

Ethical Journalism under an Evolving Digital Landscape— Challenges and Opportunities

Lei Cao

*Revelle College, University of California, La Jolla, USA
Lcao0201@126.com*

Abstract. Technologies revolving information and communication are evolving at an astonishing rate nowadays. People surfing the internet can obtain a wide range of information within a short period of time, which would otherwise be unachievable with a pen-and-paper approach. However, coming with this convenience is the concern about mis/disinformation and biases. This concern is especially strong when the major source of news becomes online media platforms with a diverse range of user generated contents and stakeholders. Centered on this topic, the subject of this study is the relationship between platform governance and responsible journalism. This article covers the ethical responsibility of social media platforms under the evolving digital landscape, their ethical and legal implications on regulating news coverage, and the challenges, as well as opportunities, involving platform regulations. The aim of this research is to review similar studies in the past, and to provide pointers for more in-depth research in the future. After reviewing relevant literature, this study finds that an increasing public demand on accountability has been placed on social media platform companies within the past five years. The conception for platform governance and regulation has also shifted from self-regulation dominated to policy-co-regulation dominated.

Keywords: Journalism, Mis/Disinformation, Media Responsibility, Platform Governance

1. Introduction

The advances of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), especially the use of mobile devices, have changed news consumption fundamentally [1]. This has a profound impact on the news industry in general, since traditional news media are gradually replaced by digital platforms, especially social media platforms [2]. Because of this, the audience's role is becoming more dominant in providing news [3].

However, compared to traditional news delivery, contents delivered through digital platforms have the following qualities. Information is exchanged in real-time, the content providers are often non-professional journalists, and influencers are playing an increased role in the platform ecosystem [4]. These traits can easily lead to mis/disinformation and manipulative contents online, which hinders effective information acquisition by the audiences. Moreover, since the explosion of mis/disinformation online around the early 2020s, plus an ongoing trend of increasing right-wing presence online, the issue of online platforms' responsibility for the contents posted has fallen under

increased public scrutiny [5-6]. This study reviews this trend of public attention, from academics, platform users, and policy makers alike, under the theme of an evolving media ecosystem dominated by online platforms and marked by contents of uneven quality and intention.

This study is meaningful in that, because of the continuing evolution of ICT and social media diversity, researchers from communication research and from public policy are taking a keen interest in the accountability of social media platforms, their governance, and their implications on the traditional ethical standards of responsible news. This study is to observe whether a trend exists that holds platforms increasingly accountable for the information posted by their users [6]. This trend also shifts the conception of platform governance from self-regulation dominated regulations by the platform's internal regulation, to policy co-regulation dominated [7]—policies from both governments and non-government organizations. Given this trend, one can expect increasing attention from researchers and public policy makers on the responsibility of online platforms and their users.

2. Key concepts and their background

The discussion of the present topic includes two critical concepts. To explain the greater social implications of the evolving news media environment, the regulation and governance of digital platforms, and the standard for responsible journalism practice have to be explored.

2.1. Platform regulation and governance

Platform regulation and governance are distinct from internet regulation and governance. The governance of the internet exists as a broader category, but the boundary is increasingly blurred due to the platforms' domination of the internet [7]. However, it is important to note that, thus far, the majority of the internet content moderation is done by the platforms. Digital platforms have grown to a degree that “a relatively small number of digital platforms are the Internet.” [6]

Platforms also have their internal rules to manage their user bases, but these rules are sometimes contingent or even contradictory, and the rules are lacking in transparency. Furthermore, platforms also have their own rankings of contents posted on them, so they are effectively involved in providing contents to their users. Because of this, recent discussion argues that the digital platforms cannot hide behind the fact that they are content distributors but not the providers, and that they have to be regulated by similar standards compared to the standards applied to traditional media companies [6].

It is also important to note that there have always been efforts in regulating digital platforms. Despite the diversity of the current online environment and the problematic nature of some of the contents on digital platforms, one cannot say that digital platforms are thus far not subjected to any regulation. Platforms are by themselves “already intensively regulated” [8], and are “subject to the laws not just of their home countries, but also of the other countries” [6].

So, being “the focal points of control” [6] for information distribution, regulating digital platforms can be an effective way of regulating problematic contents online. Although regulating platforms does not automatically regulate the information on the internet, platforms' control over the internet makes regulating them a more concrete step in regulating online information.

2.2. Standards for responsible journalism

Although users on digital platforms are not professionals in the news industry, and it might be too stringent in holding them to the same standards required of professional journalists, an ethical journalism standard can be a guide to how users and platforms should behave.

The most discussed concept is accountability. When discussing the ethics of the news media, there is an apparent conflict between the right to express and the right to receive [5]. The majority of the standards are about the “procedural requirements” of news media, which denote the duties that should be performed by professional journalists and editors. However, the users are more interested in the objective truth of the information. Applying this to the digital platforms, they will have to find a balance between satisfying the users who post contents and the ones who view them.

A commonly used standard in assessing media accountability is transparency [9], but the concept is different when applied online. A critical difference is that, unlike traditional news networks, the reporters on the platforms are not employed by them. Their information and privacy also need to be respected, from both an ethical and a business strategy perspective. So, the transparency required of traditional media might not be applicable to the news outlets on digital platforms.

3. Responsibility and accountability in the digital era

3.1. The rise of citizen journalism and its implications on media standards

Ever since the popularity of social media, news consumption has been dominated by digital platforms. This has profound implications on how people receive information.

Traditional news media such as television and printed press releases are gradually replaced by more timely and more diverse reports and stories on social media [2-4]. What’s more, digital platforms are not held by the same standard compared to media companies when it comes to information published on them, because of a distinction between the provider and the distributor of information [6]. Thus, it is still largely users who are responsible and are held accountable for information posted online [4]. In effect, instead of the platforms, the legal and ethical burden of traditional media companies fall to the users of digital platforms.

However, this means that the responsibility of the digital platforms is disproportionate to their power. Tech companies behind the platforms are very politically active, and are influencing public policy decisions on topics such as employment, climate, and immigration policies [8]. They exert a strong control over policy making, either by direct lobbying for their interests in different governments, or by a more subtle influence on public opinion. In general, though, their political participation has been moving towards a “communications deregulation” [6, 8], that is, policies that align with their business interests. This makes the platform companies’ power of control run deeper than simply being the mediator of internet communication.

Another potential impact of this is that the rapid online information exchange might promote an increasingly pessimistic worldview, more so than what the world actually is. The subject of “negativity bias” has been central to the study of the influence of media contents on people’s (unhealthy) behavior [1, 10, 11]. The key theme of this subject matter is that, people exposed to more negative reports in the media, like those related to violent crime and terrorism, might develop a more negative mindset because they believe they can be victimized. This brings about a heightened “egotropic anxiety” [10], which might lead to an increased social indifference, or worse, to an extremist mindset. Ordinarily, people are more attracted to negative news [11], so the industry cuddles its users’ wishes. This is especially serious on social media platforms, given the fact that the

spreading of negativity does not stop at the receiver of negative news reports. The users of social media platforms can spread this negative mentality to others on the same platform. To make matters worse, the users on digital platforms might also have their ulterior motives in spreading these negative reports, whether they are extremists or activists.

3.2. Common challenges in platform governance and regulation

Despite the pressing need, and the increased voice calling for a more external platform regulation, challenges remain to make an effective and generalized social policy difficult.

Technical issues revolve around how to treat accountability itself and accountability in light of media transparency. Some of the traditional rules and regulations are difficult to apply to the users of digital platforms, and are reluctant to be applied to the platforms themselves. For example, traditional media companies can have editors and moderators preview publications before releasing them into their channels. However, social media updates at a much faster rate than traditional news channels, which makes it “impossible for platforms to pre-moderate, or review it all in advance” [6]. Attempts at using machine learning and algorithms can and have already been made, but “machine controls will never be a complete solution” due to the human factors involved in content creation and consumption [6].

Demanding transparency of either the users of digital platforms, or the platforms themselves, is also challenging in a practical way. As previously mentioned, companies might not want to overly disclose information related to their users due to either ethical or business concerns. Also, if a platform company uses mainly algorithmic means for its content moderation, demanding transparency can be seen as demanding the company to release critical trade secrets. Moreover, transparency can sometimes be considered more as a spectrum but less like a functional standard [9]. It will then be even more challenging to find a rule of transparency applicable to the diverse user backgrounds of digital platforms.

The biggest challenge is probably a conceptual one. There has been a general public unwillingness to push for an external regulation of platforms. “The pervasive and ongoing influence of the normative ideal of the open internet” has been resisting any conception of an external regulation of digital platforms [8]. The relatively strong economic power and technological superiority shared by major tech companies also make it difficult for public policy makers to make a move against them.

4. From self-regulation to co-regulation

4.1. Flaws of platform self-regulation

The flaws that existed in platform self-regulation have made it less attractive in the eyes of the general public, academics, and that of the policy makers. The focus for discussing platform regulation and governance has shifted to that prefer platform self-regulation to a co-regulatory scheme done by platforms, users, external organization, and governments.

Because of the platform’s multicultural nature, their self-regulation policies “have tended towards light touch, generic policy-making” that can satisfy a more diverse user community and be applied to machine moderators [6]. However, these regulation policies by platforms are often “shock-led”, and can “result in inconsistent, sometimes contradictory, content standards”. This makes platform self-regulation an ineffective and reactionary “regulation by public apology” [8].

Also, there is an increased concern that the tech companies are not adequately representing public interests, given the fact that the problem is rooted in platform power itself [8]. Public interests are more aligned to the objective truth of news reports [5], which is what platform users are expecting to see. In contrast, platforms are only fulfilling a rather weak legal procedural duties in regulating their contents through terms of service and content guidelines, based on rules that by themselves are not accountable and transparent to the public [6].

4.2. An external co-regulation framework

Due to the issues of platform power and platform self-regulation, public interest is now leaning towards a co-regulation framework of platform governance. A collaboration between tech companies and fact-checking organizations can provide new opportunities in providing more responsible contents on digital platforms [5].

There can be, and have already been, fact-checking partnerships and incentives for quality journalism to platform users. For instance, platforms have their own ranking method for contents posted on them. They are also actively curating contents and recommending high-quality contents to their users. These rankings can be outsourced to external fact-checkers, and platforms can promote truthful contents by rewarding their users for providing them [5]. Although transparency can always be a problem in the procedures employed by fact-checking organizations, this is at least a move in the right direction against mis/disinformation.

The users are not exactly powerless in this regard. They can form their own networks, comparable to networks of traditional journalists, “to moderate, guide and facilitate news-based public debate” [12]. This is effective in regulating the digital environment “bottom-up”.

4.3. The positive roles of “regulative state”

In the present internet ecosystem dominated by platform powers, the power of nation-states is especially potent in regulating platforms externally.

Firstly, it “has both the will and the capacity to regulate in the public interest” [8]. Even as a fact, the power of external internet governing bodies “is entirely contingent upon the tacit or explicit support of the major nations”. Powerful governing bodies such as the European Union [5, 6] and the governments of Australia and Canada [2] are already making moves in this direction.

Secondly, the reaction against a stronger official regulation from nation-states is based on a myth of the “open-internet”, which unfortunately “has not survived platformization” [8]. The unfounded fear that “equates state action towards digital platform companies with creeping authoritarianism” is largely due to platform companies instilling their own interests into public ideology. At the same time, the general public does not nearly have enough lobbying power, nor the technological know-how, when compared to the major tech companies in protecting their interest. Because of this, it is a tremendous opportunity for activists “to seek renewal of the regulatory state”. “The deconstruction of the regulatory state”, which many tech companies wish, “can never effectively serve the collective and shared interests”.

5. Conclusion

The current distribution of news and information is dominated by digital platforms, so the governance and regulation of the internet done to and by the platforms have fallen under increased

public scrutiny. There exists a growing trend that the public's eyes have shifted from endorsing platform independence to platform accountability.

In general, there is an increase in the belief that tech companies that own the platforms should be held to the same standard as media companies, since some of their practices are effectively the same. Moreover, since the platforms are curating and promoting the contents posted on them, and they are also contracting their own contents, they can no longer be imagined as innocent bystanders to the potentially harmful contents posted online.

However, challenges remain in how the public can effectively regulate the platforms and information on them. The traditional role of media transparency and accountability will have to be reimagined in light of the less professional nature of platform users, and the difference in the business model between platform companies and media companies. At last, an opportunity exists in a better and more effective platform regulation and governance, relying on a hybrid of self-regulation and external supervision. The supervisor's role can be fulfilled by external fact-checking organizations and platform users, but perhaps more effectively by the nation-states where those platform companies operate.

The limit of this study is that it does not cover case studies on examples of different platform regulations and their effects on platform contents (e.g., their diversity or their truthfulness). As a result, a more comprehensive literature review can be done in the future on this research subject. More case studies can also be done in the future in assessing the effectiveness and shortcomings of the ongoing development of public policies in regulating information on digital platforms.

References

- [1] Spielvogel, Ines, Kevin Koban, and Jörg Matthes. 2024. "How News Consumption in Modern Media Landscapes Relates to Threats Perceptions and Fears in Public Spaces. A Scoping Review." *Journal of Risk Research* 27 (3): 458–80. DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2024.2350717.
- [2] Flew, Terry, Petros Iosifidis, James Meese, and Agata Stepnik. 2023. "Digital Platforms and the Future of News: Regulating Publisher-Platform Relations in Australia and Canada." *Information, Communication & Society* 27 (16): 2727–43. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2023.2291462.
- [3] Li, Ziman. 2023. "Shaping the Media Landscape: Exploring Media User Consumption in the Age of Social Media." *Journal of Innovation and Development*, 4 (3): 68–71. DOI: 10.54097/jid.v4i3.13233.
- [4] Zhan, Jansen. 2024. "Journalism and News Trends: Adapting to a Changing Media Landscape." *Global Media Journal*, 22 (72). DOI: 10.36648/1550-7521.22.72.468.
- [5] Cavaliere, Paolo. 2021. "From journalistic ethics to fact-checking practices: Defining the standards of content governance in the fight against disinformation." *Journal of Media Law*, 12 (2): 133–65. DOI: 10.1080/17577632.2020.1869486.
- [6] Flew, Terry, Fiona Martin, and Nicolas Suzor. 2019. "Internet regulation as media policy: Rethinking the question of digital communication platform governance." *Journal of Digital Media & Policy* 10 (1): 33–50. DOI: 10.1386/jdmp.10.1.33_1.
- [7] Papaevangelou, Charilaos. 2021. "The existential stakes of platform governance: a critical literature review [version 2; peer review: 3 approved]." *Open Res Europe* 1 (31) DOI: 10.12688/openreseurope.13358.2.
- [8] Flew, Terry. 2021. "The Challenge of Media Platform Regulation for Small and Medium-Sized Nations." Keynote Presentation to Media Platformization and Small Nations, Conference and Stakeholder Roundtable, Helsinki, Finland. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3951610> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3951610>.
- [9] Groenhart, H.P. and J.L.H. Bardoel. 2012. "Conceiving the transparency of journalism: Moving towards a new media accountability currency." *Studies in Communication Sciences* 12 (1): 6–11. DOI: 10.1016/j.scoms.2012.06.003.
- [10] Andersen, Kim, Monika Djerf-Pierre, and Adam Shehata. 2024. "The Scary World Syndrome: News Orientations, Negativity Bias, and the Cultivation of Anxiety." *Mass Communication and Society* 27 (3): 502–24. DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2023.2297829.
- [11] Meer, Toni G. L. A. van der, and Michael Hameleers. 2022. "I Knew It, the World Is Falling Apart! Combatting a Confirmatory Negativity Bias in Audiences' News Selection Through News Media Literacy Interventions." *Digital*

Journalism 10 (3): 473–92. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2021.2019074.

- [12] Hautakangas, Mikko, and Laura Ahva. 2018. “Introducing a New Form of Socially Responsible Journalism: Experiences from the Conciliatory Journalism Project.” *Journalism Practice* 12 (6): 730–46. DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2018.1470473.