The Role of Political Communication in Shaping Public Opinion: a Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Digital Media

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Abstract. *The purpose of this research is to identify the changes that have occurred in the role of conventional and digital media in relation to public opinion and political participation with emphasis on the comparative efficaciousness of both categories. Employing a qualitative research design, the study employs interviews, focus groups, and content analysis to determine how different categorisations experience and interact with the various types of media. The meta-synthesis shows the breakdown of trust in their generations, where the older participants trusted the traditional media established as credible while the young participants were more careful while relating with the new digital media. Another important aspect of the study is the aspect of framing in the media narratives and the issue of misinformation or disinformation that has become virtually rife especially on social media. In addition, the study knits together by drawing the link between media consumption and politicisation and how in the current age of the digital media there is both enhancement of participation and a problem of conspicuous participation. In light of the findings, the study calls for an improvement of digital literacy and coming up with measures to effectively deal with fake news; The study also notes the need to engage in informed and healthy discourse in the digital environment.*

Keywords: *Political communication, public opinion, Digital media.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine changes that have taken place in the current political communication system due to the rise in use of the digital media especially the social media. These have dramatically altered the nature of formation and operation of opinions within the public and brought problems in the dominance of the conventional political media that include the television and newspapers. Earlier these media outlets acted as the key guardians of information where they shapes the sources of information and how the issues were reported helping shape the public agenda (Davis, 2007; Russell & Eissler, 2021). Nevertheless, a clear media hierarchy was also not possible with the growing digital technology especially in the last two decades in which the structure becomes fragmented and diversified (Child, 1987).

The transformation from print or television media to social networking sites and blogs has provoked a lot of academic endeavors with scholars trying to analyze how these changes affect the formation of public opinion and the democracy (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016). The use of the social media such as facebook, twitter and instagram in particular has brought further dynamics in political communication since they allow much personalized communication between political actors and the audience (Bossetta, 2018). These platforms enable the back-and-forth communication, while making it impossible for citizens to be mere communicative 'vessels'

receiving information: they also engage in the exchange of political talks which can lead to improvement of political literacy and creation of more thoughtful attitudes (Jacob et al., 2009).

However, the opportunities associated with the human activity's intensification and active engagement are accompanied by enormous difficulties (Engeström & Sannino, 2017). The current and relatively unlimited availability of information, particularly on the internet, is a considerable challenge to the ability of the users to distinguish between accurate, false, and fake information. Some researchers are worried about the quality of the information being exchanged raising alarm over the use and trending of fake or misleading news which distorts opinion of the society and deepens polarization. It has been proved that the viewers are more inclined to disseminate fake news than genuine news as they are more unique and appealing to people's emotions (Martel et al., 2020). This phenomenon has implications of raising important question about the Digital Media in democratic societies especially of the influence in the credibility of the information space (Unver et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the more conventional forms of media as much as they remain impactful have been regarded differently by different population cohorts especially when it comes to reliability. The two forms of media also differ concerning the perception that the older generations have towards them the older consumers trust traditional media more because they view it as more credible since it dates as far back as their time and is closely monitored by the authorities (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This remains due to perceived authority and accountability of traditional media coupled with the fact that they go through stringent editorial checks and verifications than the digital media which is often disordered. However, the effectiveness of the traditional media it cannot go unchallenged. Through packaging of issues, the traditional media can indirectly set a particular trend of thinking by the public as they focus on aspects of a certain story that may be beneficial to their interests while neglecting the others (Salman et al., 2011; Reese, 1991).

Digital media has also led to emerging concerns in the definition of agenda-setting role previously dominated by the traditional media (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). Whereas traditional media had the capability to dictate what the public should be concerned with by deciding what is news worthy, digital media has to some extent level the playing field and granted those who would not normally have an opportunity the visibility they desire (Bathmaker et al., 2013). However, this democratization of the public sphere is again laden with the boomerang effect; while offering a platform to minority liberties, it helps in the transmission of radical thoughts by the minorities and hence resulting in a more divided society. This study seeks to understand the dynamic functions of political communication in forming the attitudes of voters and pay attention to the role of conventional and digital media as a result of new tendencies in the Information Society (Carpini, 2004). In particular, the study aims at identifying the impact of these different media forms on the perception of the audience of political communication and therefore trying to explain how the behaviour of political actors must change as a result of the evolution of the environment existing in the society. The research therefore uses literature and empirical analysis to examine the impact of these media platforms in leading to the change of the public mind set and manipulation of political behaviour.

METHOD

Hence, this particular research utilizes a qualitative research method to establish the comparison between the traditional and the digital media in the political communication and its effect on public opinion. Qualitative paradigm is in better position of addressing the richness and details of how people make sense of different media in their daily lives. Thus, the use of this design lets the research be as detailed as possible in exploring how various media outlets help shape the political views of a society and the public opinion.

For purposes of this study, participants were only selected through purposive sampling with a view of including a cross-section of participants across different age brackets, gender, education level, and frequency of Media consumption. It was done deliberately in order to

comprise a variety of people and their interpretations of media impact, as far as different segments of the population are concerned. The study focused on two key demographic groups: respondents who are youths and are mostly exposed to new media and the retirees who rely mostly on new traditional media. This demographic focus makes it possible to have a comparative study on the effect of media on the generation of public opinion within people of different ages.

To gather data, the instruments used were face to face interviews, focus groups, and content analysis as all these are procedure that is rich in detail and quality. Focus group discussions were carried out with the selected participant with the aim of ascertaining from them their individual and general experience and understanding about the traditional as well as new media. These interviews provided good information on the way various media types function in the political arena, in regards to opinion formation and behaviors. Furthermore, focus group discussions were also conducted in order to view how people in a group engage themselves when arguing on political communication and media impacts. The organisation of the focus groups helped the participants to voice out their opinions through a collective group which proved insightful in revealing how the dynamics of a given group influences the perceptions of the individuals. Additionally, the content analysis of selected traditional and digital media was performed according to qualitative content analysis method to reveal the political issues' representation and the presence and impact of mis (over) information. Considering the sources of data, this analysis was aimed at exploring newspapers, television broadcasts, social media platforms and blogs with regards to the kind of narratives these outlets forward, which in turn informs public opinion.

The data that were collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and content analysis reviews were categorized using thematic analysis where the data was coded and sorted in a comprehensive and recommended method that was useful in identifying the areas of interests that were under investigation. The data analysis was cyclical to help discover the themes arising from the data and to be informed by the study's theoretical framework of agenda-setting and framing theories. Moreover, thematic analysis allowed to determine the key themes of the material and divide the obtained results into categories that characterize the presence of traditional and digital media in the manipulation of public opinion. Also, an examination was performed to reveal the comparative impact of the media between different populations. Here, the interest shifted from comparing the overall frequency of media types consumed to the perception people had of specific media forms and focused on the Ways in which different segments within the population engaged with media and what their opinions were.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data analysis in the present study identified some of the following important themes relating to the impact of traditional and new media on people's perception. Some of the themes include trust and credibility of the media, how the act of framing affects media content and how falsehood affects political systems. Both themes are explained with illustrative quotations from the participants and their critical and comprehensive analysis.

Media Trust and Credibility

One significant topic that could be distinguished based on the interviews and focus groups was trust and credibility in various types of media. Trust towards traditional and digital media was seen in various degrees depending on the participants' age and media use.

> "I still trust the news I get from the TV more than what I see on social media. It feels like TV channels have more to lose if they get things wrong."

This quote summarises the level of trust that older individuals specifically the Baby Boomers had with traditional media especially television. Again, when the participant is saying that there are some stakes at play when it comes to investing in programmes for TV channels , clearly the participant has in mind a belief that traditional media, for example TV channels, are expected to provide far more accurate information. Based on this it can be inferred that in terms

of perceived credibility which is an important metric that relates to the perceived reliability of the information provided there is still an advantage that traditional media enjoys, which could be due to the fact that before the go- online or digital age, traditional media was the primary source of information. However, this could also be interpreted as a weakness depending on the vulnerability of Mytilineos' traditional media outlets to old fashioned narratives that may not capture the details of contemporary issues as effectively and as soon as digital technologies do.

"I know there's a lot of junk online, but you can find real voices too. It's just about knowing where to look."

Here the participant is aware of the fact that contrary to the negative influence of the social media the majority of which post fake news, there is always hope to find fresh and unbiased opinion. This view highlights the need to take into consideration a very important aspect in learning that is digital literacy, the ability to determine the reliability of the source. It also reveals a new perspective at a generation that is much more cautious in their social media interaction, while at the same time actively searching for reliable content amidst the noise. Further, the participant's assurance of the strategic location exhibits the potential of users of digital media continuously adopting tailored assessments of credibility, which in turn has the potential of diminishing the dominance of traditional media in terms of credibility.

"It's hard to know what to believe these days. Even the news on TV seems biased sometimes, but at least I can verify things online."

This quote best portrays the emerging trend of doubts regarding the credibility of traditional media though the latter could still be relied on for information by a certain group of people. The following remark of the participant discussing the reliability of TV cable programs reveal the general waning of credibility of conventional media: 'It is irritating when there is bias in the news' it is not a far stretch to relate this factor to the revelation of ownership and editorial agendas. The statement which mentioned the use of the internet for verifying things indicates that those who participated in the show used new media in conjunction with the traditional media for independent confirmation of information. This behavior shows the audience is more involved in processing media messages and the media is trusted not automatically but based on its performance.

The theme of media trust and credibility reveal a deep societal split about trust in traditional and digital media that different generations have. A similar message was evidenced for traditional media preference, especially TV because the older candidates believe that it is more factual in comparison to the other perceived accountable media. This observation agrees with Metzger et al. (2003) who opined that the reason why traditional media remains trusted by older audiences is that the latter perceives it as authoritative and reliable. However, the erosion of trust in both traditional as well as in social and digital media as emerged with the young participants also shows a trend towards a more critical reception of news which is no longer made unconditional but earned by correct and credible reporting. This dynamic highlight means that Media Organizations need to constantly reposition their selves to ensure that they remain credible amidst the increasing cases of misinformation which are characteristic of today's society.

Younger participants' account of 'knowing where to look' for credible information was an indication of the growing nature of digital literacy especially when searching for information in the seemingly limitless world of Internet. This view has been extended by Burkhardt (2017), who have shown that people, who are more digitally literate, are able to detect fake news more easily and avoid them. This goes a long way in supporting educational interventions aimed at improving people's skills in the use of digital sources of information especially among the young generation who prefer it to traditional means such as TV. The implications of these findings are significant: especially in the ever-rising use of digital media, it becomes a virtue to distinguish between credible and inconceivable sources of the media.

The Role of Framing in Media Narratives

The aforesaid is to the fact that the aspect of the framing of the political issues within the media context was another major thread that echoed from the data collected. In some cases participants said that different media houses portray certain issues in different ways, hence different impressions are developed.

"When I read the news online, it feels like they're always trying to push an agenda. The same story on TV comes across more neutral, even though they might leave out some details."

This quote gives an impression about top leadership information media agenda setting comparing traditional and digital media. That the participant thus felt that 'It pushes an agenda' shows that the participant had an understanding of the specific framing that news websites engage in and this could be as a result of the digitsation of the journalism productivity structure that has become fragmented and competitive. Referring to the traditional media as ''more neutral'' even if they can miss things, the authors describe another interesting twofold relationship between perceived neutrality and selection. It provokes thoughts on how extent traditional media may manipulate issues or present them in a way that appears just informative while they subtly control the flow of people's perception based on what is not said.

"Social media is like an echo chamber. If you're not careful, you only see what you already agree with. It's like they frame everything to fit what you want to hear."

This quote can be considered as a critical comment on the 'filter bubble' in the social media platform whereby the algorithm and the users feed, contribute to the reinforcement of a particular information source. This can be seen where the participant used the phrase "frame everything to fit what you want to hear" implying the understanding of how each social media platform works as a feed that brings selected content in a manner that goes in harmony with the user's biases. This framing mechanism results in less cross-cutting exposure, thereby making public debate even more polarised. The participant's insight highlights a significant challenge in digital media consumption: the problem of becoming trapped in loops that make it hard to break free from the misleading internal echo chambers when it comes to comprehending more encompassing problems.

"The way they talk about climate change on the news depends on which channel you watch. Some make it seem like it's a huge crisis, while others downplay it completely."

This quote shows how potential problem structures, such as climate change issue framing, may differ in radically ways across various media outlets. The willingness of the participant to discuss how the same event is different in one channel as opposed to another is a clear example of how framing goes a long way in influencing the public on matters of major concern. Such variation in framing shapes may result to vast difference in the perception of the same issue among the populace depending on the media outlets they read. It also implies that there is a growing audience that is aware of these inequalities possibly making the media consumers be more interrogative about the nature of issues that it portrays.

The patterns in relation to framing also surfaced as the most vital messages because the same events are reported in different tones and consisting of different elements by the various media. I found this study's result in agreement with the Framing theory that holds that MEDIA plays a crucial role in framing issues in a way that alters the perception of the PUBLIC. Accordingly, participants pointed out that digital media look more agenda-oriented – which is more a concern of the polarised and extremely fragmented nature of the online news environment. As stated by Spohr (2017), it leads to the polarisation of the discourse due to people being given only the information which they like to consume.

However, the perceived independence of traditional media even if it might overemphasize some events while ignoring others is something that has arisen questions concerning framing in legacy media. While traditional sources may seem objective, what comprises an issue and what is left out, can sway people's point of view in a way that may not come off as prejudice. There is not much more to media bias than what has been presented in this paper; however, there are more

nuanced ways through which traditional media can impose its influence, including through the mechanisms of media agenda-setting and selective emphasis: In this sense, we can see that there are far more imperceptible, or 'softer,' manifestations of bias than the blatant manipulation that many might first suspect (Fleras, 2011). The assumption here is that while those consuming traditional media may be unaware of the hidden biases that are inherent in the so-called 'objective' reporting, they are also less likely to approach news content critically.

The Impact of Misinformation on Political Perceptions

There is a clear identification of emerging topics of the subject, where misleading information needed further discussion, focusing on its influence on the political attitudes and decisions. Points made by participants include the fact that there seems to be a lot of fake news going around particularly on the social media.

"I've seen so many fake stories on Facebook, and it's scary how many people believe them without checking. It makes me wonder how much of what we believe is actually true."

This quote encapsulates the kind of effect fake news has on social media apps such as Facebook. The participant was worried over people accepting fake stories without resulting to checking showed that complex issues of digital literacy were apparent and were there is apparent absence of checks to the spreading of false information. The quote also pose an existential question about the truth in postmodernism world, where the realities begins to blur the difference between reality and fantasy. All these cases of information dis-establishment mean that people can be misled by incorrect information rather than discuss an issue based on facts.

"Sometimes I think people just want to believe the worst, so they don't bother to check if it's real or not. It's like they want the drama more than the truth."

This quote brings a kind of psychological approach to the consumption of fake news since people would rather read stuff that is dramatic and sensational rather than the truth. When the participant questioned that the audience 'wants the drama more than the truth' it was shown that audience engagement is more about emotion rather than facts. This is a trend that could be tapped by the various news stations especially the ones given to sensationalism hence the spread of fake news. The quote also has an ironic perspective of human nature for the fact that when people are eager to get information, they will go for it if it has controversy and scandal.

"It's frustrating because even when you try to correct someone, they just double down on what they believe. It's like facts don't matter anymore."

This quote is a pointer to what is known as 'confirmation bias', whereby an individual will not change his or her belief despite the evidence to the contrary. The participant's rage, when trying to counteract Fake news is a testimony of the fact that as long as the principle of post-truth prevails , it will be very hard to find a rational dialogue way with certain individuals. This resistance to factual correction not only fosters the spread of false information but also widen the division in society since people are inclined to stay confined in their bubbles. The quote raises awareness on the fact that better ways of dealing with fake news seems far from being achieved mainly by principles of full disclosure.

The most worrying one of them is the theme of misperception regarding political matters, this theme may in one way or another affect the democracy. The result of this study supports the increasing literature on the effects of fake news especially through the social networks. According to Guadagno & Guttieri (2021), one major consequence of fake news spreading in digital media is the definite erode of institutional credibility and intensification of political divide. Every participant expressed anger at how the misinformation remained constant even when other participants tried to debunk it, and this is consistent with the confirmation bias where by even in the face of contradictory evidence, a person will not change their mind (Koslowski, 2012).

Psychological viewpoint is also evident in this study owing to the ability of fake news to meet the histrionic appetite of the consumers of media. The idea that 'people want the drama

more than the truth' precisely points to the fact that users usually seem to appreciate fake news more than the truth as they evolve their passions and immensely provoke an emotional response from the recipients. This observation chimes with Bryanov & Vziatysheva (2021) research findings that hold the element that polarized news is shared and believed similarly than factual news and false news. The task for media and related authorities, as well as policy-makers, is thus to find how to prevent the spread of such messages and at the same time, to remove such fake information containing material, in how to combat the emotion, which fuels the phenomenon and is instrumental in its dissemination.

Political Engagement and Media Influence

The third and the most prominent theme that is evident from the data is regarding the media consumption and the political process. They described how they get involved in political issues and there was a distinction between the old school media and social media.

"I feel more connected to what's happening politically when I read the newspaper. It's like taking the time to read gives me a better understanding than just scrolling through my phone."

This quote affirms that traditional media better offers a more intellectual way so as to comprehend political issues as opposed to the social media platforms such as twitter. The shunning of newspapers also raises the prospect that traditional media create greater demand for engagement as it accessed the participant's time and attention span more than social media. The concept of ''car' taking time to read is diametrically opposite to the kind of information consuming activity that happens on the digital platforms, where the feed heavily infused keep creating an illusion of consuming content. This might mean that traditional media is still an important factor in inspiring the process of creating a more reflective and informed citizen, especially of the elder population.

"Social media makes it easier to stay updated on politics, but it's also overwhelming. Sometimes I just tune out because there's too much information, and I don't know what to believe."

This quote best captures how the perspective of digital media on political activity can be described as positive yet negative depending of the way it is viewed. On the other hand since political information is easily available on social media platforms, it floods the feeds of the users and the audience gets overwhelmed or becomes numb and disinterested. The participant's withdrawal tendency is a typical case observable in the context of new media when too much information regarding the ongoing events and opinions disrupts the critical thought process and leads to indifferent attitudes or rationalizations. The above reveals that even though digital media can enable political participation, it has the propensity of turning users off in case the content is not filtered in a way that is realistic and reliable.

"I like that I can directly interact with politicians on Twitter, but sometimes it feels like everyone is just shouting at each other, and nothing really gets resolved."

This quote captures the social aspect of new media, especially Twitter in which people are able to tweet to the political leaders. Yet, the participant's comment, "everyone is just shouting at each other" suggest the type of confrontation and often unproductive engagement typical for the political discourse on social media. While the presence of the notion that the described ability could help in improving democratic participation can be a positive notion, the experience may show that such communications with politicians are rather far from creating a positive change being rather confrontational instead. This post has important implications for the capabilities of online media in promoting politically relevant citizenship as the incessant discord omnipresent in the public may suppress discursive politics and eliminate possibilities of agreement.

"I feel like I'm more active politically because of what I see on social media. It's easier to join movements or sign petitions, but I wonder if it's really making a difference."

The quote sums up a certain type of gainfulness of digital media in terms of political activation accentuating that with the help of platforms for actions such as joining a movement or signing a petition, the activity is enabled. Still, the participant's concern as to whether such actions provided 'really make a difference', serves as an indication for the emerging criticism of the so called 'slacktivism.' Despite acknowledging that via the digital media users are afforded an opportunity to get involved politically while requiring minimal effort, there is a concern about the depth of those engagements or the likelihood or them being genuine, sustained efforts meant to bring about change. This highlights a critical tension in digital political engagement: the level of people's involvement and the degree of change produced.

Everything that has been highlighted so far shows that participants' experience underlines the mediated and complex nature of link between media and politics. Newspapers have been seen as representing quality political participation where a lot of thinking was involved but digital media made it easier to access politics information but even to a point where information was likely to demobilise citizens. These findings are similar to the study by Chadwick, (2017) where traditional and new media exist simultaneously hence leading to a hybrid media system that fosters a quality and depth of political interaction than can be highly variable depending on the particular media used to engage with.

The controversies observed by the authors with regard to the aggressive, confrontational nature of the comments on political issues discussed on social networks in the study echo Wahlström & Törnberg (2021) reflections about intensification of polarization and fragmentation of public discourse on social media. Direct engagement with politicians on social media, although appearing to permissive citizens' participation, in many cases results in polarization more than convergence. This implies that although digital media helps citizens to engage in politics, it tends to do this in a negative way by transforming politics into bare knuckles brawl instead of meaningful discourse.

The low-cost activation and the idea of 'slacktivism,' when participants participate in politically-tinted activities at a low level of involvement, yields doubts about the efficiency of digital activism. Even though it has become easier to support a cause by tweeting or liking a page on Facebook and following or endorsing a petition, there is rising doubt on the effectiveness of such actions. According to Cruz & Plaisance (2021), the online activism is not replacement to the actual engagement hence promoting complacency among activists. This has a resultant implication in meaning that even though digital media can be effective in calling for political action the same cannot be said of the call for sustained engagement.

CONCLUSION

It is this research work that has given an interesting profile of how newspaper and internet influences opinions and politics, portraying the dynamism of how media consumption impacts on democracy. Audience trust issues are noted to be overwhelming to traditional media especially with the elderly while the young audiences are wise in the internet. The importance of framing as the underlying mechanism that determines the media contents representation of the events was also revealed to indicate that both conventional and online media function as vehicles for framing. Disinformation appeared as one of the major challenges, especially with the help of digital technologies, with many negative consequences for planned dissemination of accurate information among the citizens. This was linked with the psychological aspects of the spread of misinformation where emotions entail information that is hard to counter through the provision of genuine facts. Moreover, further, the study also revealed that media consumption has not only the positive effects on the political participations, but they found out that digital media create risks of what they term as 'third person' political involvement. Still, it is clear that the media environment is still changing and the studies such as the present one call for future continuation of the research as well as the application of new strategies to promote informed and open public debates in support of democracy. Issues such as media literacy with the focus on new media and

a search for effective theoretico-methodological frameworks to counteract fake news are the important steps to strengthen the roles of-informed population.

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