

Original Article

Social Media's Dual Role: Facilitator of Public Discourse and Ethical Challenges in Democratic Societies

Judith Ngihbi, Ph.D.¹

¹ Department of Philosophy, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt – Nigeria

Article Info

Article history:

Received 12 March 2026

Received in revised form

29 May 2026

Accepted 7 June 2026

Available online 30 June 2026

Keywords: Democracy,
Media Ethics,
Misinformation, Public
Sphere, Social Media

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between social media and its responsibilities concerning truth, reason, and democracy. Social media includes internet platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, which facilitate communication, networking, and business promotion for vast numbers of individuals. These platforms function as crucial intermediaries between the public and governmental entities, acting as leaders, motivators, and informants vital to the cultivation of a robust democracy at all levels. In analyzing or interpreting situations, individuals often rely on their intrinsic moral compass to guide their actions, a principle described as ethics. While citizens are entitled to fulfill their social responsibilities, media outlets must adhere to ethical standards in the gathering and presentation of news, emphasizing objectivity and fairness in reporting. Media ethics delineate the expected moral conduct for media professionals. This paper posits that social media can nurture public trust and maintain credibility while avoiding the erosion of audience confidence; media practitioners must champion essential values such as reliability, accountability, fairness, truthfulness, and self-regulation. This paper concludes that the principles of media ethics are crucial for responsible journalism, aiding in the prevention of the misrepresentation of facts and the mitigation of conflicts of interest. Furthermore, it is imperative to promote equality under the law, truthfulness, accountability, and universal ideals within the media landscape.

Introduction

Today, social media and its numerous channels are integral to our cultural landscape and daily life. As multi-directional communication tools, social media platforms facilitate the exchange of information within an open system, which, if mismanaged, can rapidly amplify ethical shortcomings due to their billions of regular users and the constant release of new features. Public relations practitioners are confronted with novel challenges stemming from the speed, frequency, and open accessibility of communication via social media; these factors have intensified the necessity for heightened professional ethical responsibility. Through social media platforms, businesses, brands, agencies, and clients actively engage with their target audiences. However, this multi-source exchange, which emphasizes direct engagement, may lack the traditional media's system of balanced accuracy and verification. Consequently, if social media

content is not meticulously vetted and validated, it risks becoming unfiltered, leading to the dissemination of erroneous information and potentially dangerous situations.

Social media fosters a dynamic environment characterized by complex communication methods and real-time interactions geared toward selected audiences. Public relations professionals bear a responsibility to their audiences to maintain sincerity, openness, trustworthiness, and accuracy. They should endeavor to provide valuable social media content that fosters relationships of trust and enhances audience value. The ethical upkeep of the social media ecosystem is facilitated by promoting healthy and equitable competition among professionals, thereby fostering a vibrant community and industry. To avert ethical lapses, careful and deliberate use of social media as part of a public relations strategy is crucial. This paper aligns with the PRSA Code of Ethics, which all members of the Public Relations Society of America

Address correspondence to Judith Ngihbi, Ph.D. Department of Philosophy,
Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
Judith.ngihbi@ciwa.edu.ng (Dr. Judith Ngihbi).

(PRSA) are committed to upholding (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.).

The emergence of information technology and software standards in the early twenty-first century has revolutionized social networking tools such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, drastically altering the manner in which individuals share ideas (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.). Historically, computers have served as the foundations for various forms of social networking, from the military's ARPANET in the early 1970s to the development of Internet newsgroups, electronic mailing lists, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and additional services (Hardey, 2002). These systems evolved organically, contrasting with technologies designed to capitalize on user-generated content and collaborative materials within the social networking potential of the Internet. Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed interpersonal interactions, both online and offline, shaping how the Internet operates. Early adopters such as MySpace, LinkedIn, Bebo, and Facebook laid the groundwork for subsequent innovations like video-sharing sites such as YouTube, location-based services like Foursquare and Google Latitude, and interest-sharing platforms such as Pinterest (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). More recently, real-time content generation has become prevalent on mobile devices through services like SnapChat, where posts vanish after a predetermined duration. Additionally, real-time streaming platforms like Meerkat and Periscope have emerged, allowing content creators to broadcast live events in an unfiltered, raw manner. The communication industry continues to evolve alongside social media platforms and management tools, emphasizing the need for adherence to the foundational principles articulated in the PRSA Code of Ethics, which guides professionals in responsibly utilizing social media to best serve their clients, organizations, and the public at large (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.).

Ethics of Social Communication

Mass media has adeptly woven copyright into the very fabric of culture, transforming it into a cultural phenomenon in its own right. This phenomenon can be observed through the "water cooler effect," where media functions as a medium for communication, reflecting shared values and interests (Zephoria, 2005). Conversations often revolve around television shows, brands, and movies, illustrating the pervasive nature of media in our daily interactions.

Advertising, as a powerful force, permeates our cultural environment, interrupting television programming, overtaking magazines and newspapers, and unexpectedly integrating into movies, video games, and online reading. Consequently, advertising has become indistinguishable from daily life. At an individual level, discourse surrounding products infiltrates our interactions, seducing, teasing, instructing, cajoling, and influencing our relationships in profound ways. The symbolic attributes of products encompassing characters, settings, props, and humor have been firmly integrated into our cultural lexicon (Leiss et al., 2005).

The rising influence of social media has indisputably altered our attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles. It affects opinions across various demographics, including age, gender, and ethnicity. The fascination with social media platforms' capacities to facilitate discussion is palpable. Through numerous chat boxes and online forums, we have the ability to engage with multiple individuals simultaneously. While countless social networking sites exist, data shows that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Skype are among the most utilized. Tools like WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram enable instantaneous

sharing of ideas, photos, and videos. The ability to share images on platforms like Facebook is particularly significant, as it fosters interaction through likes, comments, and replies. Consider a scenario where an individual adds 4,000 new friends to their Facebook network and uploads a photograph. The intention behind this action is to share the image with a wider audience. As they accrue likes and comments, their popularity within the social media realm increases, highlighting societal acceptance as a prerequisite for online prominence. In the contemporary digital landscape, social approval has become essential for nearly every endeavor (Mukherjee, 2016).

Article Highlights

- **Social media's dual nature:** Platforms like Facebook and Twitter simultaneously enhance democratic participation and government accountability while magnifying misinformation, sensationalism, and privacy violations due to their speed, scale, and lack of traditional verification.
- **Truth as a foundational duty:** Journalists bear an ethical obligation to report accurately, yet face systemic pressures—budget cuts, tight deadlines, and self-serving sources—that complicate truth-telling, making transparency essential for public trust.
- **Commercial pressures distort discourse:** Media outlets' reliance on advertising commodifies audiences and prioritizes profitable demographics (e.g., millennials), incentivizing shallow, sensational content over substantive journalism.
- **"Paid news" undermines integrity:** Practices like red-envelope journalism (cash bribes for favorable coverage) and payola corrupt media credibility, eroding public confidence and hindering democratic progress, particularly in African contexts.
- **Media ethics as democratic guardians:** Upholding principles like accountability, fairness, self-regulation, and transparency is essential for social media to fulfill its "enlightenment role"—checking power, fostering informed citizenry, and preserving democratic values.

However, the personal information shared on social networking services often raises significant privacy concerns. Malicious hackers may gain unauthorized access to user profiles, obtaining private images and sensitive data. Upon registering on social media platforms, users typically agree to specific terms and conditions. Consequently, many violate these regulations and create fraudulent profiles using images sourced from various search engines or plagiarized material. Links shared on platforms like Facebook often lead to enticing deals or explicit content, commonly disseminated by hackers. Such actions compromise user profiles, allowing malicious entities access to personal data. Furthermore, there are significant security issues with platforms like Facebook, where uploaded photographs can easily be downloaded, leading to the creation of fake profiles that closely mimic the original. Although Orkut, an earlier social networking site, displayed private messages publicly, Facebook provides somewhat greater privacy controls. Nonetheless, one of Facebook's notable drawbacks is users' inability to delete their accounts entirely; while accounts can be disabled, they cannot be permanently erased.

Responsibility to Truth

The journalistic obligation to report the truth is a foundational tenet of media ethics. Virtually all codes of ethics emphasize that journalists must convey accurate information. This imperative is often inscribed on the cornerstones of reputable news organizations and serves as a guiding principle for responsible reporting. Credible language is an

essential aspect of any communicative endeavor. The age-old question posed by Pontius Pilate "What is truth?" continues to challenge individuals across diverse contexts (Christian et al., 2017). As societal concepts and worldviews shift, so too does the understanding of what constitutes truth. Journalists today must navigate the complexities of truth amidst dilemmas that arise within both African and Eurocentric scholarship and society. Journalists face considerable challenges, including budget constraints, tight deadlines, editorial expectations, and self-serving sources, all of which complicate their role as truth-tellers. Although not all conceivable aspects are addressed, the concept of truth extends beyond a simple fact-based definition (Bonhoeffer, 1955). Deception defined as a deliberate intention to mislead the antithesis of truth-telling. It is rare for a reporter or editor to intentionally present false information during the newswriting process. Nonetheless, the temptation to deceive during the information-gathering stage is ever-present, often simplifying the pursuit of information.

The push for enhanced transparency within media can be viewed as part of a broader global movement advocating for transparency across various fields, including corporate financial reporting, monetary policy, world politics, and food and tobacco product labeling. Several factors have contributed to the growing demand for transparency in contemporary society. In an era defined by increasing integration and interdependence, driven by democracy and globalization, comprehending human behavior and motivations becomes essential. The quest for transparency is not indicative of its worth being in doubt; rather, it reflects a recognition that the concept can be defined in various, sometimes vague, ways. Generally, however, transparency is widely regarded as beneficial and worthy of support (Wilkins & Christian, 2009). Transparency serves as a fundamental component of public accountability and is essential for fostering public trust in organizations, including the news media, government entities, and financial markets. Its role in promoting both the pursuit of truth and the accurate representation of information fundamentally underpins these principles. Overall, transparency is valued primarily for its practical advantages; it enhances accountability, bolsters credibility, and supports the dissemination of truthful information (Finel & Lord, 1999).

Promotion of Rational Discourse on Social Media

In Africa, media outlets operate primarily for profit. This implies that advertising plays a significant role in media material; indeed, for many outlets, advertising constitutes their sole source of income. While the reliance on advertisements can be a point of pride; allowing media to remain accessible at little or no cost to consumers without necessitating government funding, it also gives rise to contentious trade-offs. The commercial nature of media reflects the overarching profit motive characteristic of capitalist economies. In this framework, audiences are commodified and sold to advertisers, creating a landscape where not all audiences are considered equal. Advertisers target demographics likely to purchase products, possessing the necessary resources and willingness to spend. This obsession with appealing to specific audiences, notably millennials individuals born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s significantly influences the media environment. As digital natives, millennials have embraced internet-based television and consume content on platforms such as Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu, similar to their purchasing habits.

Challenges of Social Media

While social media offers numerous advantages, it also presents significant challenges. Utilizing social media for personal use is one matter; however, leveraging these platforms for marketing purposes

is quite another. For instance, a young person may be familiar with TikTok, but familiarity does not equate to proficiency in marketing on that platform (Christian et al., 2017). Even seasoned marketers often encounter challenges when attempting to transfer their knowledge from traditional marketing channels to platforms like Instagram or Twitter. Many companies fail in their social media marketing endeavors, either by neglecting to engage or by becoming entangled in unproductive busywork. Unaware of how social media functions, they overlook the astonishing marketing opportunities that exist within this vast and chaotic landscape. Investment in understanding how to effectively promote on social media is essential.

Currently, many marketers lament the diminishing organic reach on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, yet fail to explore and capitalize on the robust advertising options available on these networks. The adage "If you can't beat them, join them" holds true; however, many marketers resist collaborating with platform specialists who continuously devise innovative strategies to create engaging and effective advertisements. After all, platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Pinterest operate as businesses, not charities.

Social media has long grappled with issues related to the quality of information, content disregard, violations of people's rights and freedoms, professional incompetence, and conflicts of interest (Christian et al., 2017). Furthermore, the prevalence of sensationalism, dishonesty, and a lack of journalistic rigor has historically plagued these platforms. Despite the establishment of dedicated media ethics courses and various regulatory frameworks both formal and informal complaints persist, and public confidence in the profession erodes. Digitalization and globalization have transformed journalism, distorting ethical perceptions and contributing to the public's growing distrust of social media platforms (Christian et al., 2017).

According to Turner (2010), journalism increasingly favors sensationalism and shallow reporting over substantive content. The dissemination of misinformation and disinformation further erodes public trust. It has struggled to find reliable solutions for addressing these issues or methods of self-correction to maintain trust in the face of disruption. Therefore, it is imperative to reassess our ethical standards and determine their applicability to both human-generated and algorithm-driven journalistic outputs. We must ensure that these standards are transparent and relevant across all forms of journalism, not solely within traditional media institutions. In both local and global contexts, we require procedural flexibility alongside normative certainty. Most importantly, approach to media ethics must incorporate the perspectives and needs of the wider communities that journalism serves (Ward, 2021).

Addressing Paid News and Ethical Dilemmas

The practice of compensating journalists for favorable media coverage commonly referred to as "paid news" raises substantial ethical concerns. Also known as red-envelope journalism in Africa, this practice involves concealing or overtly disbursing monetary bribes in exchange for favorable narratives. The 1950s radio payola scandal in the United States epitomizes similar ethical dilemmas, where record labels paid disc jockeys to ensure airplay for their songs (Christian et al., 2017). While terms like "payments" and "gifts" are frequently employed to describe this practice in various regions, many countries like South Africa, Cameroon, and the United States are increasingly scrutinizing its implications within journalism. Despite variations in perspectives regarding the severity of the credibility issue associated with paid journalism, the consensus remains that the repercussions are dire. As articulated by Moegsien Williams of Independent

Newspapers, South Africa finds itself at a crucial yet precarious juncture in its development; all forms of corruption in media, politics, and business hinder the nation's progress (Moegsien, 2018). Listing the myriad distortions, evasions, and conspiracy theories proliferating in the current media landscape is an impossible task. The glamorization of egregious journalistic failures as acts of valor undermines the integrity of journalism and disserves the public, particularly to those dedicated journalists around the world who strive diligently to report the truth, often at considerable personal risk (Manjoo, 2015).

Advocacy for Democracy

In a democratic system of governance, representatives are chosen by the populace, empowering citizens with fundamental freedoms and rights, including those enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. James W. Carey, a respected media scholar, articulates these rights as follows: The First Amendment ensures that no individual can be coerced into practicing a particular religion, guarantees the right to free expression, protects the freedom to communicate ideas in written form, allows individuals to assemble for discussion, and prohibits the government from suppressing grievances against it (Carey, 2009). As active citizens, it is incumbent upon us to exercise our rights legally and in good faith. Consequently, the ideals of liberty, justice, individualism, and choice are often invoked to characterize the essence of democracy.

In established democracies, knowledge and education are foundational pillars of a free society. There is widespread agreement that a well-informed public opinion serves as a powerful catalyst, underpinning the very essence of legislative governance. Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of America, situated the role of a free press at the center of his political philosophy (Jefferson, 1899). He frequently referred to an independent information system as the liberty that safeguards all other liberties. The press enjoys a privileged position often referred to as the "enlightenment role" which has led to persistent calls from both internal and external stakeholders for responsible and ethical conduct. Jefferson lamented the potential for degradation that could arise when the press disseminates libelous or erroneous information. Similarly, Joseph Pulitzer warned that, without rigorous ethical standards, the media could fall short of its duty to the public and even become detrimental (Pulitzer, 1904).

The French moralist La Bruyère criticized news reporters for dwelling on trivial matters and thereby undermining their higher responsibilities. He aptly observed, "They spend a peaceful night reading a piece of news that they must discard when they awaken" (Bruyère et al., 1980). John Cleveland previously cautioned against conferring undue prestige upon those who produce inconsequential news, likening it to granting nobility to a mere daft creation a "Mandrake" rather than recognizing the true value of substantive journalism (Cleveland, as cited in Christian et al., 2017). Conversely, a commons-based perspective posits that a democratic media system necessitates essential components that remain independent from both corporate and governmental influences. This framework regards mass media as a public good, which society requires but that the market often fails to provide in adequate quantities or quality (Christian et al., 2017). In this context, government has a proactive role in promoting these goods, as demonstrated by the Founders' support of postal subsidies as a means to ensure information dissemination. Today, governments may be compelled to support networks or services that have become necessities rather than mere luxuries (Drushel, 2011).

Most vital is the responsibility of the journalistic and reporting functions of mass media to act as a check on both corporate and political power. Jarvis asserts that the pathway to restoring trust in government and technology corporations lies in incisive journalism's capability to challenge secrecy and compel influential institutions to uphold the principle of transparency (Jeffries, 2013). Such journalism not only restores public confidence but also fortifies the foundations of democracy by ensuring that information disseminated within society is both accurate and reflective of diverse perspectives. Thus, the media serves not merely as a conduit for information, but as an essential guardian of democratic values, fostering informed citizenry that can engage meaningfully in governance.

Conclusion

This paper looked at social media's dual function as a platform for public conversation and a cause of moral dilemmas in democracies. It reveals that while social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram increase public engagement and government accountability, their speed, scope, and financial incentives often magnify false information, sensationalism, and privacy violations. The lack of conventional verification methods undermines rational thought and public confidence. Therefore, responsible journalism and the health of democracy depend on upholding media ethics, which include dependability, justice, honesty, transparency, and self-regulation. In the end, social media must strike a balance between business interests, individual liberties, and the public good. To ensure that these platforms support democratic discourse rather than harm it, a common code of media ethics is essential. This code should serve as a guiding principle to ensure that all media operations prioritize ethical standards, enabling a more responsible and effective media landscape that empowers informed citizenry and enriches democratic discourse.

References

- Bonhoeffer, D. (1955). *Ethics*. Macmillan.
- Carey, J. W. (2009). The First Amendment and the communications revolution. In *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society* (pp. 33–51). Routledge.
- Christian, C. G., Fackler, M., McKee, K. B., & Woods, R. H., Jr. (2017). *Media ethics: Cases and moral reasoning* (10th ed.). Routledge.
- Drushel, B. E. (2011). 'I'm here to tell you it's OK': The FCC chairman, digital TV, and lying to the government. In B. E. Drushel & K. German (Eds.), *The ethics of emerging media: Information, social norms, and new media technology* (pp. 119–134). Continuum.
- Finel, B. I., & Lord, K. M. (1999). The surprising logic of transparency. *International Studies Quarterly*, 43(2), 315–339.
- Hardey, M. (2002). Life beyond the screen: Embodiment and identity through the internet. *The Sociological Review*, 50(4), 570–585.
- Jefferson, T. (1899). Address to Philadelphia delegates. In P. L. Ford (Ed.), *The writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Vol. 10). G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Jeffries, J. (2013, September 6). NSA surveillance: Welcome to the end of secrecy. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/06/nsa-surveillance-welcome-end-secrecy>
- La Bruyère, J. de, et al. (1980). *Responsibility in mass communication* (3rd ed.). Harper and Row.
- Leiss, W., Kline, S., Jhally, S., Botterill, J., & Asquith, K. (2005). *Social communication in advertising: Consumption in the mediated marketplace* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Manjoo, F. (2015, August 19). Ad blockers and the nuisance at the heart of the modern web. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/technology/personaltech/ad-blockers-and-the-nuisance-at-the-heart-of-the-modern-web.html>

Moegsien, W. (2018, March 12). South Africa at a crossroads: Corruption and the media. Independent Online. <https://www.iol.co.za>

Mukherjee, K. (2016). Comparison between social communication ethics and social media communication ethics: A paradigm shift. *Global Media Journal*, 7(2), 1–10.

Public Relations Society of America. (n.d.). Ethics and social media. <https://www.prsa.org>

Pulitzer, J. (1904). The school of journalism. *The North American Review*, 178(561), 641–680.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). <https://plato.stanford.edu>

Turner, G. (2010). Tabloidization and the journalism of the ordinary. In S. Allan (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to news and journalism* (pp. 508–518). Routledge.

Ward, S. J. A. (2021). *Handbook of global media ethics*. Springer.

Wilkins, L., & Christian, C. G. (2009). *The handbook of mass media ethics*. Routledge.

Zephoria. (2005, September 29). When media becomes... http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2005/09/29/when_media_beco.html

Declarations:

Author's Contribution:

- Conceptualization, data collection, interpretation, drafting of the manuscript and intellectual revisions
- The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

Conflict of Interest: NIL

Funding Sources: NIL
