



Social Media, Citizen Journalism, and the Crisis of Professional Mass Communication

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Abstract

The rise of social media and the widespread use of smartphones have drastically changed journalism and mass communication. This paper looks at the mixed effects of this change: it has made news production and sharing more accessible, but it has also created serious challenges for traditional journalism standards. Through a review of recent studies and reports, it is argued that while social media has allowed everyday people to act as "journalists" and provide real-time reporting, it has also contributed to the spread of misinformation, divided audiences, empowered unqualified media figures, and damaged trust in news outlets. Additionally, the implications for journalistic ethics, media literacy, and the future of a vibrant public sphere are discussed.

Keywords: Social media, Journalism practice, Misinformation, Media ethics, Digital communication.

Original Research Article

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1. Introduction

The foundation of 20th-century journalism, built on editorial control, institutional trust, and mass broadcasting, is going through a major and unsettling change. The rise of social media and widespread smartphone use hasn't just changed the tools we use; it has completely rewired mass communication, creating a "mess." This mess reflects a significant democratization of news production, where the clear line between broadcaster and audience has blurred. Now, anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can capture, comment on, and share information with a global audience, taking on roles that used to belong to journalists and media companies. This change promises a more diverse and involved public space, diminishing the hold of traditional media and giving a voice to overlooked

groups. However, it also brings a flood of problems: the quick spread of misinformation, the decline of trusted sources, the splitting of audiences into algorithm-driven echo chambers, and a deep economic crisis for professional journalism. This paper argues that this shift illustrates a contradiction in democratic communication. The same technologies that have opened up publishing have also complicated the goals of journalism: providing a shared, factual basis for democratic discussion. By looking at the rise of citizen journalism, the platform-led changes in how people consume news, and the resulting crises in trust and finance, this research aims to outline this new terrain. Ultimately, it argues that dealing with this "mess" requires not a return to a romanticized past of centralized control, but a careful rethinking of journalistic ethics, public



understanding, and platform responsibility in the digital era.

2. Literature Review

Research has thoroughly documented how social media has changed the role of journalists, their methods, and their relationship with audiences. Jain (2024) highlights that social media has pushed journalists to be more interactive, transparent, and adaptable, often blurring the line between professional reporting and personal branding (1).

Citizen journalism—where non-professionals cover news—plays a key role in this change. With smartphones and social media, regular individuals can now share firsthand accounts of events. One study suggests, “Theoretically, anyone holding a smartphone can share their version of events and become a news source (6).” This type of reporting is particularly valuable in situations where mainstream media cannot gain access.

A major advantage of this shift is the democratization of news. Social media has “democratized journalism, giving voice to the voiceless” and reduced the influence of traditional gatekeepers. Information is no longer filtered by a small group of editors; various voices can present their views, potentially enriching public discussions (8).

Yet, this democratization brings significant problems. The same platforms that amplify citizen voices also allow for the rapid spread of misinformation and lack of professionalism, damaging the credibility of all news sources (8). Additionally, the business models of social media companies are undermining traditional journalism. The Reuters Institute’s 2024 Digital News Report shows how news media face challenges from “rising misinformation, low trust, attacks by politicians, and an uncertain business environment,” worsened by platforms prioritizing user engagement over news content (2)(3).

3. Methodology

This paper uses conceptual analysis and a narrative literature review methodology. It combines findings from recent academic articles, industry reports (like the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024), and

expert commentary published between 2024 and 2025. The analysis highlights key themes—democratization, citizen journalism, challenges (misinformation, fragmentation, economic pressure), and ethical issues—to provide a clear overview of journalism today in the social media age.

4. Results & Analysis

The changes in journalism due to social media and smartphones are not uniform but involve a series of interconnected and often conflicting effects. This section offers a detailed analysis of these outcomes.

4.1. Democratization and Expanded News Coverage: A Double-Edged Sword

The rise of citizen journalism has led to significant, concrete impacts. Smartphones serve as powerful tools for recording—allowing citizens to document happenings on a real-time, and natural disasters with unmatched immediacy. This has undermined the traditional “hierarchy of credibility,” where institutional sources were automatically prioritized. However, this expansion is not purely beneficial. The analysis identifies a “spotlight effect,” where events with high visual, emotional, or ideological appeal receive more coverage, while complex issues that do not create viral moments are often ignored. Similarly, citizen journalism may provide raw “first draft” footage, but it usually lacks the context, verification, and investigative depth that characterize professional journalism (5). This results in an information ecosystem rich in immediate, emotional accounts but potentially lacking in depth and accountability.

4.2. Algorithmic Fragmentation and the "Platformization" of News

The division of audiences represents a fundamental shift in how news is discovered through platform algorithms. The Reuters Institute (2024) data shows that TikTok’s emergence as a news source, especially among younger users, exemplifies this change. News increasingly appears not in dedicated news apps or websites, but as interludes between entertainment and personal content (3). This “platformization” reshapes news values to match “platform logic”—favoring engagement (likes,

shares, comments) over public relevance. Stories that provoke outrage or simplistic emotional responses get more engagement. As a result, the public sphere becomes filled with "splintered realities," where different demographic groups see entirely different news narratives based on their algorithmic profiles, weakening a shared understanding for public discussion (3).

4.3. The Industrialization of Misinformation and Trust Decay

The challenge of misinformation has developed from isolated instances of "fake news" to an industrialized issue. AI-generated content (such as deepfake videos and synthetic text) and coordinated fake behavior (bot networks and troll farms) now misuse the very platforms meant for democratization. Similarly, the global concern over fake news (59%) is worsened by a "lateral surveillance" issue: the public now has to do the complex verification work that editors once handled, often lacking the tools or training to do so effectively (3). This erodes trust in individual stories and the credibility of journalism overall. When anyone can publish, it becomes harder to distinguish between good information and noise, leading to "information nihilism," where overwhelmed individuals may disengage from news or seek out ideologically comfortable but often inaccurate information silos.

4.4. Existential Economic Pressure and the "Value Gap"

The crisis in economic models is more severe than just a change in revenue. It indicates a "value gap": social platforms receive the economic benefits (data, attention, advertising) produced by professional journalism without covering its costs. Platforms' recent decision to deprioritize news content (like Meta's shift away from news) has cut a crucial traffic source for many publishers (6)(3). This has led to two diverging survival strategies: some elite outlets retreat behind strict paywalls, creating information inequality, while others turn to "click-driven churn" where speed and volume take precedence over quality. This results in a weakening of local and mid-tier news, leading to "news deserts" where

communities lack reliable coverage of civic issues (6)(3).

5. Discussion

The analysis presented calls for a discussion that goes beyond simple diagnosis to address the future of journalism in practical terms. The main issue, which involves the balance between freeing access and chaotic disorder, sets the stage for several important debates.

5.1. Reframing the Crisis: From Deinstitutionalization to Re-contextualization

The crisis is often described as the deinstitutionalization of journalism. A more accurate description is its de-contextualization and re-contextualization through platforms. News is "de-contextualized" when it is removed from its institutional brand, editorial process, and supporting content that indicate its credibility. This reduction turns it into just another isolated piece of content in a feed. It is then "re-contextualized" by the platform's algorithms and social dynamics, where its meaning and perceived truth are shaped by likes, shares, the identity of the sharer, and its connection to specific group preferences (4). This changes the basis of credibility from institutional authority to networked connections. Therefore, the discussion must focus on how to restore contextual cues of reliability in a rapidly changing, platform-driven landscape. Possible solutions could include technology like strong provenance metadata (e.g., the Content Authenticity Initiative), clearer labels for sources, and platform features that enhance transparency about sources and corrections (4).

5.2. The Normative Role of Journalism in a Hybrid Ecosystem

What is the essential core of journalism that must be preserved? This discussion suggests it is the dedicated pursuit of accountable truth for the public good. Citizen journalism and social media excel at observing and sharing events, but often lack the rigorous pursuit of truth (systematic verification, ethical integrity) and accountability structures (to editors, ethical standards, and the public through ombudsmen) (4)(7). The future likely lies in a hybrid

ecosystem where these approaches coexist and complement each other. Professional journalism should build on its strengths: investigative resources, deep expertise, and commitment to fairness. Its role is shifting from being the only gatekeeper to becoming the main verifier, sense-maker, and integrator. Journalism must curate valuable contributions from the public while maintaining high standards to distinguish useful information from irrelevant noise, serving as a guide through the daily information overload (4)(7).

5.3. Algorithmic Governance and the Design of the Public Sphere

The discussion must address the non-neutrality of platform architecture. As the public sphere is mostly hosted on privately owned digital platforms, their design choices raise significant democratic concerns. Algorithms that prioritize engagement often favor emotion over reason, simplicity over complexity, and tribalism over consensus. The key question is whether a "public interest algorithm" can be developed or enforced. This involves investigating regulatory models, from the EU's Digital Services Act that includes risk-based obligations to more ambitious ideas about "algorithmic audits" for fairness and transparency in news selection. The goal is not to dictate specific content but to ensure that the systems shaping our political conversations do not undermine the basic requirements of informed debate (4).

5.4. Toward a New Social Contract for News

Resolving the tension requires a new social contract that includes four main groups:

1. Citizens/Audiences: They must shift from being passive consumers to active, informed participants. This means developing critical digital literacy skills and understanding that quality journalism, as a public good, needs financial backing (through subscriptions, donations, or taxes) and active engagement.
2. Journalists & Institutions: They must adopt radical transparency by explaining their processes and showing their sources, enhance community

involvement, and invent sustainable revenue models while steadfastly upholding ethical standards.

3. Platforms: They must take on a stewardship role, moving from reactive content moderation to proactive system design that promotes credible information, supports the news ecosystem through fair licensing, and allows independent oversight of their processes.

4. Policymakers & Educators: They must develop smart, forward-thinking regulations that encourage competition, safeguard privacy, and back public interest media. At the same time, education systems should incorporate media literacy—including data and algorithm literacy—as a key civic skill from a young age.

The current "mess" in journalism represents the beginnings of a new communicative era. The disorder arises from the clash between a long-standing institutional model and a groundbreaking, decentralized technology. The discussion must not focus on restoring the old system but on blending its best qualities with new opportunities. The aim is to create a resilient information ecosystem that is open and trustworthy, inclusive and principled, dynamic and democratic. The way forward is not about reinstating gatekeepers, but about cultivating guides, designing a responsible public space, and re-educating citizens. The future of journalism depends on our ability to harmonize the democratic potential of smartphones with the necessity for a shared reality.

6. Conclusion

The rise of social media and smartphones has created a "mess" in traditional journalism and mass communication by democratizing production and removing gatekeepers. This paper argues that this shift involves both empowerment and chaos. The emergence of citizen journalism has broadened news coverage, but it has also raised challenges like misinformation, fragmented audiences, and financial instability for established media. The future of a healthy public sphere depends on navigating this tension—leveraging the participatory potential of digital tools while strengthening the core journalistic values of accuracy, honesty, and public service.

Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of interventions like media literacy programs, new business models for journalism, and platform governance.

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