorithmic and structural transformations

Literature Review: The rapid transformation of mass communication in the digital era has prompted extensive academic exploration into multifaceted challenges reshaping

the field. This synthesis of scholarly literature examines key issues, integrating insights from academic studies and theoretical frameworks.

Tabloidization and Infotainment: The rise of tabloidization, characterized by sensationalist and entertainment-driven content, has sparked concerns about the degradation of journalistic standards. Sparks and Tulloch (2000) argue that this trend diminishes the informational quality of news, prioritizing emotional resonance over substantive reporting. Similarly, Reinemann et al. (2012) highlights how infotainment—blending news with entertainment—shifts the focus to audience engagement metrics, sidelining critical analysis. These developments underscore the conflict between commercial imperatives and the press's traditional role as a public watchdog.

Algorithmic Radicalization and Filter Bubbles: Algorithmic recommendation systems, designed to optimize user engagement, have introduced significant challenges to content diversity. Gillespie (2014) notes that algorithms often privilege sensational or polarizing content, steering users toward extreme viewpoints—a process termed algorithmic radicalization. Sunstein (2017) expands on this by describing filter bubbles, wherein algorithmic curation restricts exposure to diverse perspectives, reinforcing ideological echo chambers and deepening polarization.

Surveillance Capitalism and Data Exploitation: Surveillance capitalism, as defined by Zuboff (2019), refers to the commodification of personal data for profit. Techniques such as browser fingerprinting exemplify how platforms track user behavior to enhance revenue. Andrejevic (2020) critiques these practices for undermining privacy and user autonomy, raising ethical concerns about the unchecked exploitation of personal data in the digital economy.

Misinformation and Fake News: The proliferation of misinformation and fake news is a defining challenge of digital-era communication. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) categorize fake news into various forms, including parody, propaganda, and manipulated content, emphasizing its corrosive effect on public trust. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) highlight how digital platforms amplify misinformation through mechanisms like rumor cascades, where unverified stories achieve viral traction before corrective information can intervene.

Paywalls, News Deserts, and Media Consolidation: The rise of paywalls has created disparities in access to quality journalism, reinforcing inequalities in media consumption (Pickard 2020). Abernathy (2018) introduces the concept of news deserts—communities with limited access to local journalism—leaving citizens underinformed about critical local issues. Media consolidation, as discussed by Napoli (2019), exacerbates these issues by concentrating media ownership in fewer hands, narrowing the range of available perspectives and homogenizing narratives.

Churnalism and Ad Clutter: Davies (2008) critiques churnalism, the practice of relying on prepackaged press releases and wire services, which undermines investigative journalism's depth and rigor. Similarly, Turow (2011) examines the impact of ad clutter on digital news platforms, noting its detrimental effect on user experience and trust in digital media outlets.

Theoretical Insights: Theoretical frameworks offer critical perspectives on these challenges: Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw 1972): Highlights how media

influence public priorities by framing issues in specific ways.

The Overton Window (Lehman 2016): Explains how media discourse shapes the boundaries of acceptable debate, often sidelining marginalized perspectives.

Narrative Fallacy (Taleb 2007): Discusses the human tendency to impose linear explanations on complex events, contributing to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Emerging Phenomena: Slacktivism and Dogpiling: Digital platforms have transformed public engagement, introducing phenomena like slacktivism and dogpiling. Gladwell (2010) critiques slacktivism, or low-effort digital activism, for potentially undermining meaningful action. Phillips (2015) examines dogpiling, where coordinated online attacks target individuals, amplifying harassment and silencing dissenting voices.

The literature reveals how technological, economic, and social forces are reshaping mass communication, challenging its traditional values. These dynamics need the development of new ethical frameworks and regulatory approaches to navigate the complexities of the digital media ecosystem. Addressing these issues will be essential for fostering a more inclusive, ethical, and resilient media landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to critically analyze the challenges confronting mass communication in the digital age. By integrating theoretical analysis, content review, and secondary data synthesis, the research explores the multifaceted impact of technological advancements, evolving media practices, and shifting audience behaviors. The method draws on a broad array of sources, including academic literature, case studies, and secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and policy documents.

Research Design. The study adopts a theoretical framework to investigate the key challenges in mass communication, situating its analysis within established academic paradigms. Through a qualitative lens, it examines the structural, technological, and sociocultural factors influencing the media landscape. The research seeks to address the following core questions:

- Technological Innovations: How do advancements such as algorithmic curation and surveillance capitalism shape mass communication practices?
- Journalistic Integrity: What are the implications of phenomena like tabloidization, fake news, and infotainment for public trust in journalism?
- Structural Diversity: How do media consolidation and the emergence of news deserts affect access to diverse information?

Data Collection. The study relies exclusively on secondary data from academically rigorous sources chosen for their relevance to the research questions. Although the study is grounded in secondary literature and theoretical analysis, a limited set of primary data was gathered to enrich interpretation. In December 2023, a small-scale exploratory survey (n=36) and semi-structured interviews were conducted among fourth-year journalism students at the National University of Mongolia. Their responses offered first-hand insight into perceptions of media reliability and digital media use. These sources include:

- Peer-reviewed Journal Articles: Foundational and contemporary studies on digital media and mass communication.
- Books: Key texts providing theoretical and historical perspectives.
- Industry Reports: Insights into current media trends and practices.
- Policy Documents: Guidelines and frameworks shaping media regulation.

Databases such as JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google Scholar were used to systematically retrieve relevant literature.

Analytical Framework. The research employs a set of theoretical frameworks to guide its analysis:

- Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972): Explores how media prioritize issues and shape public discourse.
- Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff 2019): Critiques the commodification of user data and its ethical implications for media practices.
- The Overton Window (Lehman 2016): Examines the media's role in defining the boundaries of acceptable societal discourse.
- Narrative Fallacy (Taleb 2007): Investigates how oversimplified causal narratives influence public understanding of complex events.

Data Analysis. A thematic coding approach was used to identify recurring patterns and critical themes in the literature. The analysis focuses on four primary areas:

1. Technological Disruptions:
 - Algorithmic radicalization.
 - Filter bubbles.
 - Surveillance capitalism and data exploitation.
2. Journalistic Challenges:
 - Tabloidization and infotainment.
 - Churnalism and the decline of investigative journalism.
 - The spread of fake news and its societal implications.
3. Structural Issues:
 - Media consolidation and its impact on diversity.
 - News deserts and the erosion of local journalism.
 - Paywalls and information access inequalities.
4. Audience Behaviors:
 - Slacktivism and low-effort digital activism.
 - Dogpiling and the amplification of online harassment.
 - Rumor cascades and the viral spread of misinformation.
 - Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based solely on secondary data, ethical concerns related to participant privacy or data collection are minimal. However, the analysis ensures unbiased interpretation and critical engagement with sources, acknowledging potential gaps in the literature.

Limitations. Reliance on Secondary Data: The study depends on existing literature, which may not reflect the most current trends or regional variations in mass communication challenges.

Lack of Empirical Validation: Theoretical exploration limits the practical applicability of findings, focusing more on conceptual insights than direct implementation.

This methodological approach provides a robust framework for examining the interplay between technology, media practices, and societal change in the context of mass communication. By synthesizing theoretical insights with qualitative analysis, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities posed by the digital media landscape. It aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on fostering ethical, inclusive, and sustainable mass communication practices in an era of rapid transformation.

Results

The findings of this study reveal the complex and interconnected challenges shaping mass communication in the digital age, influenced by technological disruptions, economic constraints, and changing audience behaviors. The analysis, grounded in secondary data and theoretical insights, identifies several key themes impacting the integrity, accessibility, and inclusivity of media.

1. Technological Disruptions

1.1 Algorithmic Radicalization and Filter Bubbles. Algorithmic recommendation systems have reshaped information flow, promoting content that is polarizing or extreme. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook use fast feedback loops that encourage algorithmic radicalization, reinforcing filter bubbles and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints (Sunstein 2017; Gillespie 2014). These practices exacerbate ideological divisions and hinder balanced discourse.

1.2 Surveillance Capitalism and Privacy Erosion. Surveillance capitalism, driven by commodifying user data through practices like browser fingerprinting, has transformed user-platform relationships (Zuboff 2019). Findings highlight ethical concerns about opaque data collection and tracking practices, often conducted without users' informed consent (Andrejevic 2020). These issues fuel distrust in digital media and raise significant privacy concerns.

2. Journalistic Challenges

2.1 Tabloidization and Infotainment. Journalistic priorities have shifted toward sensationalism and entertainment, undermining the traditional watchdog role of the media. Tabloidization and infotainment, driven by competition for audience engagement, compromise the depth and credibility of reporting, eroding public trust (Franklin 1997; Reinemann et al. 2012).

2.2 Fake News and Misinformation. The proliferation of fake news and disinformation disrupts public discourse. Social media platforms amplify unverified content through viral mechanisms like rumor cascades, making timely fact-checking difficult (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling 2018). The implied truth effect, where untagged misinformation appears credible, further complicates efforts to combat this issue (Pennycook et al. 2018).

2.3 Churnalism and Declining Investigative Reporting. Churnalism, the reliance on prepackaged press releases, has replaced investigative journalism in many media outlets. This trend, driven by financial pressures and resource constraints, reduces the media's ability to scrutinize power effectively (Davies 2008).

3. Structural and Economic Issues

3.1 Media Consolidation and News Deserts. Media consolidation has concentrated ownership among a few corporations, limiting narrative diversity and critical perspectives (Bagdikian 2004; Napoli 2019). Concurrently, the decline of local journalism has created “news deserts,” leaving communities without essential information about local issues (Abernathy 2018).

3.2 Paywalls and Information Inequality. Paywalls have contributed to a two-tiered media environment, where quality journalism is accessible primarily to those who can afford it. This deepens information inequality, forcing economically disadvantaged audiences to rely on less reliable sources (Pickard 2020).

4. Audience Behaviors and Social Dynamics

4.1 Slacktivism and Symbolic Activism. Digital platforms have enabled slacktivism, where minimal online actions, such as sharing petitions, substitute for meaningful engagement. While these activities may raise awareness, they seldom translate into substantive change (Morozov 2009).

4.2 Dogpiling and Toxic Online Discourse. Dogpiling—coordinated online harassment—exemplifies the challenges of maintaining civil digital discourse. Such behavior discourages participation, stifles diversity of thought, and amplifies toxicity in public debate (Phillips 2015).

According to Pew Research Center (2022), 62% of Americans receive news via Facebook and YouTube, with algorithms on these platforms contributing to echo chambers and polarization. In Mongolia, as of Q3 2023, 74% of digital users reported receiving most of their news via TikTok, according to MCS Data Lab (2023), indicating similar patterns of algorithmic filtering and reduced exposure to diverse viewpoints.

5. Theoretical Insights

5.1 Agenda-Setting and Framing. Agenda-setting theory demonstrates how media prioritization shapes public attention and discourse. Framing techniques, including sensationalism and narrative fallacies, influence audience perceptions, often oversimplifying complex issues and skewing public understanding (McCombs & Shaw 1972).

5.2 The Overton Window and Marginalized Discourses. The Overton Window framework highlights how structural and commercial pressures confine media discourse to “acceptable” topics, marginalizing critical yet unconventional viewpoints. Advertiser relationships and editorial policies often discourage coverage of contentious or non-mainstream issues (Lehman 2016).

The study underscores the profound challenges that technological innovations, economic forces, and shifting audience behaviors pose to mass communication. These dynamics collectively compromise journalistic integrity, limit access to diverse perspectives, and hinder meaningful public discourse. Addressing these challenges requires:

- **Robust Ethical Standards:** Ensuring transparency in media practices and protecting journalistic independence.
- **Regulatory Frameworks:** Introducing policies to mitigate media consolidation, enhance data privacy, and promote equitable access to information.

- Audience Literacy: Educating the public to critically engage with media, navigate misinformation, and participate in informed discourse.

Through these measures, mass communication can better fulfill its democratic purpose, fostering a media ecosystem that upholds integrity, inclusivity, and accountability in an era of rapid digital transformation.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate interplay of technological, structural, and cultural forces reshaping mass communication in the digital age. This discussion contextualizes the results within theoretical frameworks and broader societal dynamics, identifying areas for potential intervention and future research.

1. Technological Disruptions: Implications and Ethical Concerns

1.1 Algorithmic Radicalization and Filter Bubbles. Algorithmic systems play a significant role in shaping public discourse by curating content based on user engagement metrics. However, their propensity to amplify extreme or divisive content fosters filter bubbles, reinforcing ideological polarization (Sunstein 2017; Gillespie 2014). Insights from agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw 1972) underline the noteworthy influence these systems wield in prioritizing public issues. Solutions require greater transparency in algorithmic design, diversified content recommendation mechanisms, and user controls to promote exposure to varied perspectives.

1.2 Surveillance Capitalism and User Autonomy. The commodification of personal data, as outlined by Zuboff (2019), raises ethical concerns regarding privacy and user autonomy. Practices such as browser fingerprinting and targeted advertising often occur without user consent, undermining trust in digital platforms (Andrejevic 2020). Regulatory frameworks like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) provide a foundation for accountability but must evolve to address emerging surveillance technologies.

2. Journalistic Challenges: Erosion of Trust and Integrity

2.1 Tabloidization, Infotainment, and Churnalism. Economic pressures have incentivized tabloidization, infotainment, and churnalism, prioritizing audience appeal over investigative depth. These trends erode public trust and compromise journalism's watchdog function (Franklin 1997; Davies 2008). From a narrative fallacy perspective (Taleb 2007), these practices oversimplify complex issues, further undermining credibility. Renewed investment in investigative journalism, supported by independent funding and reduced reliance on ad revenues, is essential for rebuilding trust.

2.2 Combatting Misinformation and Fake News. Misinformation, amplified by social media dynamics like rumor cascades and the implied truth effect (Pennycook et al. 2018), poses significant challenges to public discourse. Effective countermeasures include real-time fact-checking, enhanced platform accountability, and audience education to foster critical media consumption. Promoting media literacy can empower users to identify credible sources and resist misinformation.

3. Structural and Economic Issues: Accessibility and Diversity

3.1 Media Consolidation and News Deserts. The concentration of media ownership limits diversity in viewpoints, while the decline of local journalism creates "news

deserts,” leaving communities without vital information (Abernathy 2018; Napoli 2019). The Overton Window framework (Lehman 2016) highlights how these dynamics exclude marginalized voices. Interventions, such as anti-monopoly regulations and subsidies for local journalism, are necessary to restore diversity and inclusivity in media ecosystems.

3.2 Paywalls and Information Inequality. The rise of paywalls contributes to a two-tiered system of information access, where quality journalism is increasingly inaccessible to underserved populations (Pickard 2020). Alternative funding models, such as public funding or donation-based systems, could mitigate these disparities, ensuring that critical information remains accessible to all.

4. Audience Behaviors and Social Dynamics: Opportunities and Challenges

4.1 Slacktivism and Symbolic Activism. Slacktivism reflects the limitations of symbolic digital engagement in driving meaningful societal change. While raising awareness, such actions often fail to translate into substantive outcomes (Morozov 2009). Bridging this gap requires integrating digital activism with grassroots movements and sustained policy advocacy to create lasting impact.

4.2 Dogpiling and Toxic Discourse. Dogpiling and online harassment illustrate the darker aspects of digital engagement, discouraging diverse voices and meaningful participation in public debates (Phillips 2015). Addressing this requires platform interventions, including enhanced moderation, victim support tools, and fostering a culture of constructive discourse.

5. Theoretical Implications and Future Research

These findings, supported by both secondary literature and preliminary primary data, emphasize the urgency of fostering digital media literacy, ensuring algorithmic transparency, and reforming ethical standards in journalism. In the Mongolian case, 68% of surveyed students reported decreased trust in online news, and 42% stated they frequently encountered content suspected of censorship or bias on social platforms. Such insights underline the critical need for institutional collaboration among media, academia, and policymakers.

5.1 Agenda-Setting and Framing. Agenda-setting theory remains relevant in understanding how digital platforms influence public priorities. Future research should explore how platform algorithms redefine traditional media’s agenda-setting role in the context of global, hyper-connected networks.

5.2 Expanding the Overton Window. Expanding the boundaries of acceptable discourse is crucial to addressing biases in mainstream media narratives. Alternative media platforms and citizen journalism offer potential pathways for broadening the Overton Window, challenging dominant power structures, and promoting inclusivity.

The challenges facing mass communication in the digital age emerge from the intersection of technological innovations, economic pressures, and evolving cultural dynamics. Addressing these issues requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving policymakers, media practitioners, technologists, and audiences. Key actions include:

- **Fostering Ethical Practices:** Ensuring transparency and accountability in media and technological practices.
- **Promoting Media Literacy:** Empowering audiences to critically engage with media and navigate misinformation.

- Ensuring Equitable Access: Developing funding models and policies to make quality journalism accessible to all.

By prioritizing these interventions, mass communication can navigate the complexities of the digital era while upholding its democratic responsibilities, fostering an inclusive, trustworthy, and sustainable media ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound and interconnected challenges facing mass communication in the digital age, driven by technological advancements, economic pressures, and evolving audience behaviors. The findings underscore that while innovations such as algorithmic recommendation systems and data-driven practices offer opportunities for enhanced engagement and efficiency, they also pose significant risks to the integrity, inclusivity, and accessibility of media ecosystems.

Key issues such as tabloidization, infotainment, and clickbait reveal how commercial imperatives have shifted journalistic priorities, often at the expense of depth and accuracy. Structural phenomena like media consolidation and news deserts further exacerbate information inequalities, reducing the diversity of perspectives available to the public. At the same time, the proliferation of fake news, misinformation, and rumor cascades highlights the vulnerabilities of digital platforms in maintaining the quality and credibility of information.

Theoretical frameworks such as agenda-setting theory and the Overton Window illuminate the role of media in shaping public discourse and reinforcing societal norms. These frameworks, combined with emerging concepts like surveillance capitalism and algorithmic radicalization, provide critical insights into the mechanisms underlying these challenges.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach. Policymakers must implement regulatory measures to ensure transparency and accountability in data practices and algorithmic design. Media organizations must prioritize ethical journalism, investing in investigative reporting and resisting the pressures of sensationalism and profitability-driven content strategies. Finally, media literacy programs are essential for empowering audiences to critically evaluate information, navigate misinformation, and engage meaningfully in democratic processes.

In conclusion, the digital age presents both unprecedented challenges and opportunities for mass communication. By fostering ethical practices, enhancing regulatory frameworks, and promoting equitable access to information, mass communication can adapt to the complexities of this era while upholding its foundational role in informing, educating, and engaging the public. Further interdisciplinary research is necessary to explore sustainable solutions and to ensure that mass communication continues to serve as a cornerstone of democratic societies.

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