

Research Paper

The Optimization of Communication Strategies for the Public Opinion Guidance Power of Mainstream Media in the Era of Social Media

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Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed public opinion formation, challenging mainstream media's traditional influence. This paper analyzes how media can adapt communication strategies for the digital age. It highlights challenges like audience fragmentation, disintermediation, credibility loss, and echo chambers, which weaken gatekeeping (Ceron, 2014; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). The study recommends four strategies: content innovation with interactive formats, multi-platform distribution for diverse audiences, engagement mechanisms that turn passive viewers into active participants, and data-driven systems for real-time monitoring (Wan & Shao, 2019; Li, 2016; McGregor, 2019; Song & Zhu, 2021). It also discusses collaborative governance involving media, government, platforms, and civil society to combat misinformation and reinforce authoritative messaging (Creemers, 2015; Li, 2015; Perko et al., 2016). Media convergence, when integrated, can enhance effectiveness by combining journalism with storytelling, participation, and analytics (Li, 2016; Zhang & Meadows, 2016). The findings advance understanding of agenda-setting in hybrid media systems and offer practical advice for media professionals, policymakers, and scholars navigating legacy and digital platforms in shaping public discourse.

Keywords: mainstream media, social media, public opinion guidance, communication strategies, media convergence, agenda-setting, misinformation

Introduction

The advent and rapid proliferation of social media platforms over the past two decades have fundamentally disrupted the traditional communication ecology in which mainstream media institutions operated as primary gatekeepers and agenda-setters of public discourse (Katz, 2011; McGregor, 2019). Legacy news organizations, including newspapers, television networks, and radio broadcasters, historically enjoyed near-monopolistic control over information flows, enabling them to shape public opinion through selective coverage, framing, and editorial prioritization (Ceron, 2014). However, the emergence of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Weibo, and TikTok has democratized content creation and distribution, empowering ordinary citizens to become "prosumers" who simultaneously consume and produce media content (Katz, 2011). This transformation has fragmented audiences, eroded traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, and created new credibility challenges that complicate mainstream media's ability to guide public opinion effectively (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). Empirical studies reveal that while legacy media outlets retain some first-level agenda-setting power, the ability to influence which topics receive public attention, social media platforms have introduced distinct dynamics that weaken unilateral control over public agendas and alter sentiment formation processes (Ceron, 2014; Morris, 2018). The disintermediation enabled by social platforms allows journalists and citizen actors to bypass traditional editorial hierarchies, reducing the exclusive intermediary role of legacy newsrooms and creating alternative pathways for information dissemination (McGregor, 2019; Wei et al., 2013). Moreover, platform affordances such as algorithmic curation, network homogeneity, and ease of expression have transformed opinion climates, making it easier for like-minded individuals to form echo chambers and for misinformation to spread rapidly before authoritative sources can respond (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Ascher, 2017). In response to these challenges, mainstream media organizations have begun experimenting with various optimization strategies to maintain relevance and influence in the digital age. These strategies encompass content innovation, multi-platform distribution, audience engagement, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative governance mechanisms (Wan & Shao, 2019; Li, 2016; Song & Zhu, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these approaches remains contested, and many legacy institutions struggle to balance the demands of digital engagement with the preservation of journalistic standards and credibility (Yan, 2020). The tension between attention-oriented formats that perform well on social platforms and the depth of analysis traditionally associated with quality journalism poses a fundamental dilemma for mainstream media seeking to optimize their communication strategies (Yan, 2020).

This paper addresses the critical question: How can mainstream media organizations optimize their communication strategies to enhance public opinion guidance power in the era of social media? To answer this question, the study synthesizes empirical research across multiple domains, including agenda-setting

theory, media convergence, platform studies, and public opinion dynamics. The analysis draws on case studies of major media institutions, experimental research on content formats and distribution strategies, and theoretical frameworks that explain the changing nature of influence in hybrid media systems (Li, 2016; Zhang & Meadows, 2016). By integrating these diverse perspectives, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges mainstream media face and the strategic options available to them.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 examines the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence regarding social media's impact on mainstream media's agenda-setting power and credibility. Section 3 presents evidence-based optimization strategies across content production, distribution, engagement, and analytics. Section 4 explores collaborative mechanisms and governance frameworks that can strengthen mainstream media's guidance capabilities. Section 5 discusses the role of media convergence in amplifying effectiveness and addresses the challenges of misinformation and echo chambers. The conclusion synthesizes key findings and offers recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

2. The Impact of Social Media on Mainstream Media's Public Opinion Guidance Power

2.1 Fragmentation of Audiences and Erosion of Agenda-Setting Power

The traditional agenda-setting model, which posited that mass media could tell audiences "what to think about" through selective coverage and prominence, has been significantly complicated by the rise of social media platforms (Ceron, 2014). While mainstream media institutions continue to exert first-level agenda-setting influence, determining which topics receive attention, social media have introduced parallel and sometimes competing agenda-setting processes that fragment public attention and dilute the impact of any single source (Ceron, 2014; Morris, 2018). Research by Ceron (2014) demonstrates that traditional mass media retain some agenda-setting power in online environments, but social media produce distinct debate dynamics characterized by different sentiment patterns, participant demographics, and temporal rhythms that weaken unilateral control over public agendas. This fragmentation is particularly pronounced among younger audiences who increasingly rely on social platforms as primary news sources and exhibit lower trust in traditional media institutions (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). The proliferation of alternative information sources on social media has created a more competitive and pluralistic information ecosystem in which mainstream media must vie for attention alongside citizen journalists, influencers, advocacy groups, and entertainment content (Wei et al., 2013). Studies of Twitter behavior reveal that individual journalists' social media posts often achieve greater reach and engagement than official media outlet accounts, suggesting that personal brands and informal communication styles may be more effective than institutional messaging in capturing audience attention (Wei et al., 2013). This finding challenges traditional assumptions about the primacy of organizational credibility and suggests that mainstream media must adapt

their communication strategies to leverage both institutional authority and individual journalist engagement.

2.2 Disintermediation and the Rise of Prosumer Culture

Social media platforms have fundamentally altered the relationship between media producers and audiences by enabling disintermediation, the removal of traditional gatekeepers from the information flow (Katz, 2011; McGregor, 2019). In the pre-digital era, mainstream media served as essential intermediaries that collected, verified, contextualized, and disseminated information to mass audiences. However, social platforms allow individuals to publish content directly to potentially global audiences without editorial oversight, transforming passive consumers into active "prosumers" who simultaneously consume and produce media content (Katz, 2011). This shift has democratized content creation and empowered marginalized voices, but it has also undermined the exclusive intermediary role of legacy newsrooms and created challenges for information quality and verification (McGregor, 2019). McGregor (2019) documents how journalists increasingly use social media not only to disseminate news but also to represent and harness public opinion, effectively incorporating audience voices into their reporting processes. This practice can enhance perceived legitimacy and responsiveness, but it also raises questions about representativeness and the potential for journalists to amplify unrepresentative or extreme viewpoints (McGregor, 2019). The prosumer culture fostered by social media has created expectations for dialogue, participation, and co-creation that traditional one-way broadcast models cannot satisfy, compelling mainstream media to develop new engagement strategies that balance professional standards with audience inclusion (Katz, 2011).

2.3 Credibility Challenges and Content Adaptation Pressures

The competitive pressures of the social media environment have forced mainstream media organizations to adapt their content strategies in ways that may compromise traditional journalistic values and credibility (Yan, 2020). Research on the People's Daily, China's most authoritative state newspaper, reveals a significant shift toward brief, emotionally framed content designed to engage online audiences, raising concerns about reduced news depth and perceived news value (Yan, 2020). This adaptation reflects a broader tension between the demands of social media algorithms, which prioritize engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, and the journalistic imperative to provide comprehensive, contextualized, and balanced reporting (Ascher, 2017). Ascher (2017) warns of "algorithmic sensationalism," whereby automated content prioritization systems disproportionately amplify inflammatory or emotionally charged content at the expense of substantive reporting. When mainstream media organizations optimize their content for algorithmic distribution without adequate human oversight, they risk amplifying sensational narratives that undermine their credibility and public trust (Ascher, 2017). This dynamic is particularly problematic in crisis situations where rapid information dissemination must be balanced against accuracy and verification requirements (Perko et al., 2016).

2.4 Platform Affordances and Opinion Climate Transformation

The structural features of social media platforms, including network homogeneity, message reach, and ease of expression, fundamentally alter how users form and express opinions, creating new challenges for mainstream media seeking to guide public discourse (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). Neubaum and Krämer (2017) explain that social platforms blend mass communication and interpersonal communication in ways that transform opinion climates, making it easier for individuals to perceive consensus within their networks and more difficult for mainstream media to establish authoritative frames. The juxtaposition of professional journalism and user-generated content on the same platforms complicates traditional credibility heuristics, as audiences may struggle to distinguish between verified reporting and unverified claims (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). Furthermore, the algorithmic curation of social media feeds tends to reinforce existing beliefs and preferences, creating "filter bubbles" and echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives and authoritative corrections (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). These dynamics pose significant challenges for mainstream media attempting to reach audiences with counter-narratives or corrective information, as platform algorithms may deprioritize content that contradicts users' established preferences or network norms.

3. Evidence-Based Optimization Strategies for Mainstream Media

3.1 Content Innovation: Interactive and Immersive Formats

To compete effectively in the social media environment, mainstream media organizations must move beyond traditional text-based reporting to develop interactive and immersive content formats that leverage digital affordances and engage audiences in novel ways (Wan & Shao, 2019). Wan and Shao (2019) argue that interactive products such as newsgames, digital games designed to convey journalistic information, can foster two-way interaction and reshape engagement through innovative combinations of technology and narrative design. These formats allow audiences to explore complex issues through simulation and experimentation, potentially enhancing understanding and retention compared to passive consumption of traditional articles (Wan & Shao, 2019). Beyond newsgames, mainstream media can employ data visualizations, interactive timelines, multimedia narratives, and augmented reality experiences to make complex information more accessible and engaging (Wan & Shao, 2019). However, content innovation must be pursued strategically, with careful attention to preserving explanatory quality and avoiding the trap of prioritizing novelty over substance (Yan, 2020). The challenge is to develop formats that satisfy both the engagement demands of social platforms and the informational needs of audiences seeking depth and context.

3.2 Multi-Platform Distribution: Tailored Strategies for Diverse Audiences

Effective public opinion guidance in the social media era requires mainstream media to develop sophisticated multi-platform distribution strategies that tailor content formats, framing, and timing to the

specific affordances and audience characteristics of different platforms (Li, 2016). Li (2016) emphasizes that media fusion must produce "chemical reactions", integrative transformations rather than simple additive combinations, to enhance both production efficiency and influence. This approach involves reorganizing production workflows, reallocating resources, and creating platform-specific content that combines institutional authority with the interaction styles and proximity to audiences that social platforms enable (Li, 2016). Research by Zhang and Meadows (2016) demonstrates intermedia agenda effects between traditional mass media and platforms like YouTube, suggesting that coordinated cross-platform publishing can steer public attention more effectively than isolated efforts. Mainstream media should develop platform-specific strategies that account for differences in user demographics, content consumption patterns, and algorithmic prioritization across platforms (Zhang & Meadows, 2016). For example, short-form video content may be most effective on TikTok, while in-depth analysis and discussion may perform better on platforms like Twitter or LinkedIn.

3.3 Audience Engagement: From Passive Consumers to Active Co-Creators

Transforming audiences from passive consumers into active co-creators represents a fundamental shift in mainstream media strategy that can strengthen legitimacy and extend reach (McGregor, 2019). McGregor (2019) shows that journalists who use social media to represent and harness public opinion can improve perceived legitimacy by demonstrating responsiveness to audience concerns and incorporating diverse voices into reporting. Structured engagement mechanisms, including dialogue features, amplification of constructive comments, crowdsourced verification, and participatory reporting projects, can help mainstream media build stronger relationships with audiences while maintaining editorial standards (McGregor, 2019). Wei et al. (2013) indicate that engaging individual journalists and influencers on social platforms can extend reach beyond official outlet accounts, suggesting that mainstream media should invest in building the personal brands of their journalists and facilitating their social media presence. However, audience engagement strategies must be carefully designed to avoid amplifying unrepresentative voices or compromising journalistic independence (McGregor, 2019). Clear guidelines, training, and oversight mechanisms are essential to ensure that engagement enhances rather than undermines credibility.

3.4 Data-Driven Decision Making: Analytics and Modeling for Adaptive Strategies

The availability of real-time data on audience behavior, content performance, and public opinion dynamics creates opportunities for mainstream media to adopt data-driven decision-making processes that enable adaptive and targeted communication strategies (Song & Zhu, 2021). Song and Zhu (2021) propose UCIR transmission models and an Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) evaluation system to quantify media influence and simulate interventions for guiding public opinion, offering a methodological basis for evidence-based strategy development. These approaches allow media organizations to detect emerging trends, identify influential actors, predict information diffusion patterns, and evaluate the effectiveness of

different messaging strategies (Song & Zhu, 2021). Data-driven approaches can inform decisions about content topics, formats, distribution timing, and targeting, potentially improving both efficiency and impact (Song & Zhu, 2021). However, the use of analytics and automation must be balanced with human judgment to avoid the pitfalls of algorithmic sensationalism and to ensure that optimization serves journalistic values rather than merely maximizing engagement metrics (Ascher, 2017). Mainstream media should develop integrated systems that combine big data analytics with editorial expertise and ethical oversight.

4. Collaborative Mechanisms and Governance Frameworks

4.1 Government-Media Coordination for Coherent Messaging

Effective public opinion guidance in complex information environments often requires coordination between mainstream media and government agencies to ensure coherent, timely, and authoritative messaging, particularly during crises or on issues of national importance (Creemers, 2015; Li, 2015). Creemers (2015) documents the institutional centralization of internet governance in China and shows how state actors integrate online control with official messaging as part of a coordinated public opinion strategy. While the specific governance model varies across political systems, the principle of establishing clear communication protocols and coordination mechanisms between media and government can enhance the effectiveness of public opinion guidance (Creemers, 2015). Li (2015) describes practices on Chinese microblogs where official accounts cultivate discipline, collaborate with opinion leaders, and suppress rumors as part of a proactive guidance strategy. These practices include cross-posting agreements between outlets and official accounts to amplify verified information, opinion leader engagement programs to co-produce corrective content, and rapid response protocols for addressing emerging misinformation (Li, 2015). While such approaches raise important questions about press freedom and government influence, they illustrate the potential for coordinated action to counter misinformation and strengthen authoritative messaging in social media environments.

4.2 Platform Partnerships and Moderation Cooperation

Collaboration between mainstream media and social media platform operators represents another critical mechanism for enhancing public opinion guidance capabilities (Perko et al., 2016). Perko et al. (2016) recommend pre-established communication protocols, cross-sector training, and joint content verification workflows between emergency managers, media organizations, and platform operators to improve crisis messaging. Platform partnerships can facilitate rapid identification and correction of misinformation, prioritization of authoritative sources in algorithmic feeds, and development of features that support quality journalism (Perko et al., 2016). Such partnerships must navigate tensions between platform business models, which often prioritize engagement and user growth, and public interest goals of accurate information and constructive discourse. Mainstream media can advocate for platform design changes that support credible information, such as source labeling, fact-checking integrations, and algorithmic

adjustments that reduce the spread of misinformation (Perko et al., 2016). However, these collaborations must be transparent and accountable to avoid creating new forms of censorship or undue influence.

4.3 Stakeholder Inclusion and Multi-Actor Governance

Effective public opinion guidance increasingly requires the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, including NGOs, academic experts, and engaged publics, in collaborative governance frameworks (Deng et al., 2021). Deng et al. (2021) show that social actors beyond traditional media and government can lead topic framing on platforms like Weibo, indicating that formal mechanisms to integrate these actors into guidance strategies can increase reach and legitimacy. Multi-actor governance approaches recognize that authority and influence in social media environments are distributed across multiple nodes rather than concentrated in traditional institutions (Deng et al., 2021). Mainstream media can develop partnerships with civil society organizations, academic institutions, and community groups to co-create content, verify information, and reach diverse audience segments (Deng et al., 2021). These partnerships can enhance credibility by demonstrating independence from government control and responsiveness to public concerns. However, stakeholder inclusion must be managed carefully to maintain editorial standards and avoid capture by special interests.

5. Media Convergence, Misinformation, and Future Directions

5.1 The Role of Media Convergence in Amplifying Effectiveness

Media convergence, the structural and technical integration of production, distribution, and engagement capabilities across platforms, represents a critical enabler of mainstream media effectiveness in the social media era (Li, 2016; Zhang & Meadows, 2016). Li (2016) argues that convergence must be implemented as integrative transformation rather than simple addition, creating "chemical reactions" that combine the authority of traditional journalism with the interactivity and proximity of social platforms. Convergence enables new product forms, such as the interactive newsgames documented by Wan and Shao (2019), and facilitates coordinated cross-platform campaigns that leverage intermedia agenda effects (Zhang & Meadows, 2016). Effective convergence strategies link authoritative reporting, platform-native storytelling, audience participation mechanisms, and advanced analytics to preserve credibility while increasing reach and responsiveness (Li, 2016; Song & Zhu, 2021). However, convergence requires significant organizational change, including restructuring of workflows, retraining of personnel, and cultural shifts that break down silos between traditional and digital operations (Li, 2016). Mainstream media organizations that successfully implement convergence can achieve competitive advantages in both efficiency and influence.

5.2 Addressing Misinformation and Echo Chambers

Misinformation spread and algorithmically reinforced echo chambers pose central threats to mainstream media's public opinion guidance capabilities, requiring coordinated countermeasures across multiple

domains (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Ascher, 2017). Neubaum and Krämer (2017) identify network homogeneity, message reach, and ease of expression as platform attributes that foster echo chambers and alter opinion climates. Ascher (2017) documents how algorithmic amplification of sensational content can outpace human judgment and verification processes, enabling rapid rumor diffusion that undermines authoritative corrections. sHan (2022) highlights that microblogs and short-video platforms' speed and feedback dynamics complicate supervision and enable rapid rumor circulation that outpaces traditional verification channels. Mainstream media must develop rapid response capabilities, including dedicated fact-checking teams, cross-platform monitoring systems, and partnerships with platform operators to identify and counter misinformation quickly (Han, 2022). Additionally, media literacy initiatives that help audiences critically evaluate information sources and recognize manipulation tactics can strengthen resilience against misinformation (Perko et al., 2016). However, countermeasures must balance speed, accuracy, and civil liberties, as overly aggressive content moderation can suppress legitimate speech and undermine trust (Creemers, 2015). The optimal approach likely involves layered interventions that combine automated detection, human verification, transparent labeling, and audience education rather than relying solely on content removal (Ascher, 2017; Perko et al., 2016).

6. Conclusion

The optimization of communication strategies for mainstream media's public opinion guidance power in the era of social media requires comprehensive transformation across content production, distribution, engagement, analytics, and governance. This paper has synthesized empirical evidence demonstrating that social media have fundamentally altered the communication ecology by fragmenting audiences, enabling disintermediation, creating credibility challenges, and transforming opinion climates (Ceron, 2014; Katz, 2011; Yan, 2020; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). While these changes have weakened traditional agenda-setting power, they have also created opportunities for mainstream media to enhance their influence through strategic adaptation. Evidence-based optimization strategies include content innovation through interactive and immersive formats that leverage digital affordances (Wan & Shao, 2019), multi-platform distribution tailored to diverse audience segments and platform characteristics (Li, 2016; Zhang & Meadows, 2016), audience engagement mechanisms that transform passive consumers into active co-creators (McGregor, 2019; Wei et al., 2013), and data-driven decision-making systems that enable real-time monitoring and adaptive interventions (Song & Zhu, 2021). These strategies must be implemented as integrated transformations rather than isolated initiatives, with careful attention to preserving journalistic standards and credibility while meeting the demands of digital engagement. Collaborative governance mechanisms involving coordination among mainstream media, government agencies, platform operators, and civil society actors can strengthen public opinion guidance capabilities, particularly in countering misinformation and addressing crisis situations (Creemers, 2015; Li, 2015; Perko et al., 2016; Deng et al.,

2021). However, such collaborations must be designed with transparency and accountability to avoid creating new forms of censorship or undue influence. Media convergence, when implemented as integrative rather than additive transformation, can amplify effectiveness by combining authoritative reporting with platform-native storytelling, participatory features, and advanced analytics (Li, 2016). The challenges of misinformation spread and echo chamber formation require layered countermeasures that combine automated detection, human verification, transparent labeling, platform partnerships, and audience media literacy initiatives (Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Ascher, 2017; Han, 2022; Perko et al., 2016). Mainstream media must develop rapid response capabilities while balancing speed, accuracy, and civil liberties in their content moderation and correction strategies.

Future research should examine the long-term effectiveness of different optimization strategies across diverse political and cultural contexts, investigate the tradeoffs between engagement optimization and journalistic quality, and develop more sophisticated models of influence in hybrid media systems. Practitioners should prioritize investments in convergence infrastructure, data analytics capabilities, journalist training for digital engagement, and partnerships with platforms and civil society organizations. Policymakers should consider regulatory frameworks that support quality journalism, promote platform transparency, and protect press freedom while addressing the harms of misinformation. Ultimately, the optimization of mainstream media's public opinion guidance power in the social media era requires balancing continuity and change, preserving the core values of accuracy, independence, and public service while adapting to new technological affordances and audience expectations. Mainstream media organizations that successfully navigate this balance can maintain relevance and influence in shaping public discourse, contributing to informed democratic deliberation and social cohesion in increasingly complex information environments.

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