The journalism crossroads: Social media, misinformation and the anti-trust communities

Already suffering in the Web 2.0 era, journalism is now at a crossroads when dealing with the elusive concept of truth (Viner, 2016) in a world where information has no boundaries. When the vision of Russian tanks rolling across Ukrainian borders appeared on our screens, an endless flood of information came out of the Eastern European country through social media, documenting the event in real-time and from many different perspectives. Over recent years the way global events are experienced has changed, as more people access social media many new sources of information have developed – changing the way information is shared globally. Unlike the way historically significant events – for example 9/11 – were experienced through the lens of news broadcasts and newspapers, the contemporary experience includes an uncountable number of social media users participating in the discussion and sharing of unfolding world events as they happen.

This experience has introduced a predicament for the mainstream media and journalism. Social media has disrupted the information hierarchy once commanded by the mainstream media. The declining influence of journalistic values is noticeable as social media platforms struggle to balance freedom and truth. Despite this, social media communities have developed an aversion to the new and old media's authority, and the polarisation of political discourse has created communities of misinformation. This paper will explore these ideas with a focus on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and analyse how increased access to social media by users worldwide has changed how traditional journalism functions. While there is less need for the mainstream media as the "fourth estate," there remains a need for journalistic values to interrogate the endless streams of information flowing through social media.

The traditional mainstream media, namely print and broadcast, once served as the primary news source for many people worldwide; however, social media has introduced chaos to the information hierarchy. The organisations regarded as mainstream media are journalistic institutions, known as the "fourth estate," an independent group capable of challenging the power of state authority through journalistic methods to achieve accountability (Reese, 2022).

However, it is essential to note that this does not mean the mainstream media are honest in their activity – the incredible complexity of the news media's motives is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, as an example, Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp shows the power of controlling information to benefit a group of individuals rather than the public (Arsenault & Castells, 2008), and critics have scrutinised this behaviour through social media (Meade, 2022). As more news points appear and the information landscape drastically changes, social media is challenging the mainstream media's traditional monopoly on information and position as the source of news for many people.

The essence of social media disrupts the traditional ways of consuming information, and the mainstream media's role as news producer has weakened with the proliferation of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Instead of having a recognised point of consumption (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018), millions of individual users on these platforms produce and reproduce information. This is not a new phenomenon; Web 2.0 introduced this problem to journalism years before the conception of social media. The idea of "prosumption" through user-generated content (Delanty, 2018) has enabled social media to thrive because of its accessibility in the contemporary world. In a journalistic context, this shift from the traditional model of news consumption changed how people are informed about events around them, as anyone could now be a news producer.

These changes are clear in community news, where social media has dramatically lessened the position of the news media as the primary source of information for local affairs. Local news coverage has been affected by the declining revenues community papers generate, sometimes creating "black holes" due to areas not having a journalist to cover their local affairs (Harte, Howells & Williams, 2018). A solution to this has been through the creation of community Facebook groups, where community members, organisations, and even local government institutions use Facebook to produce news (Thorson et al., 2020). These community groups are digital third spaces where relationships between individuals are equal (Vaux & Langlais, 2021). Members share stories and comment on others as they would in a public setting – such as a cafe or park – but on a much greater scale. However, it is clear in this example that community

members now have the tools to hold local institutions accountable themselves, displacing the watchdog role of journalists.

Mainstream media has less of an impact on public discourse than it once had, and although still taking part in institutional accountability, journalism does not drive the discussions it once used to and has become another source – rather than the 'only source' – in the endless stream of information online. Journalism as a discipline is at a critical stage in finding its role in society., Aas Estella (2020) argues, "journalism is distinguishing itself from all other sources that now challenge its gate-keeping function, considered a thing of the bygone pre-internet era" (p. 16). Social media has only furthered this challenge, and as we have seen from the events of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the mainstream media was competing with individuals using Twitter, Facebook and even Tik Tok to communicate what was happening 'on the ground'. However, the necessity for journalism's strict values of fairness, balance, and impartiality (Arant & Meyer, 1998; MEAA, 2022) has never been clearer.

What defines journalistic organisations from other news sources are the requriements a story needs to satisfy – accurate information, authoritative opinion and verified sources – before it can be broadcast or published. According to Waisboard (2018), the problem posed by social media is the absence of any need to verify the authenticity of the published information, as a result, it can spread far as due to the easy access of social media platforms. Recent history has spoiled us with examples of how far social media can spread information. In the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the "Ghost of Kyiv" (Eisele, 2022) is a social media product that became the talk of the feeds. Ukraine's Defence Ministry Twitter account posted footage attributed to this pilot in action, but the idea of a sole pilot taking on a far superior force was false – as was the footage which was from the video game *Digital Combat Simulator* (Media Bites, 2022). This example highlights the tendency for information with unverified sources to take the front stage of public discussion.

Social media presents a new way to manipulate information to fit a specific narrative, and the war in Ukraine has shown various instances of propaganda thriving due to poor verification. As observed in the last example, Ukraine's Defence Ministry suggested its resistance to the Russian

occupation is much greater than what appears to be accurate; whether it was intentional is irrelevant because misinformation was quickly spread. Ball (2021) suggests this type of propaganda is common, and it can be either deliberate action from propagandists or simply content from a social media user that was not fact-checked. He also describes Russia's contemporary method of propaganda through social media: "by making a range of opposing viewpoints known, and presenting them all as credible, the inherent plausibility of any given position is called into question; and, in stirring divisions within societies, certain sources are made to appear inherently untrustworthy" (p. 20). It should also be noted that Russian state-controlled traditional news organisations have been used to conducta disinformation campaign within the country. According to Cushion (2022), "Russian authorities have tightly controlled Putin's narrative by limiting people's access to media that challenges his perspective" (para. 10). Posts from social media users claiming to experience events contrary to how they have been often described have been common observations during the Russian occupation. However, these testimonies are questionable at best and verifying their authenticity is almost impossible with social media's distinct anonymity.

A very recent shift for social media platforms is cooperating with fact-checking and journalistic organisations to provide users with further information regarding unverified claims. The issues raised through the emergence of the COVID-19 infodemic (Cinelli et al. 2020), Trump's efforts to "gaslight the public" (Mitcho, 2017, para. 1), and the current Russian occupation have all invoked debate about the need for verification on social media. The first notable instance of social media platforms taking a stand was when Twitter fact-checked Trump regarding his claims about mail-in ballots, notifying users that his claims were deemed false by fact-checkers (Paul & Culliford, 2020). Social media's algorithms, combined with journalism's strict discipline, show that the news and social media can work together to ensure the scrutiny of misinformation. However, whether a user chooses to trust the facts is entirely on themselves, and social media has allowed individuals to create communities where users challenge "the truth."[KL14]

Again, it would be unwise to suggest that the rejection of the mainstream media's judgment of accuracy is a new emergence due to the advent of social media. However, there has been an increase in "sceptic communities" on social media, whereby members of these communities often reject information from the mainstream media in favour of what they may find on social media that conform to their ideologies (Winston & Winston, 2020). COVID-19 saw anti-vax groups rise in vocality on social media; the war in Ukraine has also seen groups applaud Russia's invasion and reject the mainstream media's coverage favouring unverifiable "independent" sources. These ideas can be attributed to the increased polarity of political discourse, which is amplified through social media. Rejecting certain sources because of a perceived bias limits the diversity of content people interact with, limiting the scope of their knowledge.

Media diversity and media literacy are essential factors for being well-informed about the happenings around the world. Social media's reliance on algorithms to connect users with content has proven to be a disruptor of diversity because there is a priority for "pro-attitudinal" over "counter-attitudinal" news (Levy, 2021).[KL15] Winston and Winston (2020) note that "people anyway don't tend to be very willing to accept information that contradicts their opinions, their worldviews, or their 'common sense'" (p.183). One can observe these interactions on social media, particularly on Twitter, where dissenting opinions usually lead to long arguments with barely any valuable conclusion. This highlights how insular online communities can become, and despite being more mobile than ever, people with shared beliefs tend to congregate together.

Hampton and Wellman (2018) argue that access to diverse opinions could decrease the chance of such insulation through persistent awareness of others through social media. However, Hampton's (2016) discussion of the "spiral of silence" – refusing to participate in political discussions with family and friends out of fear of disagreement or conflict – could explain why more people reject mainstream media's legitimacy on social media, as they choose to distance themselves from immediate contacts who interact with journalistic content in fear of conflicting opinions. According to Hofseth (2016, as cited in Brandtzaeg et al., 2017), "pointing out falsehoods is valuable, as no central bodies are policing the internet" (p.1113); nevertheless,

this is only true if people are willing to trust the source. People are more likely to trust the people around them, and the nature of social media dissolves the traditional community understanding of proximity, connecting people more than ever and decreasing the likelihood of their exposure to good journalism.

Throughout this paper, we have seen a struggle between the structural norms of the journalism discipline and the open and fast-flowing nature of social media. The latter has changed the information landscape so much that the mainstream media has struggled to maintain its role in society, suffering an identity crisis in the contemporary world. Despite this, social media's inability to verify published information has opened new collaboration pathways for the old and new media. However, whether users accept this collaboration depends entirely on the communities they are part of, and the increased polarisation of political discourse on social media has produced new challenges for information media. This paper is limited in scope due to relying on existing literature researched over a brief period. However, general observation and participation on social media suggest changes to how the mainstream media operates in cooperation with social media. For now, it is evident that journalism is more important than ever, and the old and new media need to harness the discipline's potential to protect the integrity of a democratic society.

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