

## **NEW MEDIA VERSUS TRADITIONAL MEDIA: POWER DYNAMICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CREDIBILITY**

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**ABSTRACT:** Traditional print and broadcast media have long adhered to gatekeeping processes that uphold their credibility. However, the rise of new media is reshaping power dynamics and attracting audiences while often bypassing these established editorial controls. This shift raises concerns about whether traditional media can retain its authority on critical societal issues. Grounded in Kurt Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory (1947), this study examines how the power dynamics influence perceptions of credibility in both new and traditional media. It aims to highlight the impact of new media journalism on the credibility of traditional media, and fact-checking options available to traditional media journalists in the new media age. The study adopts an exploratory research design, involving a comprehensive review of academic literature, online resources, and library materials relevant to the topic. The findings suggest that traditional media maintain their credibility as preferred news sources, but largely among older media audience (baby boomers), while the younger media consumers increasingly prefer online platforms. Additionally, the study highlights a decline in traditional media's persuasive influence. Agency-specific recommendations were proposed, to integrate traditional and citizen journalism, counter new media disinformation, ensure algorithmic accountability on social media platforms, enhance local monitoring of false information, and institutionalise media literacy programs.

**Keywords:** New Media, Traditional Media, Power, Credibility, Gatekeeping

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a world where the media enjoyed the prerogative of gatekeeping, the internet broke down the walls, the gate, and whatever stood between news producers and news consumers. Toffler's (1980) word coinage "prosumer" quite aptly describes the aftermath of the new media onslaught on the traditional media, as the media audience is indeed no longer mere receivers or consumers of media messages but are themselves active producers and contributors of the same. This state of affairs now continuously tips the scale in favour of whoever garners the lion's share of attention for the media messages they put out. In this fierce competition, the capitalists and political actors are not the only ones behind the curtains. The audience also meets and parley with them and decides for themselves what is really important to be in the news. While this spells a new age of 'media liberation' for the masses, it does not necessarily spell doom for traditional media owners, as studies have established that the masses, helpless in the possibilities of their newly-found freedom, still turn to the mainstream media for fact-checking and authority. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) submitted that the mainstream media are still the go-to place for credible news despite higher

dependence on new media for information. Similarly, Fotopoulos (2023) established that mainstream television media remains the leading source of credible news; although he also observed that the younger population have a higher level of trust and affinity for the new media than do their older counterparts, the overarching finding is that people trust more in the mainstream broadcast and print media than in new media channels. Given this state of affairs, our curiosity lies in the media's ability to keep safe its hallowed virtue of being the leading authority on pressing societal issues. This study therefore aims to answer the primary research question: how do the power dynamics influence the credibility perceptions of new media versus traditional media?

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. examine the credibility status of the traditional media (print and broadcast media);
- ii. examine the credibility status of the new media;
- iii. examine the influence of new media journalism on the credibility status of the traditional media; and
- iv. explore fact-checking options available to traditional media journalists operating in the new media age.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed an exploratory research design to investigate how the power dynamics influence the credibility perceptions of new media versus traditional media. Using literature review as research instrument, journal articles pertinent to the research topic were sourced from online journals, using different combinations of the key terms in the research topic. *ResearchGate*, *Academia* and *Google Scholar* are the three databases from which these journals were primarily sourced. Relevant library materials that treat key concepts in this study were also consulted. The following themes were isolated from reviewed literature: gatekeeping, power dynamics, citizen journalism and propaganda; and formed the bases for discussion of subjects raised in this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Kurt Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory, which he introduced in 1947. Lewin's theory explains the decision-making process of media professionals (journalists, editors, and producers), in determining which information is published and which is not. Since the theory was developed before the rise of the Internet, it does not account for the role of new media journalists (citizen journalists). However, it remains valuable in understanding how traditional media sustains credibility through gatekeeping, which involves filtering out inaccuracies and unverified information prior to publication. The Gatekeeping Theory allows for a comparison between traditional media and new media platforms, given that they operate with different gatekeeping mechanisms, highlighting the implications of this distinction for media credibility.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **New Media and the Listless Grasp of Gatekeeping Theory**

If there was ever a time when the media was king, it was in the days when they enjoyed the exclusive prerogative to control the ebb and flow of public discourse. The audience had no real power of their own to air their thoughts and opinions to the masses, and so relied on the much-limited chance of being considered by the emissaries of the media kingdom, the journalists. How unimaginable it must have been, the frustration of waiting a lifetime's chance to be featured in the media, only for the landline to ring back with the words, "The editor stepped down your story. I'm sorry." Well, the media audience does not have to deal with that frustration anymore. Obiaje and Adelabu (2022) allude to the fact that the media has lost its 'manipulative' grasp on the audience, and submit that the audience has assumed the role of content creators. William and Carpini (2000) in Roberts (2005) made a case against gatekeeping theory by declaring that, "Gatekeeping seems to be passé – if one information source will not publish something, another one (that is just as easy to find online) will publish it." If this is so the case, gatekeeping theory has become a discourse for contextual, media agency-specific purposes, as opposed to past times when the fangs of collective gatekeeping kept certain stories completely shut out of the media.

The loopholes of information fetching and dissemination brought on by new media to boycott traditional media continually render gatekeeping efforts ineffective, and it appears that in a few decades from now, the concept of gatekeeping will regress into mere "gatewatching," where all that the mainstream media can do is filter what gets published or broadcast from their news desk, but not what the public knows or wishes to know more about. Bruns (2011) attempted the use of the term "gatewatching," but his use of the word was reserved for activities of citizen journalists who he describes as people who "republish, publicise, contextualize and curate existing material rather than develop substantial new journalistic content." This study's adoption of the term "gatewatcher" however focuses on the mainstream media key players, and describes their effort to keep out of their publication or broadcast, those stories that are already in the new media space (social media, blogs, RSS feeds, etc.)

With the new media on the rampage of unregulated news circulation, it is of no effect the limited gatekeeping or gatewatching the mainstream media continues to struggle at, because at the receiving end of the information cycle, what matters is that the audience have information at their disposal, regardless of how or where they got that information. Some may propose, that the apparent impotence of the gatekeeping theory in the new media space is no cause for alarm, considering that data shows that the mainstream media are still the go-to shop for credible news (Fotopoulos, 2023). What should be noted however, is that the older media audience (baby boomers) are responsible for a larger part of the curve, with the younger generation showing a preference for new media (*ibid*). It is only a matter of time before the new media sympathisers, or indeed enthusiasts, catch up.

New research and literature are starting to consider an alternative (or additional) approach to gatekeeping that addresses the concerns of the relatively 'unregulated' new media. This approach they have termed "algorithmic gatekeeping," is described as the "influence of programmed

procedures (algorithm) on the process of gatekeeping" (Arjen, 2023). Their argument for the need for "algorithmic gatekeeping" advances that, "the increasingly important role of automation in the news-making process and the role of social media platforms... have made the gatekeeping process more complex." Hopeful as the idea of "technology-assisted gatekeeping" may sound, it is still a growing area of research, and we foresee that new debates will arise in the future as to who really does the gatekeeping: the machine or the programmer who creates the algorithm. Till then, traditional gatekeeping continues to lose its grasp on news and information flow.

### **New Power Play**

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the media landscape, introducing a 'new power play' that redefines how information is disseminated and consumed. Traditional media outlets, once the primary gatekeepers of news, now share the stage with a plethora of digital platforms like blogs and independent individuals, known as content creators. This shift has decentralised information dissemination, allowing voices from diverse backgrounds to contribute to public discourse. However, this shift has also led to concerns about spreading misinformation and eroding journalistic standards. The bypass of traditional gatekeepers means that content can be disseminated without rigorous fact-checking, increasing the risk of false and sensationalised information.

In order to decently underscore new power play, focusing on misinformation, participatory influence and media manipulation, it is essential to assess existing literature. Heimans and Timms (2018) deduce that new power, like a current, is open, participatory, and peer-driven, whereas conventional power, like currency, is held, guarded, and spent by a select few. Understanding this contemporary power dynamics has been made easier with the use of this conceptual framework, especially in digital situations. Through his network society theory, Castells (2013) expands on this notion by contending that power now mostly functions through network structures as opposed to the traditional hierarchy. His examination of power in network society shows how the advent of digital connections has radically changed power dynamics and given rise to new social structures that do not rely on, or completely bypass established power structures.

Social media and its platforms have now become important participants in the "new power play." Bennett and Segerberg (2013) present this idea of "connective action," highlighting the ways in which new media enables individual political participation. This shift empowers grassroots mobilization while simultaneously making these platforms susceptible to manipulation by powerful entities.

Zuboff (2019) goes into further detail about how social media platforms act as new power brokers by using behavioural data to influence user behavior. This "surveillance capitalism" gives individuals, companies and basically anyone with access to information, enormous control over social behaviour, leading to a potential for serious power imbalances. Pariser (2011) further critiques the algorithmic personalisation employed by media platforms, which presents users with the decision to select desired information silos. These silos amplify biases and create environments ripe for the exercise of sensationalised media and influence through targeted propaganda and misinformation campaigns.

With the decision given to users to now tailor the information they consume, Allcott and Gentzkow's analysis of the 2016 US elections extensively documents the rise of fake news and its involvement in new power relations. They emphasise the role social media platforms play in spreading false and sensationalised narratives, highlighting how disinformation thrives in an atmosphere dominated by algorithm engagement. The study shows that new power players, such as influencers, organisations, political campaigns, and state-sponsored groups, use these platforms to sway public opinion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

As media consumers now play the role of 'prosumers', there has been a disruption of traditional journalism which is a critical element in the new power play. Meikle (2016) discusses how the decentralization of media production has fragmented public discourse, challenging the authority of legacy media institutions. He explained that this fragmentation has created opportunities for alternative power players to shape narratives and get believers to champion these narratives.

Chesney and Citron (2019) validate the concern of the emergence of the 'new power play' warning of the potential misuse of emerging technologies such as deepfakes in their analysis of privacy and democracy challenges. Synthetic media, such as Deepfakes, represent a new level of media manipulation, allowing powerful players to manufacture convincing falsehoods that destroy trust in institutions and individuals. BuzzFeed's "Obama Deepfake" is an example that illustrates the study. In 2018, BuzzFeed worked with filmmaker Jordan Peele to create a deepfake video of former US President Barack Obama (Wakefield, 2018). The video depicted Obama seemingly making disrespectful remarks about the United States President, Donald J. Trump, highlighting the ease with which deepfakes could be used to shape and spread false information and disinformation.

### **Citizen Journalists and Their Propagandist Cookbook**

The rise of digital platforms has decentralised news and media dissemination, enabling the emergence of a new group of gatekeepers known as citizen journalists, non-professional journalists who collect, analyse, produce and disseminate information – challenging traditional media gatekeeping. However, as empowering as this move has been in recent years, it has blurred the lines between journalism, activism and propaganda. This review examines how citizen journalists operate within the "propagandist cookbook," a metaphor for the systematic use of new media to amplify narratives that may serve ideological or political agendas. It also explores scholarly concerns on the ethical, technological, and socio-political dimensions of citizen journalism in the context of propaganda.

Citizen journalism emerged as a counter-narrative to the institutionalised media, driven by platforms like X (formerly Twitter), blogs and YouTube (Gillmor, 2004) as cited in Bruns (2011). Scholars argue it embodies participatory democracy, enabling marginalised voices to bypass gatekeepers (Allan & Thorsen, 2009). However, its lack of editorial oversight raises concerns about credibility (Rosenstiel, 2014). These digital platforms empower citizen journalists to document events in real time (e.g. EndSARS protests, Black Lives Matter protests, and 2023 general elections in Nigeria), but they also aid the dissemination of false and sensationalised information. Tufekci (2017) underscores how algorithms prioritise engagement over accuracy,

creating echo chambers that amplify biased content. Citizen journalists often employ emotionally charged language, memes and selective framing to mobilise their audience. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) highlight such tactics as "information disorder," where propaganda masks itself as grassroots reporting. Examples include viral conspiracy theories (e.g. salt as a cure to Ebola) and biased YouTube channels.

Propaganda is empowered by platforms and their algorithms that reward sensationalism. Benkler et al. (2018) describe the phenomenon of 'networked propaganda,' where disinformation flows through interconnected networks of media outlets, social media users, bots, and trolls. In this ecosystem, citizen journalists often play a dual role: they can act as watchdogs exposing injustice of authorities and other individuals, but they can also become channels for skewed interpretations, particularly when automated accounts or coordinated human actors amplify their work. This dynamic creates a vicious circle of propaganda, where sensationalised content is strategically amplified to manipulate public opinion and social media trends. This "cookbook" relies on clickbait headlines, hashtag hijacking, and astroturfing – artificially created public support for a cause (Woolley & Howard, 2016). While some citizen journalists aim to hold power accountable, others exploit their freedom to push agendas creating a grey ethical zone. McIntyre's (2018) critique in her book *Post-Truth*, examines the emergence of an era characterised by a cultural and mental shift where emotional persuasion and ideological alignment increasingly outweigh factual rigour and evidence-based reasoning.

In Nigeria, citizen journalists have played a dual role in amplifying democratic discourse and fueling ethnopolitical conflicts. During the 2019 elections, platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp were tools of real-time information for citizen journalists. Social media users tagged 'cyber warriors' utilised social media platforms and viral hashtags (e.g. #Obidient), playing a pivotal role in the 2023 general elections, to shape narratives and boost the appeal of their messaging to a wide audience (Aidelaje et al., 2024).

While some parties argue that citizen journalism democratises information (Rodríguez, 2001), others counter it with warnings that it enables "clicktivism," an action that prioritises virality over facts or truth (Fuchs, 2024). The propagandist cookbook often takes advantage of this confusion, leveraging the belief of "speaking truth to power" for manipulative ends. Citizen journalism embodies the inconsistencies of new media: a tool for empowerment and a weapon for propaganda. The "propagandist cookbook" is the strategic exploitation of digital platforms to shape public opinion, often at the cost of professional, individual integrity.

### **Ferreting the News**

These days when the news breaks, citizen journalists very often beat the journalists and the wire service to it. Omosotomhe and Olley (2018) found that journalists are not driven by a competitive impulse to break the news anymore, but have rather come to terms with the fact that citizen journalists (or 'social media' as more pronounced in the study) are sometimes first responders to the site of the news, and should be relied on for gathering basic details of the news. A Hong Kong study examining the supplementary role of social media in news gathering in a high internet penetration context found that journalists still rely significantly on traditional media channels for

“news sourcing and verification.” However, given the highly competitive environment and the need to turn out news fast, journalists also significantly rely on “ready-made information” available on large social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube) (Zhang, 2019).

These studies reveal that the citizens are increasingly being integrated into the total news production process, even in traditional media houses. The concern about this is, in a new media space more populated by citizen journalists and non-traditional journalist social media users, how much control do the traditional journalists have over the ebb and flow of propagandist junk that the social media spews out from time to time? Current attempts to damage-control the unprofessionalism or unethical behaviour of some citizen journalists and social media users largely involve computer-aided fact checkers, in addition to the journalist’s own instinct for spotting questionable or unverified information. However, these do not always prove to be a water-tight barrier for eliminating false or propagandist information.

Schifferes, Newman, and Thurman (2014) discussed some techniques for social media news sourcing and verification, much of which was still experimental at the time, and the authors submitted that most tools of fact checking (including those already in use) do not have “enough fine-grained control.” This chink in the armour of the media’s gatekeeping attempts leaves sufficient room for propagandist junk to sometimes fall through, particularly given the tight deadlines journalists have to work with in delivering news. Another issue of concern is that the new media threw the doors open for many multiple versions of a story to be circulated at the moment when it breaks, which informed the adoption of the term “junk” in this study. Journalists are not merely bothered about breaking the news first before their ‘equally professional’ counterparts; they are concerned about setting the context and straightening kinks that might have been introduced into the story beforehand, on the social media. This creates all the more clutter of information to sort through in the newsgathering process.

### **Future Troubles: AI-generated Counter-evidence**

The troubles of news credibility and verification continue to be compounded by the public use of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years. Conversely, news establishments are introducing AI use in combating fake news. The financial implication of so doing and the requirement for skilled manpower to handle the technology are, however, factors for delay in full adoption of this process. Bontridder and Pouillet (2021) submit that AI-enabled disinformation peddling has a real societal impact in that they “foment political strife, skew online discourse, and manipulate the marketplace [of ideas].” They also observed that these ‘artificial speakers’ are consistently present on social media and have the tendency to mask credibility i.e. on the surface, they demonstrate traits consistent with credible news sources. This AI-enabled embellishing of the fake news process makes for ‘easy’ peddling of propagandist messages in manners consistent with credible news sharing. The sophistication of artificial intelligence use promises to increase rapidly within the next decade (Akinnagbe, 2024).

AI-assisted generative media intended to mislead the public also adds to the complex strings of data that journalists battle to verify or debunk. Himself a victim of such AI hoax, Pope Francis

commented on the use of artificial intelligence to spread fake news and manipulate minds (AFP, 2024). Political figures and other prominent people have often been the subject of engineered hoaxes; including political figures Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and a host of others, as well as religious leaders. These cases account for versions of AI-mediated misinformation peddling that often come under scrutiny by professionals and the public, owing to the prominence of the subjects involved, which often in turn intensifies efforts to tease out the facts. More subtle applications of artificial intelligence on more limited topics do not avail those issues the widespread scrutiny and debunking that more prominent characters enjoy. The cumulative effect of such subtly mediated propagandist efforts may, however, show over time, judging by the trend observed by Bontridder & Poulet (2021).

Current patterns portend that the skilled perpetrators of media propaganda will continue to stay ahead of journalistic efforts to counter them. The inherent fast pace of the news production process is a factor to this, where less-than-sufficient time is available to fact-check the nitty-gritty of multiple news stories that are all set to go to press within a short period. As artificial intelligence use continues to mediate in the disinformation process also, more news stories will become subject to skewing, leaving journalists with a tight choice to prioritise which stories to thoroughly invest their fact-checking efforts on, within the time available. More delayed, feature-based reports are not entirely left out of the effort to keep the audience in the loop of factual, and objective journalistic reports, but the increasing trend of information skewing in the new power play leaves much of those reports at the risk of focusing on “information repair” rather than pure information dissemination.

### **Key Findings and Recommendations**

The analysis in this study establishes the following:

- i. traditional media maintain their credibility as preferred news sources, but largely among older media audience (baby boomers), while the younger generation of media consumers show preference for online sources;
- ii. traditional media is progressively losing its persuasive influence on the media audience;
- iii. newsrooms are increasingly incorporating social media sources in their newsgathering process, sometimes relying on “ready-made information” available on social media platforms;
- iv. public use of artificial intelligence for combating fake news is a promising reform, but the financial implication and the requirement for skilled manpower are factors for delay in full adoption of this process.

In Nigeria, where digital adoption outpaces regulatory frameworks and institutional resources are limited, addressing the challenges presented in this study requires strategies that are tailored to local realities, such as:

- i. established media outlets should create verification networks with credible citizen journalists;
- ii. the Nigerian Cybercrime Act (2015) should be amended to criminalise AI-generated disinformation for the purpose of electoral manipulation or defamation;

- iii. regulators should require transparency reports from social media platform owners, detailing how content is prioritized during hot-button issues;
- iv. community leaders and grassroots journalists should be trained as fact-checking ambassadors to report suspicious content via SMS hotlines to relevant agencies; and
- v. secondary schools should integrate media literacy and fact-checking modules into their civics classes.

## **Conclusion**

The ongoing struggle for credibility between new media and traditional media underscores a fundamental shift in the media landscape. While traditional media maintains a legacy of institutional trust and rigorous editorial processes, new media has democratized information dissemination, offering speed and accessibility. However, the proliferation of misinformation complicates the credibility of both media forms. This study highlights the necessity for hybridisation of traditional and citizen journalism, combating artificial intelligence-powered disinformation, promoting algorithmic accountability, strengthening local monitoring of disinformation, and institutionalisation of media literacy. Ultimately, the future of media credibility will depend on how both traditional and new media adapt to the challenges of misinformation and audience scepticism, fostering an informed and critically engaged public.

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