

THE MEDIA, TRUTH AND THE ETHICS OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE AGE OF PROPAGANDA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital media and the proliferation of social platforms have radically transformed the landscape of public opinion, creating new challenges for the relationship between media, truth, and ethics. In the age of propaganda, the media's role in shaping public perceptions is increasingly scrutinized as information is often manipulated or distorted to serve political, corporate, or ideological interests. This paper explores the complexities of media ethics in the contemporary information age, focusing on how propaganda and misinformation challenge the concept of truth in public discourse. The ethical responsibility of the media in maintaining truth, objectivity, and fairness while navigating the tension between freedom of speech and the potential harms of manipulated narratives is central to this discussion. By analyzing the role of media in shaping public opinion, the paper proposes strategies for promoting ethical journalism and protecting democratic integrity in the digital era.

Keywords: Media, Truth, Ethics, Public Opinion, Propaganda

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, the media plays a fundamental role in shaping public opinion; acting as both a conduit for information and a powerful tool for influencing societal beliefs and behaviors. With the rise of digital platforms and 24-hour news cycles, the volume and speed of information dissemination have drastically increased. However, this expansion has come with significant challenges, particularly regarding the truthfulness of information and the ethical responsibilities of media outlets. In today's media landscape, the line between fact and opinion has become increasingly blurred, and the deliberate manipulation of information—often referred to as propaganda has become a common tool used by political actors, governments, and corporations to sway public opinion and promote specific agendas.

The ethical implications of such practices are profound. Media organizations are tasked with the duty of presenting facts in a way that is both objective and accurate, yet the economic pressures of sensationalism, the influence of corporate sponsors, and the rise of partisan media often undermine this responsibility. As a result, the trust between the public and the media has eroded, and the concept of “truth” has become more subjective, with competing narratives presenting conflicting versions of reality. This paper examines the ethical dimensions of this issue, exploring the responsibilities of media organizations in promoting truth and combating the harmful effects of misinformation and propaganda. Furthermore, it will address how these ethical considerations relate to the broader democratic processes, highlighting the crucial role of the media in upholding public trust and informed decision-making in society.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

The media has long been a powerful force in shaping public opinion, acting as a key vehicle for disseminating information, framing political discourse, and influencing societal norms. In the modern era, with the advent of digital platforms and 24-hour news cycles, the media’s role in shaping public opinion has only intensified. From news broadcasts to social media platforms, the media has the capacity to inform, persuade, and sometimes manipulate public views, often serving as the primary source through which individuals understand and interpret the world around them.

One of the most significant ways in which media shapes public opinion is through framing the manner in which news and information are presented. Media outlets often choose which events to cover, how to describe those events, and which voices or perspectives to emphasize, thus shaping the public’s understanding of the issues at hand. For example, the framing of political events, such as elections or policy debates, can significantly influence how the public perceives candidates or political parties. According to Entman (1993, 52), framing “selects some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text.” This selective emphasis guides the audience toward specific interpretations and judgments, subtly influencing their beliefs and actions.

The agenda-setting function of the media is another powerful mechanism by which public opinion is shaped. While the media may not directly tell people what to think, it often tells them what to think about. By focusing on particular issues and elevating them to public prominence, the media can influence which topics dominate political discourse and public concern. McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) agenda-setting theory asserts that “media doesn’t tell people what to think, but it tells them what to think about.” For instance, when media outlets extensively cover issues like climate change, immigration, or economic inequality, these topics gain prominence in public discussions, influencing policymakers and the public alike.

Social media platform have further amplified the media’s role in shaping public opinion. In contrast to traditional media, social media allows individuals to share information, opinions, and news at an unprecedented scale, giving rise to a more interactive and participatory form of media consumption. However, this new form of media consumption also comes with challenges,

including the spread of misinformation and the creation of “echo chambers,” where users are exposed primarily to viewpoints similar to their own. The algorithmic nature of platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram often prioritizes sensationalist or emotionally charged content, which can exacerbate polarization and reinforce pre-existing beliefs (Pariser, 2021, 20). The result is an environment where the line between credible news and misleading content becomes increasingly difficult to discern.

The economic pressures faced by media organizations also play a role in shaping public opinion. Many traditional media outlets are subject to financial incentives that prioritize sensationalism, scandal, or controversy in order to attract higher ratings, views, or ad revenue. As a result, news stories may be presented in a way that maximizes audience engagement, sometimes at the cost of accuracy or balance. This phenomenon, often referred to as “infotainment,” blurs the line between news and entertainment, and can lead to the distortion of facts or the oversimplification of complex issues (Bagdikian, 2004, 89).

Despite these challenges, the media also has the potential to play a positive role in shaping public opinion by providing informative, balanced, and fact-based content. The rise of independent journalism, fact-checking organizations, and media literacy campaigns has increased the public’s ability to critically evaluate the information they consume. As the media landscape continues to evolve, the role of journalists, media producers, and consumers in upholding the integrity of public discourse becomes ever more critical. However the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, from framing issues and setting agendas to influencing political attitudes and social behaviors. While media outlets have the power to inform and engage the public, they also have the responsibility to present information accurately and ethically. As digital platforms continue to evolve, the ability of media to shape public opinion remains a double-edged sword, capable of both enriching democracy and exacerbating divisions. Media literacy, ethical journalism, and public accountability are crucial in ensuring that the media remains a force for positive social change rather than a tool for manipulation.

PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES AND MISINFORMATION

In the modern information age, propaganda and misinformation have become powerful tools used by various actors including governments, corporations, and political groups to shape public opinion and influence behavior. Propaganda, by definition, is the strategic use of communication to promote specific ideas, ideologies, or interests, often through the manipulation of information. While propaganda can take various forms, it typically involves the distortion or selective presentation of facts to manipulate the beliefs and actions of an audience. Misinformation, on the other hand, refers to the dissemination of false or inaccurate information, regardless of intent, and has become increasingly pervasive in both traditional and digital media. Understanding the techniques of propaganda and misinformation is essential for discerning their impact on public discourse and democracy.

One of the most common propaganda techniques is card-stacking, which involves the selective presentation of facts to promote a particular agenda. By highlighting only favorable information

and omitting negative details, those wielding propaganda create a biased narrative that influences the audience's perception of an issue. This technique is frequently seen in political advertising, where a candidate's strengths are emphasized while their weaknesses are minimized or ignored. For example, during electoral campaigns, political parties may focus on a candidate's achievements while downplaying controversies or failures, creating an artificially positive image (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, 132).

Another powerful propaganda technique is the use of fear-mongering, where emotional appeals are made to provoke fear in the audience. By exaggerating threats or dangers, propagandists seek to manipulate public sentiment and mobilize people to take certain actions. A classic example of fear-mongering can be seen in wartime propaganda, where the enemy is depicted as an existential threat to national security. This technique also plays a significant role in shaping public policy, particularly in areas such as national security, immigration, and public health. For instance, the portrayal of immigrants as criminals or economic burdens can fuel xenophobia and support for restrictive policies (Lasswell, 1927, 120).

Demonization is another frequently used technique in propaganda, wherein an opposing group or individual is portrayed as inherently evil, immoral, or dangerous. This strategy is designed to simplify complex issues by framing them in black-and-white terms, thus eliminating any nuance or opposing viewpoints. Historically, demonization has been used in political and military contexts, such as the portrayal of communists during the Cold War or the demonization of political opponents in authoritarian regimes. In the context of modern media, demonization is often seen in the way certain political groups or movements are vilified, contributing to polarized and divisive public discourse (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012, 45).

Misinformation (the dissemination of false or inaccurate information) often overlaps with propaganda, although it can occur unintentionally as well. The rise of digital platforms has made misinformation more widespread, as rumors, hoaxes, and fake news can be shared quickly across social media, often with little regard for accuracy. One significant form of misinformation is fake news, which refers to deliberately fabricated stories that are presented as legitimate news to mislead or deceive the audience. The proliferation of fake news during significant political events, such as elections, has been shown to influence voter behavior and public trust in democratic processes (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018, 1146). The spread of misinformation can also undermine public health efforts, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when false claims about the virus and vaccines created widespread confusion and hindered efforts to curb the disease's spread.

Another form of misinformation is seen in conspiracy theories, which are often propagated through social media and fringe websites. These theories involve complex, unfounded claims about hidden agendas or covert actions, typically involving powerful groups or institutions. While they may seem far-fetched, conspiracy theories can have a profound effect on public opinion, particularly when they are presented in ways that resonate with individuals' preexisting beliefs or fears. The widespread belief in conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election or the origins of COVID-19, highlights the dangers of unchecked misinformation in shaping public perception (Goertzel, 1994, 734).

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TRUTH AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Social media platforms have dramatically transformed the way information is disseminated, consumed, and interacted with in the modern world. Once primarily a tool for social interaction, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more recently, *TikTok*, have become central in shaping public discourse and influencing perceptions of truth. While these platforms provide unprecedented access to diverse viewpoints, they also pose significant challenges to the accuracy of information and the integrity of public debate. The impact of social media on truth and public discourse is multifaceted, involving both positive and negative consequences for the way we engage with information, politics, and societal issues.

One of the most significant effects of social media on truth is the phenomenon of echo chambers. Echo chambers are environments where users are exposed primarily to information that aligns with their existing beliefs and opinions, while dissenting voices are either marginalized or excluded. Research has shown that social media platforms, particularly those with algorithm-driven content feeds, exacerbate this effect by prioritizing content that generates strong emotional reactions, which often leads to the reinforcement of existing biases (Pariser, 2011, 42). As a result, individuals in echo chambers may become more polarized, less open to alternative perspectives, and increasingly resistant to information that contradicts their views. This creates a fragmented public discourse, where competing narratives of truth are perpetuated without the possibility of meaningful dialogue.

Another challenge posed by social media is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. Unlike traditional media, where there are editorial processes and fact-checking mechanisms, the decentralized nature of social media allows for the rapid dissemination of both false and misleading information. Misinformation refers to the sharing of false information without malicious intent, while disinformation is deliberately fabricated to deceive or manipulate an audience. Social media platforms are particularly susceptible to the spread of misinformation because of the speed at which content can go viral and the lack of effective oversight in many cases. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, false claims about the virus, its transmission, and treatments circulated widely on social media, causing confusion and hindering public health efforts (Fraser et al., 2021, 163). The spread of such content highlights the need for greater accountability in how information is shared and consumed online.

Fake news, a type of disinformation designed to deceive and mislead audiences, has become one of the most dangerous consequences of social media's impact on public discourse. Fake news often presents itself as legitimate journalism, making it difficult for the average user to discern between credible sources and fabricated content. The intentional spread of fake news has been used for political purposes, influencing elections, spreading propaganda, and distorting public opinion. A notable example is the role of fake news in the 2016 United States presidential election, where false stories circulated on social media were found to have had a significant impact on voters' perceptions of the candidates and their policies (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, 213). The widespread availability of fake news has undermined public trust in traditional news sources, creating an environment in which the truth becomes harder to discern.

Additionally, algorithmic biases on social media platforms further complicate the relationship between truth and public discourse. Social media companies use complex algorithms to determine which content appears in users' feeds, prioritizing posts based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. This system often amplifies sensational, emotional, or polarizing content, which can distort the public's understanding of events and issues. For example, studies have shown that false news spreads faster than true news on platforms like Twitter, partly due to the virality of sensationalized headlines (Vosoughi et al., 2018, 1147). These algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, inadvertently prioritize content that is often misleading or divisive, contributing to the erosion of trust in information and public debate.

Despite these challenges, social media also has the potential to play a positive role in shaping public discourse and promoting truth. The democratization of information on social media has enabled marginalized voices to be heard and has facilitated the rapid dissemination of important social and political movements. The *Arab Spring*, for instance, saw social media platforms being used to organize protests, share real-time information, and challenge oppressive regimes. Social media has also enabled greater accountability, with platforms serving as spaces for public debate, fact-checking, and exposing corruption (Tufekci, 2017, 111). In this sense, social media can be seen as a tool for transparency and truth-telling, providing an alternative to traditional media outlets that may be influenced by corporate interests or political affiliations. However, to fully realize the potential of social media as a force for good, there is a need for stronger mechanisms to combat misinformation and promote digital literacy. Fact-checking organizations, digital literacy programs, and algorithmic transparency are essential components of this effort. Additionally, social media platforms themselves must take greater responsibility for curbing the spread of harmful content and ensuring that users are exposed to reliable information. Without these efforts, social media risks further exacerbating the challenges to truth and public discourse, undermining the integrity of democracy and informed citizenship.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, public trust in the media has significantly declined, largely due to concerns about misinformation, bias, sensationalism, and the financial pressures on media outlets. This erosion of trust presents a critical challenge to the role of the media in a democratic society, where informed citizens are essential for effective participation in civic life. To restore public trust, a multi-faceted approach is necessary one that involves media organizations, journalists, governments, and the public. Addressing issues of ethical standards, transparency, and accountability in media practices is paramount in rebuilding confidence in the media and ensuring that it continues to serve its vital role in society.

A foundational step in restoring public trust is the promotion of ethical journalism. Ethical journalism is grounded in principles such as fairness, accuracy, impartiality, and the commitment to truth. Media organizations must adhere to strict ethical guidelines that prioritize the public interest over commercial or political pressures. The *Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics* emphasizes that journalists should "seek truth and report it" and "minimize harm" by

ensuring that their reporting is balanced, respectful, and fact-based (“Code of Ethics”). Media outlets that consistently uphold these principles are more likely to earn the trust of their audiences. In addition, the increasing reliance on citizen journalism, fueled by social media, requires an emphasis on the ethical responsibility of ordinary people sharing information. Encouraging ethical behavior in this sphere such as verifying information before sharing can reduce the spread of falsehoods and reinforce a culture of integrity in public discourse.

Another essential strategy for restoring trust is enhancing transparency within media organizations. The public has a right to understand how news is produced, funded, and disseminated. One way to achieve this is through greater transparency about the editorial processes and decision-making that shape media content. Media outlets should disclose their sources of funding, ownership structures, and any potential conflicts of interest. The establishment of independent editorial boards or fact-checking organizations within media companies can provide additional layers of oversight, ensuring that content is produced with integrity. When news organizations make their editorial processes visible and understandable to the public, they demonstrate accountability and foster trust.

In addition to transparency, accountability is crucial in rebuilding public trust. Media organizations must be held responsible for their reporting, especially when errors are made. This can be achieved through prompt corrections, public apologies, and clear acknowledgment of mistakes. A commitment to accountability also includes addressing bias and sensationalism in reporting. One way to combat bias is through the use of diverse and inclusive editorial teams, which can help ensure that news stories reflect a wide range of perspectives. Regular media audits and independent oversight, such as by public regulators or independent commissions, can help identify and address issues of bias or misrepresentation.

Fact-checking plays an increasingly important role in the effort to restore public trust in the media. As misinformation and fake news continue to spread across digital platforms, fact-checking organizations are vital in verifying the accuracy of claims made by politicians, public figures, and media outlets themselves. Prominent organizations like *PolitiFact*, *FactCheck.org*, and *The Washington Post’s Fact Checker* have become trusted sources of accurate information, especially in the context of political discourse. Media outlets can collaborate with such organizations to ensure that the information they disseminate is verified and reliable. Fact-checking should be integrated into the daily operations of media organizations, making it a routine part of news reporting rather than an afterthought. Additionally, educating the public on how to recognize and evaluate credible sources of information can empower individuals to critically engage with the news they consume.

The promotion of media literacy is another critical strategy for restoring trust. Media literacy programs, both in schools and through public campaigns, help individuals develop the skills necessary to critically evaluate the information they encounter. By teaching people how to assess the credibility of sources, understand biases, and identify misinformation, these programs can reduce the influence of falsehoods and conspiracy theories. Media literacy also helps people understand the economic and political forces that shape media content, fostering a more informed and discerning public. As digital platforms increasingly serve as news sources, educating users

about the dynamics of algorithms, data privacy, and the spread of fake news is essential to fostering a media-savvy society.

Finally, media organizations and social media platforms should work together to curb the spread of misinformation. Given the central role that social media plays in the dissemination of news, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube must adopt stronger measures to monitor and flag misleading content. These platforms have a responsibility to ensure that their algorithms do not prioritize sensational or false information simply because it generates engagement. Increased cooperation between media outlets and social media platforms, as well as the use of artificial intelligence to detect and block fake news, can help mitigate the negative effects of misinformation. However, this must be done with respect for free speech and without overreach that stifles legitimate discourse.

Thus, restoring public trust in the media is a complex long-term process that requires the active involvement of media organizations, journalists, social media platforms and the public. By promoting ethical journalism, ensuring transparency, prioritizing accountability and encouraging fact-checking and media literacy, media organizations can begin to rebuild the trust that has been lost in recent years. In a time of rampant misinformation and divisive rhetoric, it is crucial for the media to reassert its role as a reliable, ethical source of information that serves the public good.

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