



How does media shape public opinion and influence the formation of personal and collective identity in the digital age?

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Abstract:

This study aims to explore how media shapes opinion and identity in today's society. Mass media and social media can influence public opinion by setting agendas and framing issues. Digital media can also create filter bubbles and polarization through algorithms and personalization. Additionally, social media platforms allow for global sharing of social movements and political messages. However, they can also spread misinformation and propaganda at a rapid rate. This can cause a decreased trust in government and other institutions. On a personal level, social media can shape one's identity through self-presentation and social comparison. This allows individuals to feel stronger ties to the groups they belong to, but can cause mental health issues and decreased self-esteem. By applying agenda-setting theory, framing theory, and social identity theory. This study will provide a comprehensive understanding of how media can both empower and harm society. The use of media can allow for easier civic engagement and democratization of voice. However, there are many ways that the media can be used to divide and manipulate society. Through ethical responsibility, media literacy, and critical thinking, we can maintain healthy democracies.

Introduction

In today's world, the media is not just a channel of information. It is a powerful agent of influence. From traditional newspapers to TikTok and Instagram, it shapes how we see ourselves and others. The media can tell certain stories and ignore others, and this influences how people think and believe. This selective coverage can lead to a narrow view of the world, and these views become even more rigid. Therefore, it greatly influences both public opinion and how people see themselves. With the development of digital platforms, this influence has become even greater. Online algorithms show people specific content, and because of this, how different groups are represented online influences people's opinions and how they understand their place in society.

Social movements were always an effective weapon that people used on a national and international level all around the world to restructure the past, reshape the present, and change the future of society.

The Journalism university notes: Public opinion represents the shared beliefs and attitudes of society on matters ranging from politics to social issues. In democratic systems, it holds significant influence over government decisions, corporate strategies, and even grassroots movements. While factors such as personal experience, education, and peer groups contribute to shaping these views, the media stands out as one of the most powerful forces. Through newspapers, television, radio, and digital platforms, the media not only delivers information but also frames it—amplifying certain topics, spotlighting particular perspectives, and steering public discourse. In this way, the media doesn't merely inform; it actively shapes how people understand and interpret the world around them.

CC PLUS (2021) explains that social media has made public sphere communication easier. With billions using these platforms, social movements can now reach global audiences. This shift redefines the public sphere as global, not just national. Facebook and Twitter enable international participation, making activism a worldwide phenomenon.

Psychologists emphasize that human thought and behavior are shaped by one's environment, which includes family, friends, religious institutions, and other social settings. These interactions can occur in person or through digital channels, such as radio, television, or the internet. In today's digital age, social media has become a central influence on our environment, shaping opinions, behaviors, and tendencies. It also serves as a vital tool for global communication, enabling access to diverse information and perspectives.

Seeing this research gap, the insufficient study of how modern media and digital platforms shape public opinion and influence the development of social movements on a global scale, I decided to conduct a study on this topic. The purpose of the work is to analyze the mechanisms of influence of media and algorithms of digital platforms on the perception of society, to identify their role in the transformation of the public sphere, and to determine how they contribute to or hinder the development of social movements

Literature review

How social media helps to shape public opinions

Social media platforms play a major role in shaping political opinions. Politicians and parties leverage tools such as targeted advertisements, viral posts, and algorithm-driven content curation to influence how voters perceive candidates and issues. However, the widespread circulation of misinformation and fake news can distort public debate and alter public opinion.

Another significant impact of social media is the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. Algorithms curate users' feeds by analyzing their preferences and online behaviors, showing them content they are more likely to agree with. While personalization is intended to improve user experience, it often reinforces existing beliefs rather than exposing individuals to diverse perspectives. This dynamic fosters division and polarization, as users become entrenched in ideological bubbles and increasingly resistant to opposing viewpoints.

Fletcher (2025) highlights the phenomenon of filter bubbles and echo chambers, where algorithms reinforce users' existing beliefs. In terms of agenda-setting, this means that algorithms act as "editors," deciding which topics enter the user's field of vision. However, such studies often assume user passivity, overlooking the possibility that individuals actively seek alternative sources of information.

Individuals often adjust their attitudes when they no longer align with current circumstances or fail to guide meaningful action. Major events—such as natural disasters or human tragedies—can heighten awareness of deeper issues and spark shifts in public opinion. Environmental attitudes, for example, have been shaped by pivotal moments: the release of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986, Margaret Thatcher's 1988 speech to the Royal Society addressing global warming, the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, and the 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Ultimately, the endurance and

influence of public opinion on any issue depend heavily on the attention it receives from mass media. (Davison, 2025)

Ja'afaru & Asemah (2024) emphasize that social media has evolved from a tool for personal interaction into a powerful mechanism that shapes social relations, cultural practices, and public opinion, with far-reaching effects on politics, business, careers, global values, lifestyles, and innovation. Using a library research approach to analyze secondary data, the study applies agenda-setting theory and the propaganda model to show how social media frames issues through trending topics, hashtags, and shared content, thereby facilitating the spread of propaganda and disinformation.

The researchers note that disinformation and propaganda circulate widely across digital platforms, with social media accelerating their dissemination rapidly and effectively. Rhetorical techniques such as hyperbole, metaphor, allusion, and repetition are employed to reinforce messages, while memes, bots, and influencers further amplify narratives across blogs, websites, online communities, and social networks. These practices often serve political, financial, ideological, or attention-seeking purposes.

However, the unchecked spread of propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech fosters public distrust and societal division, undermining confidence in both media and government. To counter these challenges, the study highlights strategies such as fact-checking, promoting media literacy, and encouraging critical thinking. Ultimately, the findings conclude that social media is a dominant force in shaping public opinion, while simultaneously enabling the widespread circulation of propaganda and disinformation.

Ja'afaru & Asemah examine social media as a space for the *mass dissemination of propaganda* and disinformation, employing memes, bots, and influencers. This aligns with the *propaganda model*, in which the media transmit narratives that serve particular interests. Compared to Fletcher, who focuses on individual isolation, Ja'afaru & Asemah emphasize collective-level influence. Together, these perspectives reveal two interconnected mechanisms: the individual (algorithms) and the collective (propaganda). A limitation of this research is its strong focus on political contexts, while cultural and identity-related dimensions remain underexplored.

In democratic societies, the media carries a crucial responsibility to inform, educate, and encourage civic participation. Preserving ethical standards, countering misinformation, and fostering media literacy are fundamental to sustaining public trust and ensuring that citizens remain well-informed. As digital technologies reshape the media landscape, recognizing their influence and promoting critical engagement are essential for the health of democracy.

By guiding public attention, shaping collective perceptions, and constructing social narratives, the media exerts significant influence over public opinion. While it has the potential to inspire progress and positive change, it also risks reinforcing bias and deepening divisions. Addressing this complex dynamic requires both accountability from media institutions and critical thinking from individuals to maintain balanced and constructive public discourse (Editorial Team, 2024).

One of the most notable influences of social media on human behavior is the way individuals construct their online identities. Through curated profiles, chosen images, and status updates, people often attempt to present an idealized version of themselves. This practice, referred to as self-presentation, enables individuals to manage the information they disclose and shape how others perceive them.

Cooper (2024) analyzes the phenomenon of self-presentation, where users construct idealized versions of themselves through profiles and posts. This is directly linked to social identity theory, as online identity strengthens group belonging but can also lead to anxiety and reduced self-esteem. A limitation is that research tends to emphasize negative outcomes (anxiety, comparison) while paying less attention to positive aspects, such as self-expression and social support. Examines the phenomenon of online identity and self-presentation, where individuals curate idealized versions of themselves through profiles, images, and status updates. While this allows for self-expression, it also creates pressure to maintain a certain persona and fosters unhealthy comparison with others. These dynamics can lead to anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and feelings of inadequacy. The intersection of identity and mental health highlights the dual nature of social media: it empowers individuals to construct identity while simultaneously exposing them to psychological risks.

Research on the influence of social media on public opinion and identity can be examined through several key theories. Agenda-setting theory explains how the media determine the significance of issues by shaping the public agenda. Framing theory complements this by showing how the presentation of information influences interpretation. Finally, social identity theory connects media influence to processes of personal and collective identity formation, demonstrating how the digital environment reinforces group belonging and affects self-presentation.

Media and Public Opinion

The media plays a central role in democratic societies by informing citizens, shaping perceptions, and fostering civic engagement. According to agenda-setting theory, media outlets determine which issues gain public attention, thereby influencing the priorities of both individuals and policymakers. Complementing this, framing theory highlights how the presentation of information—through language, imagery, and narrative—affects interpretation and meaning. Together, these theories demonstrate that the media not only reports events but actively constructs the lens through which public opinion is formed.

Social Media, Propaganda, and Disinformation

Social media platforms have also become powerful tools for the dissemination of fake news and propaganda. Ja'afaru & Asemah (2024) argue that memes, bots, and influencers are strategically employed to spread disinformation, aligning with the propaganda model of media influence. These techniques amplify political narratives, manipulate public opinion, and undermine trust in institutions. While Fletcher (2025) focuses on algorithmic isolation, Ja'afaru & Asemah highlight the collective impact of propaganda, showing how disinformation spreads rapidly across digital networks and reshapes political engagement.

Conclusion

Media influence continues to be a significant factor in how we understand politics, culture, and society at large. Technology in the Information Age has also brought algorithmic and personalization effects that can exacerbate polarization and filter bubbles. Social media allows



for new avenues for activism and global communication, but also enables disinformation and propaganda to spread quickly, breeding distrust. On an individual level, media can also play a role in our identity and how we express ourselves to the world; however, it can also cause us to draw comparisons to others and pose mental health risks. Although there has been extensive research on media's political effect, more research needs to be done on media's role in culture and identity.

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