Exploring The Ethical Implications of Social Media Weaponization by Digital Journalists

[1]Ms. Amber Gagan

Student, Bachelor Of Arts In Journalism And Mass Communication,

6th Semester

Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

[2]Ms. Tuhina Choubey

Assistant Professor, Journalism And Mass Communication,

Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Abstract

The dynamics of digital platforms are changing the face of journalism in the modern era, which presents both opportunities and difficulties for news trust and journalistic ethics. This study examines the complex effects of platform dynamics on journalistic norms, audience engagement, disinformation, polarization, and tactics for reestablishing confidence through interviews with journalists from a range of backgrounds. Examining the pressures placed on journalistic techniques, it becomes clear that attention-grabbing material and engagement are becoming more important than traditional journalistic standards. Journalists struggle to uphold their ethics in the face of sensationalism and quick news distribution as they navigate the cutthroat world of online media. The task of engaging audiences on digital platforms has become increasingly intricate for journalists, who must strike a balance between professionalism and authenticity while tackling issues of misinformation and online harassment. Notwithstanding these difficulties, platforms provide chances for genuine communication and audience trust-building. The quick dissemination of false narratives across platforms is a significant challenge posed by the growth of misinformation. With so much content available, it can be challenging for journalists to distinguish between reliable sources and sensationalist articles. Platform polarization worries highlight how content moderation and algorithmic curation influence online conversation. Journalists worry about the division of society, but they also support communication and openness to lessen the effects of divisiveness. Trust restoration strategies involve working together with platforms, journalists, and regulatory agencies. Journalists prioritize openness, truthfulness, and moral reporting to reestablish confidence and advance media literacy in online environments. Journalists are hopeful about the potential of digital media to promote informed discourse and civic involvement, reiterating the crucial role of journalism in a democratic society, despite the challenges of platform-mediated journalism.

Keywords – media, journalists, ethics.

Introduction

The evolution of digital media has significantly redefined the landscape of journalism in recent years, offering new ways for the dissemination of news, engaging with audiences and prompting public discourses. However, these transformations lie challenges, particularly in combating misinformation

and addressing audience polarisation. In navigating this digital terrain, journalists find themselves under difficult circumstances to deliver news promptly while contending with the proliferation of false information propagated through social media echo chambers. However, the historical relation between media and technology traces roots back to the early 1950s, as demonstrated by CBS's utilisation of primitive computers like Univac to forecast the outcome of the 1952 US presidential election (Bohn, 1980). This event marked the inception of a longstanding relationship between media and technology, laying the groundwork for precision journalism and subsequently, data journalism. By the late 1980s, scholars commenced exploring the potential ramifications of emerging technologies, such as computers, in the field of journalism (Meyer, 1973; 1991). The advent of the internet era witnessed the dominance of online media as a potent force, with platforms like AOL offering a range of services, including news content, in the early 1990s. This rapid expansion of digital media culminated in its designation as the 'fourth medium,' alongside print, radio and television (Chyi & Sylvie, 1993; Bonnington, 1995). In the mid-2000s, the emergence of Web 2.0 introduced the concept of citizen journalism as a viable alternative to traditional forms, sparking debates regarding its implications for mainstream media (Gillmor, 2004; Bowman & Willis, 2003). While some researchers viewed citizen journalism as a disruptive force, numerous studies indicated its role in enhancing rather than replacing professional journalism (Allan & Thorsen, 2009). Introduction By 2000, the global landscape boasted over 4400 online publications, primarily located in North America, Europe, South America and Asia (Chyi & Sylvie, 2000). The proliferation of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter further revolutionised journalism, facilitating personalised content delivery and presenting novel challenges and opportunities for media organisations (Newman, 2009; Hermida, 2012; Noguera-Vivo, 2013). Lev Manovich's seminal work, "The Language of New Media," offered insights into how digital media assimilated narrative conventions from traditional media while developing its own distinctive features, such as hypertext, multimedia and interactivity (Nielson & Salaveria). The introduction of the concept of transmedia in 2003 became instrumental in online journalism, leading to the evolution of diverse forms of online news content, including long-form journalism and immersive journalism (Jenkins, 2003; Wolf & Godulla, 2016; Hiippala, 2017; Rosique-Cedillo, 2015; Barranquero & Carretero, 2015; De-la Pena et al., 2010; Dominguez-Martina, 2015; Burton, 2005; Bogost et al., 2012). However, the advancement of digital journalism, information proliferation and misinformation has presented ethical and professional dilemmas for journalists (Salaverría-Aliaga, 2019; Carlson, 2017).

Literature Review:

- Early 1950s: CBS's use of Univac to forecast the 1952 US presidential   election (Bohn, 1980).

- 1980s: Scholars explored the impact of emerging technologies, like computers, on journalism (Meyer, 1973; 1991).

- Early 1990s: Platforms like AOL began offering news content, marking the start of online media as a 'fourth medium' alongside print, radio, and television (Chyi & Sylvie, 1993; Bonnington, 1995).

- By 2000: Over 4,400 online publications globally, primarily in North America, Europe, South America, and Asia (Chyi & Sylvie, 2000).

- Mid-2000s: Web 2.0 introduced citizen journalism, sparking debates about its impact on traditional media (Gillmor, 2004; Bowman & Willis, 2003).

- Studies indicated citizen journalism's role in enhancing professional journalism rather than replacing it (Allan & Thorsen, 2009).

- Platforms like Facebook and Twitter revolutionized journalism by enabling personalized content delivery (Newman, 2009; Hermida, 2012; Noguera-Vivo, 2013).

- Lev Manovich's "The Language of New Media" highlighted digital media's assimilation of traditional media narratives and development of unique features like hypertext and interactivity (Nielson & Salaveria).

- 2003: Introduction of transmedia led to diverse online news forms, including long-form and immersive journalism (Jenkins, 2003; Wolf & Godulla, 2016; Hiippala, 2017; Rosique-Cedillo, 2015; Barranquero & Carretero, 2015; De-la Pena et al., 2010; Dominguez-Martina, 2015; Burton, 2005; Bogost et al., 2012).

- Challenges include the need to deliver news promptly while maintaining accuracy and fairness (Bradfield, 2018).

- The convergence of content creators and journalists complicates ethical considerations, increasing the risk of misinformation (Salaverría-Aliaga, 2019; Carlson, 2017).

- While social media expands audience reach, it also facilitates biased reporting and the spread of misinformation (Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message").

- Sensationalized reporting exacerbates societal divisions and undermines trust in news media (Fawzi et al., 2021).

- Historical examples, such as Nazi propaganda, illustrate the manipulation of media for political agendas (O'Shaughnessy, 2009; Aslan, 2017; Steinberg, 1974; Ulum, 2021).

- Contemporary examples include social media platforms used for political narratives and the spread of fake news, leading to societal discord (Singer & Brooking, 2018; Tandon, 2021; Varma, 2024).

- Audience trust is shaped by the expectation of accurate and fair news delivery (Mayer et al., 1995; Hanitzch et al., 2017).

- Crime-related coverage and political content on social media can erode trust in institutions and promote cynicism (Park et al., 2020; Johnson, St, and Iii, 2020; Xiao, Borah, and Su, 2021).

- Journalists must adhere to principles of integrity, transparency, and ethical conduct, consulting with editors and ethical committees to navigate the complexities of digital journalism (Wenzel, 2020; Bélair-Gagnon and Usher, 2021; Zahay et al., 2020).

Methodology:

This study employed an inductive, qualitative and comparative approach to explore how journalists and senior editors perceive the role of digital media platforms in shaping trust in news, with a specific focus on India. The comparative analysis included journalists from diverse sociocultural backgrounds and examined varying political practices, particularly regarding partisan and populist tendencies. India's media landscape exhibits diversity in the utilisation of digital platforms for news consumption. According to data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, a significantly higher proportion of internet users in India rely on social media and messaging applications for news compared to other countries (Newman et al., 2021).

To ensure representation across a diverse backgrounds of participants, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was adopted. Individuals holding various roles within their organisations were targeted, including those responsible for managing newsrooms (editors-in-chief), middle-management positions (editors) and reporters. Top news organisations both online and offline in Chhattisgarh (State of India), along with national organisations were selected based on audience trust, Additionally, recommendations from journalists were sought to identify other potential participants, ensuring a comprehensive and diverse sample. In total, semistructured interviews were conducted with 30 journalists and senior editors across Chhattisgarh state and other parts of India. Interviews were conducted both in face-to-face conversations and via telephone. Participants were questioned about their perspectives on trust in news, the ethical implications of social media and the weaponization of digital media, also including factors contributing to its erosion, the role of platforms and potential strategies for fostering trust. The majority of interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, except in cases where participants requested confidentiality for background purposes. While many interviewees consented to being identified by name, to maintain uniformity, all participants were anonymized.

Analysis:

The data was manual analysed employing an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Citation2011). Initially, the researchers developed a coding scheme highlighting key thematic sections of interview transcripts capturing perspectives on audience trust in news, ethical implications of social media, the weaponization of digital media, factors contributing to erosion, the role of platforms and strategies for fostering trust, including the role played by platforms. During the data reduction process, particular attention was given to Three broad observations regarding platforms' impact on trust: their perceived benefits and detriments, ethical implications and social media weaponization by journalists. For further analysis, the focus shifted and platform-related segments, seeking patterns and refining the coding scheme. This iterative process identified common sentiments, leading to themes such as Ethical Pressures on Journalistic Practices, Audience Engagement Challenges on Platforms, Misinformation Challenges on Platforms, concerns over polarisation on platforms, Perceptions of Damaging Discourses in Platform-based News and Strategies for Trust Restoration in Platform-based News. These themes were further explored to identify differences and similarities, resulting in additional subthemes. The themes were then organised in relation to two framing questions about the impact of platforms on trust in news: (a) How do digital platforms influence journalistic practices essential for cultivating trust within the profession? and (b) In what ways do digital platforms contribute to shaping the broader information landscape, potentially exacerbating challenges beyond traditional journalism? In the summary of findings, researchers regard each narrative as a unique perspective shared by journalists regarding the disruptive or transformative impact of digital platforms on trust in news, ethical implications and the weaponization of social media. It's noted that these narratives are not mutually exclusive; rather, interviewees often expressed multiple viewpoints on the role of platforms. The term "narrative" is used in line with Carlson's approach to metajournalistic discourse, highlighting journalists' stories about their profession's legitimacy and societal role. By focusing on these narratives, the study illuminates shared experiences regarding the erosion of journalistic values, ethical concerns, social media weaponization and the influence of platforms.

Results and Discussion:

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital media, journalists face a myriad of pressures that influence their professional practices. Central to these pressures are the dynamics of online platforms, which often prioritize visibility and virality over traditional journalistic norms. The imperative to make news appealing on platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and others, has led to a shift in editorial decision-making, with a heightened focus on attention-grabbing headlines and breaking news. However, this pursuit of engagement comes with inherent risks, as journalists must balance the need for audience attention with the principles of accuracy, impartiality, and ethical reporting. Interviews with journalists reveal a nuanced understanding of the challenges posed by platform dynamics. Many express concerns

about the prevalence of clickbait headlines and the pressure to be the first to report breaking news, even at the expense of thorough fact-checking. These pressures are exacerbated by the competitive nature of online journalism, where the race for clicks and shares can incentivize sensationalism over substance. Despite efforts to maintain journalistic integrity, practitioners often find themselves navigating a delicate balancing act between serving audience interests and upholding professional standards.

In the digital age, platforms have become essential channels for audience engagement, allowing journalists to interact directly with their readership. However, this newfound connectivity comes with its own set of challenges, as journalists must navigate the complexities of online discourse while maintaining trust and credibility. Interviews with industry professionals highlight the multifaceted nature of audience engagement on platforms, from fostering personal connections to managing online harassment and navigating the blurred lines between personal and professional identity. Many journalists emphasize the importance of authenticity and transparency in their online interactions, striving to strike a balance between approachability and professionalism. However, concerns remain about the potential for online platforms to amplify negative commentary and misinformation, undermining trust in news organizations and eroding the boundaries between journalism and social media. Despite these challenges, journalists recognize the value of engaging with audiences on platforms, viewing it as an opportunity to build trust and foster meaningful connections in an increasingly digital world. The proliferation of misinformation on digital platforms poses a significant threat to the integrity of journalism and the trustworthiness of news sources. Interviews with journalists shed light on the complexities of combating misinformation in online environments, where the rapid spread of false information can have far-reaching consequences. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are identified as primary vectors for the dissemination of misinformation, creating challenges for journalists seeking to uphold accuracy and credibility. Journalists express frustration with the lack of content differentiation on platforms, where legitimate news sources are often conflated with blogs, conspiracy theories, and sensationalist content. This blurring of boundaries makes it increasingly difficult for audiences to discern trustworthy information from falsehoods, undermining the role of news organizations as gatekeepers of reliable news. Despite efforts to fact-check and debunk misinformation, journalists face an uphill battle in combating the viral spread of false narratives on digital platforms.

Digital platforms have been implicated in the polarisation of online discourse, creating echo chambers where users are exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. Interviews with journalists highlight concerns about the divisive effects of platform dynamics, where algorithmic practices and content moderation strategies may inadvertently exacerbate societal divisions. While some practitioners attribute polarisation to the algorithmic curation of news feeds and the proliferation of partisan content, others question the extent to which platforms drive ideological polarisation. Journalists express a sense

of unease about the implications of platform-driven polarisation, fearing that it may further erode trust in mainstream media and contribute to societal fragmentation. However, opinions vary on the role of platforms in shaping online discourse, with some practitioners emphasising the need for greater transparency and accountability in algorithmic decision-making. Despite these concerns, journalists remain committed to fostering open dialogue and promoting diverse perspectives in digital spaces, recognizing the importance of bridging ideological divides for a healthy democratic discourse.

Digital platforms have been implicated in the polarisation of online discourse, creating echo chambers where users are exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. Interviews with journalists highlight concerns about the divisive effects of platform dynamics, where algorithmic practices and content moderation strategies may inadvertently exacerbate societal divisions. While some practitioners attribute polarisation to the algorithmic curation of news feeds and the proliferation of partisan content, others question the extent to which platforms drive ideological polarisation. Journalists express a sense of unease about the implications of platform-driven polarisation, fearing that it may further erode trust in mainstream media and contribute to societal fragmentation. However, opinions vary on the role of platforms in shaping online discourse, with some practitioners emphasising the need for greater transparency and accountability in algorithmic decision-making. Despite these concerns, journalists remain committed to fostering open dialogue and promoting diverse perspectives in digital spaces, recognizing the importance of bridging ideological divides for a healthy democratic discourse.

References

1. Ross Arguedas, A. A., Badrinathan, S., Mont'Alverne, C., Toff, B., Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2022). "It's a Battle You Are Never Going to Win": Perspectives from Journalists in Four Countries on How Digital Media Platforms Undermine Trust in News.

2. Journalism Studies, 23(14), 1821–1840. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2022.2112908 O'Shaughnessy, N. (2009).

3. Selling Hitler: propaganda and the Nazi brand. Journal of Public Affairs: An International Journal, 9(1), 55-76. ASLAN, M. M. (2017). HITLER'S WAY OF PROPAGANDA. ASOS Journal, 5(52), 374-382.

4. Steinberg, J. D. (1974). Totalitarianism and the press: ideological justification used by Hitler, Peron, and Castro to control news media. Bhat, R. A. (2022).

5. Kazuo Ishiguro and "Godi Media": A Reading of his Select Novels and the Post-2014 Indian Media. Authorea Preprints. Ulum, M. S., & Al-Ansi, A. M.

6. Yellow Journalism in India: A Truth about Impacts Biased News Agencies Khader, M. F. M., & Kumar, T. S.

7. Media Manipulation and the Politics of Polarization in India. have on Common Masses and Their Reactions against Policies in India.

8. Kiousis, S. (2001). Public trust or mistrust? Perceptions of media credibility in the information age. Mass communication & society, 4(4), 381-403.

9. Singer, P. W., & Brooking, E. T. (2018). LikeWar: The weaponization of social media. Eamon Dolan Books. Alharbi, A., Alotaibi, A., Alghofaili, L., Alsalamah, M., Alwasil, N., & Elkhediri, S. (2022, January).

10. Security in social-media: Awareness of Phishing attacks techniques and countermeasures. In 2022 2nd International Conference on Computing and Information Technology (ICCIT) (pp. 10-16).

11. IEEE. Gulyás, Á. (2016). Social Media and Journalism: Hybridity, convergence, changing relationship with the audience, and fragmentation.

12. In The Routledge companion to digital journalism studies (pp. 396-406). Routledge. Xia, Y., Robinson, S., Zahay, M., & Freelon, D. (2020).

13. The evolving journalistic roles on social media: Exploring "engagement" as relationship-building between journalists andcitizens. Journalism Practice, 14(5), 556-573.

14. Chakrabarty, S. (2024). We are looking into complaint against PM Modi's rajasthan speech: Election commission.

15. Retrieved from https://www.thehindu.com/elections/loksabha/election-commission-considering-complaint-against-pm-modisrajasthan-speech-   sources/article68098748.ece (N.d.).

16. Retrieved from https://www.exchange4media.com/media-othersnews/the-print-sixyears-of-shaping-narratives-defining-excellence-in-digital-journalism130183.html Budic, M. (2023).

17. From algorithms to headlines: Ethical issues in AIDriven reporting. Retrieved from https://balkaninsight.com/2023/08/29/from-algorithmsto-headlines-ethical-issues-in-ai-driven-reporting/ Desk, O. B. (n.d.).

18. Will WhatsApp shut down in India? know all about the platform's plea in Delhi HC. Retrievedfromhttps://business.outlookindia.com/technology/whatsappencryption-india-delhi-high-court-meta-it-rules Nath, D. (2024).

19. "voluntary code of ethics" for Social Media Platforms: What EC told X on taking down elections-related   posts   Retrieved   from

https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/voluntary-code-of-ethicssocial-media-x-takedown-9276290/ Twitter, Facebook, Instagram yet to comply with India's new digital ethics code as it comes into effect today: What we know so far. (2021).

20. Retrieved from https://www.firstpost.com/tech/news-analysis/twitter-facebookinstagram-yet-to-comply-with-indias-new-digital-ethics-code-as-itcomes-into-effect-today-what-we-knowso-far-9652611.html

21. Vignesh Radhakrishnan & Rebecca Rose Varghese. (2024). A factcheck on Modi's speech in Rajasthan about Muslims and Manmohan Singh.

22. Retrieved from https://www.thehindu.com/data/a-fact-check-onmodis-speech-in-rajasthan-about-muslims-and-manmohansingh/article68095954.ece World of media. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://worldofmedia.ru