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DEEPLY TROUBLING OR NOT: A CRITICAL DISCURSIVE APPRAISAL OF THE DIMENSIONS OF INTERNET'S RESHAPING OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Internet-based communication has remarkably modified and influenced the way information is shared in political, economic and social spheres. While this digital carrier amplifies infinite opportunities to interact in the media space, some scholars have expressed deep concerns over its usage to spread fake news, cause divisions and violate the ethics of journalism. It is against this backdrop that the present paper seeks to deeply evaluate the extent to which the Internet has transformed communication in dimensions that evoke an unresolved dilemma. This work draws on the public sphere and network society theories to offer perspectives on the intriguing subject. Findings reveal the Internet as possessing innate constructive and disruptive capacity to impact communication in significant ways. Using illustrations from Nigeria, it is argued that while the Internet poses serious risk factors relating to misinformation, toxic online engagements and algorithmic polarization, it however widens democratic participation, citizen journalism and information access. Technology in itself is less indicated to account for the troubling aspects of Internet-mediated communication than structural factors do, in form of gaps associated with digital literacy, platform algorithms, regulatory efficiency, and socio-economic equilibrium. Addressing these challenges requires holistic measures to foster responsible platform governance, improved digital literacy and institutional safeguards to media practices.

Keywords: Internet, democratic participation, echo chamber, network society.

Introduction

The Internet and its appurtenances have tremendously transformed and recalibrated the world of communication. In an era that has marked a normative shift from the centralized and strict gatekeeping processes that characterize the traditional media systems, the mechanisms of the new digital platforms have liberalized and democratized communication to a point where the line between content creation and consumption is blurred (Bruns, 2018). The new media architecture, with its sophisticated technologies, enable contents to be produced, distributed and accessed at a rapid speed and scale never previously witnessed (Castells, 2010; Baym, 2015). At the heart of the affordances of the Internet is a plethora of social networking platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X (Twitter) which has significantly altered the way and manner communication transpires in contemporary societies (Van Dijck, 2013). It is now far much easier for the global public to share ideas and communicate

interactively, involve in political debates, engineer concerted action, and widely disseminate information beyond the limitations of networks and geographies (Shirky, 2008).

The remarkable rate at which the developing world is embracing Internet penetration and mobile communication technologies has transformed the media ecosystem (Castells, 2015). Nigeria is one of the countries where the adoption of digital devices, smartphones and mobile broadband has recorded a rapid increase in both urban and rural areas (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). A report published few years ago by the National Communications Commission estimated Nigeria to have over 107 million Internet users, making the country one of the largest digital markets in Africa (NCC, 2023). This is majorly accounted for by the large and growing youthful population which ranks among the highest in the world. These young people are intensely plugged to the digital culture as active smartphone users and players in the bustling social media and hi-tech space.

There is a raging debate among scholars regarding the impact and consequences that have trailed the frenetic rise of digital communication media technologies and applications. Whereas the early proponents of the Internet Revolution have lauded its far-reaching capacity in democratising communication, critics easily point to some troubling and dysfunctional developments that have come with this innovation. These include indiscriminate purveyance of fake news and false information, political polarization, toxic online social relational engagements, and a decline in the professional and ethical conduct of journalism (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018; McNair, 2017; Sunstein, 2017). While the Internet expands information access, it has also blurred the distinction between professional journalism and unverified user-generated contents (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). With audience attention increasingly shifting towards the cyberspace and digital platforms, this has caused seismic disruptions to the economic and institutional pedestals of the traditional media industry. One of the clear evidences of this revolution is visible in the radical dimensioning of advertising strategies, processes and practices to expand the revenue nets of diverse players within the new media ecosystem.

Nigeria provides an interesting and important context for examining the implications of digital communication transformation as a result of the interplay between several underlying and contending structural factors. Digital literacy levels remain uneven across the geopolitical zones and demographic groups thereby exacerbating the vulnerabilities of the people to misinformation (Akinwale & Popoola, 2019). There is also the other vital issue of economic inequalities and infrastructural disparities which affect access to reliable Internet connectivity (NCC, 2023). Furthermore, the regulatory frameworks governing digital communication remain contested as government makes frantic efforts to censor online media contents, a move that has generated strong debates about the freedom of expression and digital rights (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

In the context of this work, and for the purpose of operational clarity, the term Internet is used interchangeably with digital media and new media as opposed to the traditional or mainstream media which denotes the older form of the media that served as a precursor to the Internet.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

In its attempt to unravel the intriguing phenomenon of the functionality dynamics of the Internet, this work adopts a dual-outcome conceptual framework that captures the ability of the digital media to simultaneously generate both positive and negative outcomes in a degree that is as empowering as it is problematic. This work conceptualizes the Internet as a communication infrastructure rather than a deterministic force. Therefore, its effects on the society is largely viewed to depend on the interplay between technological features, institutional structures, and user practices (Castells, 2015; Fuchs, 2017). These three critical factors form the structural drivers that shape the dual outcomes of Internet-mediated communication. Firstly, this paper starts with the features of today's digital media technology which provide the avenue for content creation and consumption. It has helped facilitate access to global information. The social media and other digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and X (Twitter) rely on algorithmic systems designed to maximize and optimize engagements. This follows an established, programmed pattern that goes beyond the control of the source and receiver. So these algorithms curate and filter content in such a way as to influence which information becomes visible and the one that remains marginalized (Pariser, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). On the second driver that has to do with institutional structures, it is a known fact that media systems operate within societies where political institutions design regulatory frameworks that determine and prescribe the information directions of digital communication (McQuail, 2010). In countries like Nigeria, factors such as disparities in digital literacy, social infrastructure, regulatory uncertainties, and economic inequalities shape the communication environment (Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Aondover, Igwe, & Akin-Odukoya, 2024). Lastly, the third driver within the interplaying variables has to do with user practices essentially and posits that the behaviour of users within digital networks plays a critical and major role in shaping communication outcomes. Users can utilize digital platforms for constructive engagements like education, collaboration, and activism. But they may also employ the same means to spread misinformation, troll or harass others (Shirky, 2008; Sustein, 2017). In summation, this conceptual framework therefore supports the central argument that Internet-mediated communication outcomes are socially constructed rather than technologically predetermined.

Manuel Castells and Jürgen Habermas propounded the network society theory and public sphere theory, respectively, to explain the workings, nature and capacity of the media. The works of these two scholars provide a potent and complimentary foundation for the understanding of the dual functionality of the Internet in the sense of how they theorize communication, power, participation, and structure in modern societies.

Habermas in his theory depicts the media as the public sphere: a domain of open, rational-critical discourse among citizens. However, for the purpose of this work, this theory is extended and adapted to incorporate the tenets of the *digital public sphere* which addresses the concerns of online media and communication systems. This essentially offers a normative benchmark for assessing or evaluating the Internet's democratic potential and distortions. On the positive side, the expanded public sphere which the Internet provides as a digital information superhighway facilitates deliberative democracy (through online discussions, civic engagement, and activism); offers accessibility and inclusivity (in participation beyond geographical and cultural constraints); and deepens decentralized communication (by reducing the gatekeeping propensity of the traditional media). These factors align with

Habermas' ideal of communicative rationality where discourse is inclusive and oriented towards consensus (Habermas, 1989; Dahlberg, 2001). On the negative side, however, he warned of the colonization of the public sphere by powers and market forces. This applies to the Internet from the standpoints of commercialization and algorithmic control (through the distortion of discourse); misinformation and echo chambers (vectors that undermine rational debate); and inequalities in access and voice (factors that limit genuine participation). This conversely lends credence to Habermas' denoting of the Internet as a coveted communicative space that simultaneously enables and inhibits democratic communication (Papacharissi, 2002).

Similarly, the tenets of Castells' network society theory enunciate certain structural and technological logic that provide conceptual underpinning to the dual functionality of the Internet. This is observed in his positive thesis of Networked Empowerment which posits that power in contemporary society is organised through networks. This favourably conceptualizes the Internet as an enabler of mass self-communication (offering platforms for individuals to produce and distribute content globally); enhancer of connectivity, information flow, and social mobilization; and anchor to horizontal communication structures (that empower marginalized voices). These offerings also reinforce the perception of the role of the Internet as a driver of social transformation and participatory culture (Castells, 2009). However, on the downside of his networked power and control postulations which aptly describe the new media's negative potentials, Castells emphasize the existence of programmed networks and power asymmetries. This includes factors like dominant actors (across states and corporations); the dangers of how surveillance, data commodification, and digital capitalism shapes communication; and network exclusion that creates digital divides and marginalization. Thus, the Internet becomes a domain of both empowerment and domination, thereby reinforcing its dual-functional nature (Castells, 2010).

The integrative value of the two theories referenced above as anchors to this work is evident. Habermas' public sphere provides a normative dimension to the phenomenon under study in an analytical sense of evaluating the quality of Internet-mediated communication in regards to the enhancement of audience rationality, inclusivity and deliberation. On the other hand, and complimentarily, Castells' network society weighs in with a structural/technological dimension to interrogate and deeply explain the architecture and power dynamics of communication networks in relation to the discussed phenomenon.

Literature review

The Internet is a potent tool of communication which has divided opinions and stirred debates among scholars in regards to the degree, nature and dimensions of its influence in the society. One of its most widely acknowledged contributions is the democratization of information production and delivery. Unlike the traditional or mainstream media systems which is characterized by editorial gatekeeping, digital media platforms enable people to create, publish and disseminate information without institutional restrictions (Shirky, 2008; Bruns, 2018). In Nigeria, online news channels and social media have made it possible for the emergence of citizen journalism and alternative media outlets (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). It is now easier for people who have access to digital media technologies to share eyewitness accounts, document events, and challenge dominant narratives within the national information ecosystem. Those who were previously denied access by the conventional media

due to geographical limitations ocan now engage in national debates and conversations with the resources afforded them in this era of the Internet and digital communication (Akinwale & Popoola, 2019). The citizens have become increasingly galvanized for activism and political participation through the instrumentality of the social media which enable rapid civic engagement and mobilisation (Tufekci, 2017). This was evident during the End SARS protests when digital media outlets played a pivotal role in the organization, information dissemination, logistical coordination, mobilization, and the drawing of the attention of the international community to the unsavoury, incidences of police brutality (Ibrahim, 2021). Internet technologies have also been found very effective and handy in crisis communication and disaster management. The social media platforms are used to rapidly and virally convey emergency information and facilitate real-time coordination among communities (Houston et al., 2015). In Nigeria, digital communication channels have been deployed for public health messaging during epidemics and to send warnings to the public in times of environmental emergencies (Yamah & Folorunsho, 2024). There has noticeably been a prevalence and proliferation of misinformation in the media space since the advent of the Internet. To effectively counter this menace, digital fact-checking organizations and verification initiatives have been activated globally (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). Locally, Africa Check and Dubawa Monitor flag fake news and other misinformation contents circulating on the social media and provide verified information to the Nigerian public. Cumulatively, these reported developments not only demonstrate that Internet-mediated communication can strengthen democratic accountability, empower citizens and challenge traditional power structures; they also suggest that the digital communication ecosystem is gradually developing self-correcting mechanisms. That is on the positive side.

Conversely, the Internet has cast a serious blemish on, and menacing shadows over, the media landscape in ways that are deeply troubling. One of the most significant and rooted concerns about this technological media innovation is the speed at which it enables the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). False information and fake news are easily circulated on digital platforms through a maze of users, at a rate and rapidity that overwhelm the responses of fact-checking mechanisms (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp enable misinformation to transpire within private networks where external moderation is relatively constrained, thereby making the effective interventions of fact-checkers and regulators difficult (Resende et al., 2019; Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Studies in Nigeria reveal that fake information circulation on social media significantly influences public perceptions and political attitudes (Esiobu, Ekwugha, & Ukoha, 2024). This issue became particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when the public made all kinds of misleading claims about the virus across the digital media space (Obi-Ani, Anikwenze, & Isiani, 2020). Another troubling trend involves the emergence of algorithmically driven echo chambers. It is a known fact that algorithms are utilized by social media platforms to curate, filter, personalize and prioritize content that maximizes user engagement (Pariser, 2011). These algorithms regularly feed users with information consistent with their interests and existing beliefs thereby deepening ideological divisions and political polarization (Sunstein, 2017; Cinelli et al., 2021). The incidence of cyberbullying and other related crimes is also in the ascendancy on the Internet despite legal promulgations by relevant arms of the State to curb this vice. Digital anonymity (the absence of face-to-face interaction) and reduced social accountability fuel hostile online behaviour. Scholars describe this phenomenon as the online disinhibition effect, which accounts for why some persons

exhibit aggressive and toxic communication in digital environments (Suler, 2004). People of all professional backgrounds are not immune to this form of cyber-attacks. In Nigeria, journalists, activists, and politically exposed persons frequently experience online harassment, trolling, and coordinated attacks on social media platforms (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017). Most remarkably, the rise in citizen journalism and user-generated contents have weakened the traditional gatekeeping responsibilities of professional journalists. Historically, the news industry is governed by media organisations which control the selection, verification, and dissemination of information to the public. However, digital platforms now enable individuals to publish information directly to global audiences without editorial oversight (Bruns, 2018). These days, professional journalists increasingly compete with bloggers, influencers, and citizen journalists in a fragmented media landscape where factual and credible information circulates alongside unverified claims (McNair, 2017; Nielsen & Graves, 2017). This transformation deepens concerns and increases trust deficit in news institutions and the erosion of professional journalism standards.

Discussion, analysis and implications

Any objective discussion on how the Internet has deeply reshaped communication in ways that are troubling or not would most necessarily elicit the definition of structural and conceptual pillars upon which the elemental parameters are appraised and analysed for possible implications. Based on the established thesis and position of this paper which conceptualizes the Internet as a communication infrastructure rather than a deterministic force, it was assigned a dual-outcome functionality role whose effects depend largely on the interaction between technological features, institutional structures, and user practices. This translates to the three structural drivers that shape the outcomes of Internet communication. On the first driver component that deals with features in Internet's architecture, findings reveal that while it gives the public unfettered access to global information, there is the troubling part of technologically filtered and curated content creating algorithmic polarization and echo chambers. The second driver element addressed the issue of institutional structures which posits that political institutions, media systems, and regulatory frameworks significantly influence how digital communication operates within societies (Adebajo & Akinsola, 2025; Oloyede, 2024). Yet, in a developing country like Nigeria with visible gaps in digital literacy, regulatory uncertainties, and economic power disparities, problems arise which create media distrust. The last structural driver in the mix highlights the fundamental issue of user practices and ethical challenges around Internet-mediated communication (Iloh et al., 2026; Inobemhe et al., 2024). The liberal space engendered by digital media platforms has spawned citizen journalists, galvanized constructive engagements such as activism, and swarmed the media space with all kinds of user-generated contents. On the downside, the unrestricted and uncensored digital ecosystem has increased incidences of fake news purveyance, misinformation, trolling, cyber stalking, cyberbullying, scams and other toxic online activities. These realities clearly buttresses this paper's central argument that internet communication outcomes are socially constructed rather than technologically predetermined. Generally, there should be a deliberate and strategic effort to address the interactive components of the structural drivers which cover the affordances and design logic of the platform architecture; institutional gaps in policies, governance and infrastructure; and factors associated with user practices such as digital literacy, behaviour and culture.

In the final analysis, a graphic illustration of the interaction between the structural drivers and how this determines communication outcomes is highlighted below:

Structural driver	Interaction Effect	Nigerian Reality
Platform Architecture + User Practices	Algorithm + low literacy	Rapid spread of fake news
Institutional Context + Platform Architecture	Weak regulation + powerful platforms	Limited accountability
Institutional Context + User Practices	Poor infrastructure + low literacy	Digital exclusion

The broader implications arising from the matrix of interactions and outcomes predicated on the identified structural drivers are evident. A situation where Internet-hosted platform designs and architecture focus more on optimizing user-engagement (clicks, shares, likes, and virality) at the expense of information quality leads to high incidence of sensational and misleading contents, online trolling, hate speech and other harmful contents. In a fragile information environment like Nigeria, the design logic of platform architecture needs to shift from "attention economy" to "information integrity". Weak platform governance structures and accountability have dire implications for national security, sustenance of democracy and social cohesion (Umeh et al., 2025). Moderation laxity and algorithmic amplification exhibited by digital platforms exacerbate these risks. However, emerging research has shown that AI-assisted and explainable interface designs which offer multi-source verification and fact-checking tools can improve the ability of users to critically evaluate information credibility and minimize the spread of misinformation on Internet (Adeoye et al., 2025; Sangwan & Makitalo, 2025). Another implication as regards institutional structures in developing countries reveals a system that is characterized by weak regulation, poor infrastructure, and limited enforcement capacity. This limits the effectiveness of Internet communication. Research has shown that effective communication systems depend on robust governance frameworks that balance innovation and accountability (Napoli, 2021; De Nardis & Hackl, 2020). Any environment where regulatory systems are struggling to catch up with the pace of technological advancement and revolution is liable to experience the kind of problems prevalent in developing countries (Kitchin, 2021). Nigeria's institutional landscape produces uneven outcomes; while digital communication expands participation, regulatory gaps and infrastructural deficits limit its developmental impact. Despite noticeable improvements made in the country's governance institutions and digital communication, the existence of structural gaps remain and raise serious developmental issues (Agbaka, 2025). In trying to solve this problem, improved investments in broadband and power infrastructure is imperative. Efforts should be made also towards co-regulatory governance where government collaborates with digital platforms and the civil society. The regulatory and policy framework needs to strengthen data protection and digital rights enforcement because findings reveal that robust digital governance positively impacts efficiency of communication, transparency and accountability (Ishola, Maramura, & Gumbo, 2025). A discourse on the implications inherent in user practices is vital to the understanding, contextualization and mitigation of challenges that threaten Internet-mediated communication. This is because how individuals engage with digital media is central to determining communication quality and fidelity. Scholarly evidence shows that spread of misinformation does not only stem from

inefficient platform design but also as a result of low digital literacy levels and weak verification practices among users (Hargittai, 2021; Nygren & Guath, 2022). A central implication of Internet-driven communication in Nigeria is the urgent need to institutionalize digital media literacy as a national priority. Low levels of digital literacy has been implicated as significantly contributive to misinformation spread, weak civic engagement and poor information evaluation skills (Alazigha & Amanawa, 2024; Agbaka, 2025). Similar research findings indicate that digitally literate users exhibit greater propensity and awareness to rightly frame messages, counter misinformation or fake news, and mobilize participation effectively (Ajaegbu & Ajaegbu, 2024). This view is corroborated by the work of Apata et al (2025) which highlights the need for digital citizenship education and media literacy competencies to be introduced in Nigerian classrooms. Improving user practices requires a paradigm shift from access-driven participation to competence-driven engagement, particularly in developing contexts.

Drawing from the above discussions, analysis and arguments on the implications of the interactive structural drivers that predict Internet communication governance and outcomes, an attempt is made here to construct an integrated solution framework to highlight improvements that must need occur simultaneously across all the three drivers:

Structural driver	Key problem	Solution
Platform Architecture	Algorithmic amplification	Ethical design + verification tools
Institutional Context	Weak governance & Infrastructure	Adaptive regulation + digital investment
User practices	Low digital literacy	Education + critical engagement

The foregoing graphic illustration indicates that improving Internet communication to balance its dual-outcome capabilities in Nigeria requires a multi-level structural approach that addresses the identified areas of concern and importance.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is an incontestable fact that Nigeria's communication environment increasingly reflects a hybrid media system where traditional media and digital platforms interact, compete, and complement each other. However, this work critically focuses on the dynamics of Internet-mediated communication to unravel the dimensions of its power in ways deeply troubling or not. This interrogation significantly reveals the Internet as possessing functional implications that are both positive and negative. Advancing this balanced thesis, it was posited that the Internet has reshaped communication through the democratization of the media space, social networking, fostering of inclusion, global connectivity, and instantaneous information delivery, among other advantages. But, it has also introduced significant challenges relating to misinformation, algorithmic polarization, cybercrime and toxic online engagement. As the dual-outcome framework highlighted, the impact of Internet communication in Nigeria is context-dependent, socially and structurally constructed rather than technologically predetermined. The challenges arise primarily from institutional, economic, and cultural dynamics of the host community. In conclusion and final analysis, therefore, these outcomes and realities have profound implications for strategic and effective policy interventions to improve institutional governance, infrastructure, education (civic digital literacy), and user

practices. The internet is a coveted communication space with capabilities to empower and destabilize the society depending on how the structural forces are managed.

Generally, to improve Internet communication in Nigeria – similar to other developing contexts – requires a multi-level structural alignment to make platforms become more accountable; institutions to become more adaptive and inclusive; and users to become more critically empowered. In specific terms, this paper recommends:

- Robust platform accountability - technology companies should develop stronger systems for detecting harmful and fake information contents while maintaining protections for freedom of expression.
- Hybrid media systems – the collaboration between traditional media institutions and digital communication platforms will help to strengthen verification processes and improve information credibility
- Enhanced digital media literacy – governments and educational institutions should integrate digital literacy into the school curricula to help citizens develop competencies in order to evaluate online information critically.
- Research and monitoring – continuous research on digital communication practices is necessary to understand emerging threats, risks and opportunities within evolving media ecosystems.

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