

HYPOTHETICAL SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION MODEL AND ITS IMPORT IN CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISM PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper is an exploratory study presenting Edogor's (2024) conceptualisation of a hypothetical social media communication model and its significance in contemporary journalism. Arguably, the influence of social media on journalism practice, particularly, and on every form of human communication generally has been phenomenal. Perhaps this is because social media's invention was a singular development that engendered tremendous changes in all facets of communication more than prior technologies. Thus, the discourse on social media cuts across languages, economy, religion, culture, technologies, communication, relationships, fashion, and socio-political trends that journalism centres on. Owing to the influence that social media usage exerts on journalism and communications, the researchers of this paper deemed it necessary to provide a bird's-eye view of the interaction elements observed on the platforms. That is why the researchers have formulated and analysed a social media communication model offering the clues for better comprehension of communication processes on the sites for digital interactions. Basically, social media's multidimensional influence on journalism prompted the conceptualisation of the model portraying the rudimentary alterations in the profession now.

Keywords: Communication, journalism, mass media, model, social media.

Introduction

The advent of social media has altered the journalism sphere – ushering in new means of human interactions and wider sources of information dissemination. The same phenomenon has created a new genre of audience with arguably a distinct taste of media consumption, resulting in a different pattern of relating with them for satisfaction. Over the years, recorded history provides several inventions that trail the development of human communication across the world, from generation to generation; nonetheless, the growth in the use of social media has been astronomical, unlike the case of other prior means of interaction (Edogor, Jonah & Ojo, 2015).

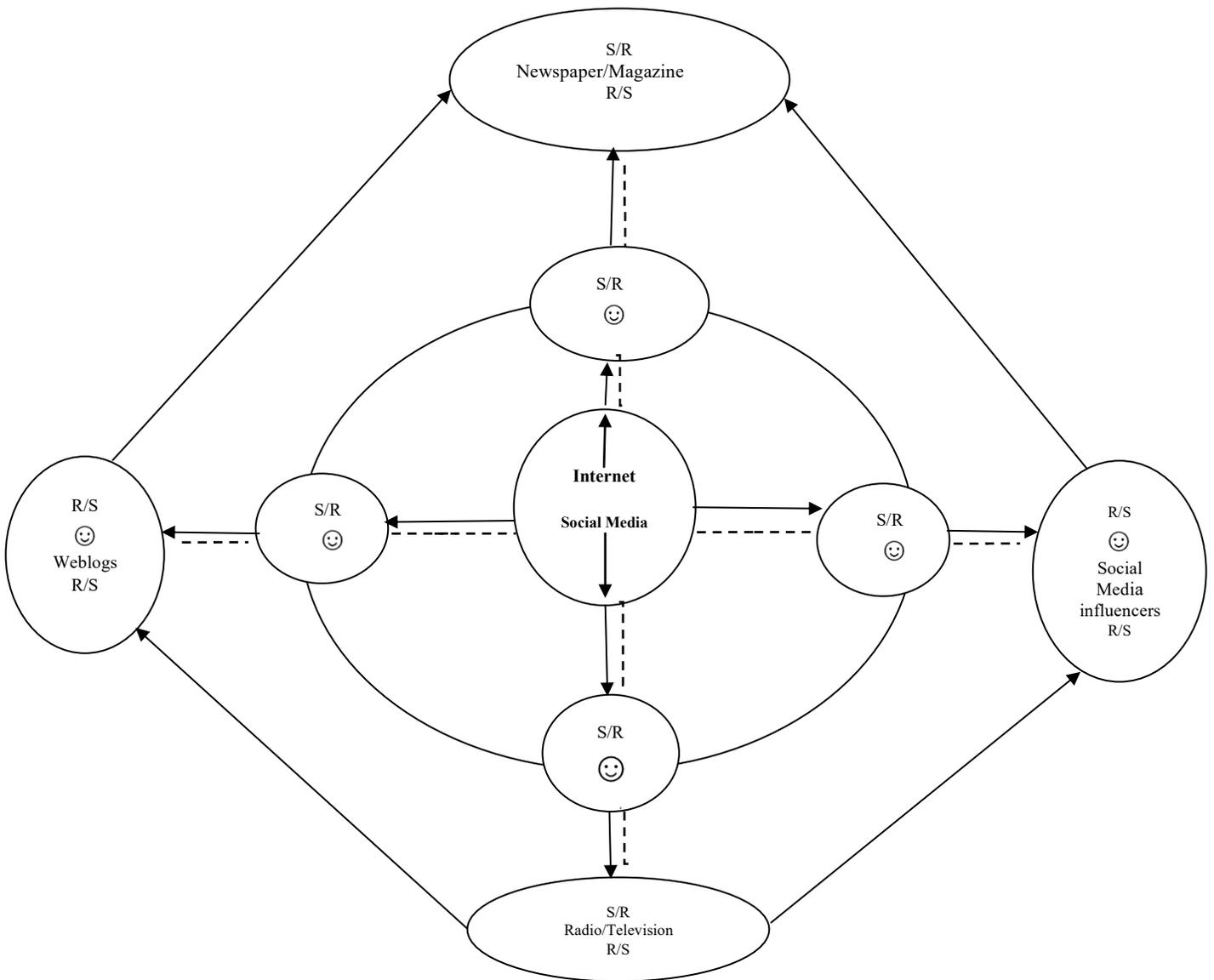
Generally, it is believed that the invention of movable type was the first recorded sophisticated technological development that shaped human communication intended for a large and scattered audience. Although the invention is popularly attributed to a German inventor, Gutenberg has been disputed as a phenomenon predating him. It was George Putnam who observed in his two-volume, *Books and Their Makers*, that Coster (Koster) was using movable type in 1426, and indeed published his first book in 1430 through the use of the method (National Open University of Nigeria, 2006). Nonetheless, various media scholars like Baran (2010), Okunna and Omenugha (2012), as well as Hasan (2013) largely accepted movable type as the precursor of other later technological inventions that facilitated journalism and mass communication of the present era.

Social media have emerged as the latest human invention that has commandeered every segment of mass, intra, and interpersonal communications in the world (Edogor, 2012). Social media have engendered both complex vertical and horizontal modifications in human communication systems. The whole processes of human interaction have been given a new and complicated ambience, distinct from their hitherto nature. To easily grasp the dimensions of the changes that the use of social media has brought into contemporary human communication, it becomes expedient to represent it in a model here. This is the effort that the current study would add towards a better understanding of the intricacies of social media platforms that have largely affected journalism practice and human society. Perhaps, this reality is the reason McQuail (2010, p.136) observes that there is “the rise of a new kind of society, quite distinct from mass society, one characterized by complex interactive networks of communication.”

Hasan (2013, p.155) points out that “one way to analyse communication is to present it in the form of a model.” The scholar defines the term as “the mechanistic perspective of human communication that effectively tells at a glance how it works.” Folarin (2002, p.55) explains the importance of models when he noted that “models are useful in helping us to visualize, analyse and discuss complex processes, which

would be otherwise difficult to explain." Since the use of social media is a multiplex phenomenon, the system must be illustrated to demonstrate the dynamics of interactions in the new channels of communication. The purpose is to depict the basic elements in the system, as Njoku (2009, p. 120) argues that "social interactions contain elements, relations and environments that are continuously changing." This attempt shall give a cursory pictorial view of the mechanics of social media. The hypothetical social media model is presented beneath:

Figure 1: Social Media Communication Model as envisioned by Edogor 2024



Source: Edogor fieldwork (2024)

Explanation of Social Media Communication Model

The essential parts of the above model are briefly explained below. The model depicts how social media have taken centre stage in all mediated human interactions – both at interpersonal and mass communication levels, thus altering the entire sphere of journalism. In the model, it could be seen that social media have annexed mass media organisations and the latter attach themselves to the former in the same way that individual users do. The model is spherical, denoting the open-ended availability of the services of social media to all users across the globe. The senders/receivers or receivers/senders (S/R or R/S) of messages in social media are represented with small circles with or without smiley-like diagrams. The arrows portray social media's characteristic interactivity where users get messages and re-send to others, who may also decide to re-send to several others that may, or may not, re-send. Essentially, the users' liberty to share and re-share messages or media content with other known and often unknown sources is the feature of social media, enhancing the propensity of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation on the platforms.

The thick lines crossing some of the arrows depict the possible existence of semantic noise that social media users' use of slang expressions or other irregular terms or symbols (emojis) could cause in the interaction. Such semantic noise is a regular characteristic of almost every social media site, and it causes dysfunctional communication for many message recipients. In a nutshell, the model is an attempt to give a bird's-eye view of the complex character of social media sites as communication instruments vis-à-vis journalism. The model illustrated the way every contemporary journalism activity as a system depends on the various social media sites.

Propositions of the Social Media Communication Model

Through the social media communication model in Figure 1 above recounting the present modifications within the journalism sphere, the following propositions have been projected by its formulator:

1. Social media sites have recreated journalism (social media journalism).
2. Social media reinforce media convergence in journalism.
3. Social media sites have brought journalists and their audience into a monolithic entity.
4. Social media sites have altered the conventional mass communication model.
5. Social media have metamorphosed individuals into 'media institutions.'

Examining the assumptions of the Social Media Communication Model

Number one assumption: Social media sites have recreated journalism (social media journalism). By virtue of their interactive nature, social media thrive on the instantaneous sharing of information, either from one person to another person or to many people who can share too. In other words, social media “platforms facilitate user-to-user interaction and enable the creation of media content among users,” (Ogundoyin, Nwogwugwu & Olagunju, 2024, p.38). This process of sharing, which appears endless among social media users, has become a veritable means for the circulation of information for journalism through the instrumentality of the sites. In such a manner, all information, ideas, experiences, and messages conveyed via online journalism (journalism as it is practiced online) could get virtually to all social media users in every part of the world. This is unlike what transpires in citizen journalism, where social media users themselves produce and share information, ideas, experiences, or messages through their social media accounts. Such personal accounts have limited scope, although the sharing and re-sharing of content could inadvertently or advertently convey messages from personal accounts to a global audience. Through the instrumentality of social media sites’ characteristic deployment of multimedia, there is a tendency to easily reach a greater heterogeneous audience through the platforms.

Number two assumption: Social media have reinforced the media convergence phenomenon in journalism. Social media sites have become the melting pot for all mass media. Thus, there is a very thin line (if any exists in some instances) between the mass media genres as they were originally known. Every mass medium has converged on social media, as Oyero (2007, p.169) observes about the internet, which he argues, “has eroded the distinctions among media, thus merging them up into one.” This observation is quite true about what social media sites have done across forms of mass media. The consequence is that social media have fostered homogeneity in virtually all forms of journalism, especially in their content offerings. The influence of social media in the convergence vogue continues to expand the frontiers of journalism, as the platforms subtly bring all media together with each medium’s peculiar audience.

Number three assumption: Social media sites have brought journalists and their audience into a monolithic entity. This assumption corroborates the idea of social media communication irredentism, which Edogor (2025) simply describes as “the unspoken doctrine that social media sites engender in the communication sphere where the sites have empowered the hitherto non-actors in public communication to be part of the main actors in the process.” Prior to now, journalists were mainly the media content producers, while the audiences were

the receivers or simply the media content consumers. However, the use of social media has changed the paradigm, bringing media audience (now social media users) under the same umbrella as content creators on social media platforms. This informal fusion of the key players, which has become a reality in the current media practice, is more evident in participatory and citizen genres of journalism, largely tailored to infotainment. Social media provide the most significant impetus to the trend – the informal fusion of the prior media content consumers with the producers as currently existing in journalism practice globally.

Number four assumption: Social media sites have altered the conventional mass communication model. The conventional mass communication model largely favours a linear interface in the conveyance of information, ideas, experiences, or messages. “The traditional mass media follows a 'one-to-many' model of communication. In other words, one source speaks at one time to many people who constitute a homogeneous mass audience,” (Oyero, p.170). On the contrary, the illustration in Figure 1 of this paper, showing social media’s pattern of communication flow, is a pointer that the linear flow of mass communication has fizzled out. Social media sites have become catalysts, engendering horizontal and vertical dissemination of information, albeit with less conservatism in traditional journalism’s pattern.

Number five assumption: Social media have metamorphosed individuals into ‘media institutions.’ Through the usage of social media, some persons have become profoundly influential owing to the number of followers and or fans they have garnered on the platforms. Such individuals use social media sites to endear themselves to people through disseminating content considered hugely significant – for entertainment, education, information, and persuasion. These groups of users are fondly known as ‘social media influencers,’ and the platforms have empowered them with the capacity to sway governments, authorities, and businesses. The activities of social media influencers in particular, and all their users generally, provide the world with another branch of the government – the Fifth-Estate-of the Realm. Through this emergence fifth-estate-of the realm, an avalanche of media technologies offering the audiences wider access (Edogor, 2024) to the mass media, the government, and people in power. This phenomenon enhances the gamut of social media journalism and creates wider avenues for social and political activism in journalism.

Social Media-Induced Changes in Journalism

The model in Figure 1 exposes the position of social media sites with their induced transformations on the public communication sphere, where journalism holds sway. The sites have altered the patterns of mass media news production

and consumption by enabling users to participate equally in the production of news content. That is evident in the model presented in Figure 1 above, where individuals are placed in similar positions as (Senders/Receivers or Receivers/Senders) just like media outfits. The import is that the social media users are attached to social media sites the same way that the conventional news media outfits are attached to the sites. Thus, it has been observed that not only can readers, listeners, and or viewers nowadays contribute content and opinions on news, but they can also choose what they read, view, or watch. This has challenged news organizations around the world to adjust the way they operate to adapt to this new approach to accessing news (Ngoci 2022, p.54).

Besides, the ubiquitous attribute of social media sites could be seen by the spread of their users in the North, East, West, and Southern parts of the model provided in Figure 1 above, and the feature is gradually making them sources of news for virtually all people who used to rely on the mainstream media. Thus, it has been argued that, "with the rapid growth of social media, more and more people are turning to social media platforms as a source of information for their daily news instead of purchasing printed newspapers (Ngoci 2022, p.54). Generally, human beings make efforts to improve on various means of gathering and sharing information as well as ensuring that the canons are maintained according to the appropriate norms in different societies. Therefore, over the past century, there have been technological attempts to revolutionise the means of human communication generally and the ways of media reporting. Uche (1999, p.192) observes that, "the revolution in information technologies is, as at 1998, one hundred and sixty-six years." White's (1973, p.49) assertion that 'the electronic information revolution started in 1832 with the invention of the telegraph by Morse is incontrovertible. There is a historical antecedent that leads to continuity in all human inventions."

However, Uche (1999), still citing White (1973, p.49), notes that, "electronic information technology revolutionises society; this fact is historically established for the past and a commonplace for the future." Meanwhile, the future that the scholar alluded to is here now as the world experiences a revolution in information and communication technologies through the changes that social media have engendered in journalism and news reporting. Social media phenomenon shapes all facets of mass communication currently in negation to the opinion of Maduka (1999, p.205) argument that "mass communication...has not always depended heavily on technology, for during the Middle Ages, the Church was able to transmit the same message to the 'whole world (Christendom)' from Rome to all parishioners on Sunday." The scholar posits that

within the era, mass communication rested more on authority than on technologies (Maduka, 1999).

Social media, with other extant communication technologies, have transmuted the authority-centred paradigm of mass communication due to their potency for quicker spreading of news. This underscores the popular view of Marshall McLuhan, who enunciated the popular idea that 'the medium is the message' (Agba, 2002, p.255) as referenced in Edogor et al (2015). Consequently, the present communication technologies place the current mass communication power virtually on the shoulders of the people, social media users. With such a trend, there is a subtle elevation of the status of the mass media audience, the majority of whom have been brought to a monolithic entity under a nomenclature – social media users. Social media users whose usage of the sites has accorded torrential influence are now popularly called 'social media influencers.' These people do almost every work that was hitherto ascribed to journalists – gathering, processing, and disseminating information to a scattered and heterogeneous audience.

One of the consequences of the emergent trend is the allusions that the audience's huge adoption of social media reduces their dependence on the mainstream media. The contemporary conventional media lack or have lost the prowess for immediate conscientization of the audience; no wonder people turn massively to the use of the new media forms in a bid to quench their information thirst (Edogor, 2012). Aja (2011, p.4) cited in Edogor (2012, p.3) makes the point clearer as he argues that, "traditional media organisations such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines seem to have lost prominence and their audience... Their news and information, as the European Society of Professional Journalists (2004, p.1) observes, are being increasingly circumvented by users who "use alternative media sources." Social media are the alternative and most popular sources through which people receive or send news and information nowadays. The people's level of dependence on social media sites in getting information and news they consume is paradoxical in comparison with the hype about the heaps of fake news that the users of the sites have a propensity to share frequently.

Social Media: Enforcing Active Audience Theory?

Based on the prism of the proposed model, the ability of social media in the empowerment of media audience could be seen in a double-barrelled status – media user (audience) as content producer and consumer. This status of the audience emerged through the roles that social media sites offer to the audience currently. This is evident in the proposed model, where social media sites have

positioned their users as both Senders/Receivers (S/R) or Receivers/Senders (R/S). The trend indicates social media sites' role in reinforcement of the active audience theory – this stresses the capability of the media audience (readers, listeners, and or viewers) of media contents as dynamic creators of significance rather than being perceived or construed as merely receptors of textual meaning (Barker, 2025). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017); Warner-Soderholm et al (2018), cited in Eke (2024, p.23), observe that “social media audiences are active” in the propagation of news on social media sites. In summary, Eke (2024) notes, “therefore, the engaged, networked social media audience actively negotiates meanings...”

The significance of the foregoing to contemporary journalism is that mass media practitioners should be conscious of the nature of nowadays' audience and devise better ways to satisfy them. The audience is the reason for the existence of all the media outfits, and whatever they offer as services would be zilch if the reasonable interest or attention of the audience is not gained. McQuail (2010, p.140) succinctly notes that “the audience member is no longer really part of a mass, but either a member of a self-chosen network or special public or an individual.” Social media usage has brought McQuail's submission to fruition. It implies that journalists of these days have greater duties to shoulder towards sustaining their audience in the current media era, replete with alternative sources of information, where the audience is also active in creating media content.

Social Media's Global Status Usage

One obvious observation in the formulated social media model is the attachment of the key actors in contemporary communication to social media, occupying the nucleus of journalism practice now. The import is that social media or social network sites, as offshoots of Web 2.0 applications, have expanded the prior influence of journalism, making the media audience more relevant. That is made possible through social media's flexible nature, which enables people to create and share information. This collaborates with the views of Nwammuo, Ezeonyjiaku, and Ekwughu (2022), who argue that digital media have become progressively more affordable and accessible to users across the world, and that the global culture in information sharing has become more homogenous than McLuhan ever envisioned in his global village postulation.

With their inherent open and flexible nature, social media sites have broken the hitherto hegemony of journalists in information gathering and dissemination. Consequently, recorded facts have it that the spread of social media among users has been unprecedented in the annals of mass media. *Awake!* (2011, p.24) cited

in Edogor (2012, p.4) points out that, "it took 38 years for radio to reach 50 million users, 13 years for television to attract the same number, and 4 years for the Internet to do so. The social networking site *Facebook* gained 200 million users in a 12-month period!" Protalinski (2014) revealed that the same medium, *Facebook*, had 1.23 billion active users in its first decade. In just seven years of existence (2009 to 2017), another social media site, *WhatsApp*, attracted 2 billion users in its first decade and got 3 billion users in its 15 years of existence (Backlinko, 2025). It has been revealed that more than 5.2 billion people across the world now use different social media sites. On average, each person uses nearly seven different social media platforms each day.

Generally, about 63.9% of the world's population is on social media, and among them are adults aged 18 years and older. It has also been reported that on average, people across the globe spend about 2 hours and 23 minutes every day on social media platforms (Hooda, 2025).

Owing to the foregoing, Ogundoyin et al (2024, p.35) state that "social media platforms have increasingly become great news sources famous for disseminating news and information." Because social media platforms are open to both their individual users as well as mass media outfits, media organisations that are worth their salt today create accounts on various social media sites. Such platforms are deployed as means to get social media users to participate or contribute to mass media content. As a result of some trends that social media have ushered in into the current mass media, it may be necessary to review the meaning of mass communication in the contemporary world.

The statistics above show the magnitude of the usage of social media and the rapidity of their spread among people across the world. Perhaps the popularity of social media sites has led media and communication researchers to pay close attention to studying the new sites for interaction. According to Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe, and Vitak (2012, p.2), "research on use of social network sites has proliferated in recent years, which is not surprising given their rapid adoption by users around the world." The growth in the rate and frequency of social media usage, as could be visualised, in the kind of attention that the users give to the sites, attests to their huge contributions in the information gathering and dissemination generally. This trend reinforces the role that social media platforms play in information sharing, thereby affecting journalism practice.

Birth of Social Media Journalism

Media scholar Folarin (2022, p.55) observes that "models are useful in helping us to visualise, analyse, and discuss complex processes, which would be

otherwise difficult to explain.” Onyejelem (2020) corroborates the view while noting that communication models are instruments for better comprehension of human interaction experiences. Following the above submissions, at this juncture, it is expedient to elucidate how the use of new communication technologies has given birth to a new phenomenon – social media journalism. This practice of the present age flies well on the wings of social media sites. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the implications of social media transformations on journalism practice, as could be visualised through the prism of the model formulated in Figure 1 herein. Through social media communication technologies have repositioned their users to be in the hierarchy of information receivers and disseminators, as could be gleaned from the position of social media influencers (users) depicted in the model in Figure 1. The notion was better captured in the submission that:

With the adoption of digital technologies that empowered citizens to distribute information online, journalists made a shift in their daily routines that involved establishing and strengthening engagement with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms. They began using social media to promote their content, interact with readers, but also to observe and incorporate in their reports the information that Internet users publish through their accounts (Tandoc & Vos, 2016) as cited in (Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020, p.1).

Social media sites have become platforms for journalism practitioners and non-journalists alike, and each of the groups jostles with one another in a hierarchy of information gathering and sharing. Through social media, journalists have better and wider means to assemble, process, and disseminate their news. Onyejelem and Aondoer (2024) aver that social media enhance creativity, customisation, efficiency, quality assurance, innovation, transdisciplinary applications, problem-solving abilities, and future-proofing capacities, requiring an understanding of the basic digital tools. So, journalists are no longer restricted by the rigidity and organisational structure of the conventional mass media, whose inherent spread is limited, thereby inhibiting the spread of journalistic news. Two decades ago, Robinson (2006), while citing Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) and Singer (2001), noted that communication and technology theorists contend that the Internet will change journalism and the nature of news. Social media have this observation.

Similarly, some social media users (non-journalists) have become self-made reporters using the new media technologies to engage in the work of information gathering and dissemination. Though this phenomenon has some negative implications on the ethical fabric of journalism, it has become an existential

reality that defines journalism practice in the world today. The above social media provided window, perhaps forms the reason for the observation that "...platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter and TikTok have become ubiquitous in the everyday media consumption behaviour of billions of citizens worldwide," (Hendrickx & Opgenhaffen, 2024, p.919). This has resulted in the situation where "the boundaries between publisher, producer, distributor, consumer and reviewer of content are blurring," Rice (1999, p.29) as referenced by McQuail (2010, p.140). Consequently, journalists' offerings and their seemingly traditional influence on the audience are changing rapidly. This is evident as social media usage has given birth to another well-known information purveyor – social media influencers who play pivotal roles in the message dissemination.

Conclusion

Social media are steadily and gradually putting a new identity and different dimensions to journalism as well as reshaping the vagaries of the profession across the world. This paper conceptualised a hypothetical social media communication model to throw light on the dynamic nature of digital interaction with its significance in contemporary journalism. It has been widely noted that social media sites, as revolutionary communication technologies, still have extensive impacts on modern journalistic practices, working conventions, audience interactions, as well as the ecology of popular communication in general. The multidimensional consequences of the phenomenon that cuts across linguistic, cultural, economic, relational, and socio-political lines explain why its involvement in the formation of current information landscapes must be subject to ongoing scholarly interrogation. The given model can be utilized to understand the mechanisms of digital communication in greater detail by providing a panoramic framework that represents the key interactional components of the social media sites. It is also useful to analyse the paradigm shifts underway, redefining journalistic practice through the trajectories of digital media platforms. Although the model is hypothetical, it forms the foundation of further empirical research that can provide support, refinement, and expansion of the elements. In a nutshell, this paper has once again confirmed the impossibility of considering journalism without the digitized systems through which communication is organized in society today. The current changes that social media introduces require not only reactive professional approaches but also further theoretical evolution for better comprehension. The hypothetical social media communication model formulated and presented herein, therefore, is a point of beginning for a wider intellectual discussion on the shifting frameworks of journalism in the digital era.

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Author's Contributions

Obiorah Edogor conceived the idea of this paper with his hypothetical social media communication model and wrote the first draft; while Njideka Ezeonyejiaku did the proofreading, Timothy Onyejelem made some inputs after the drafts, and Chinelo Uchendu did the proofreading after the inputs, and Ifeoma Obi reworked the whole paper based on the comments from the reviewers.

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The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest with any sources or persons from the beginning of this paper to the end of it.

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