

The Challenges of Journalism in the Post-Truth Era

Buwen Yao^{1,a,*}

¹*Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S102TN, United Kingdom*

a. buwenyao315@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Public confidence in mainstream news organizations has significantly declined in recent years, while news disseminated through social media platforms has gained unprecedented attention. This thesis explores journalism's multifaceted challenges in the post-truth era, a time marked by the prevalence of emotional appeals and personal beliefs over objective facts. With the rapid advancement of information dissemination technologies, journalism's core values, communication methods, and public trust are profoundly affected. The paper begins by examining the characteristics and limitations of journalism during three distinct phases: the broadcasting era, the digital era, and the post-truth era. By comparing these phases, the study identifies key shifts in the role and influence of journalism. Furthermore, it delves into the challenges journalism faces today, such as the spread of misinformation, erosion of public trust, and the impact of echo chambers. Finally, the thesis proposes practical strategies to address these issues, strengthening journalism's role as a reliable source of information and a cornerstone of democratic society in the post-truth era.

Keywords: Post-truth era, Journalism challenges, Digital age, Public trust, Misinformation

1. Introduction

The rise of social media and self-media has disrupted the authority of traditional news dissemination by enabling anyone to become an information publisher. This decentralization has eroded the role of professional news agencies while simultaneously accelerating the spread of misinformation across vast audiences. Even more concerning is the growing dominance of emotionally charged and inflammatory content, which often outpaces objective and in-depth journalism in reach and impact due to its inherently engaging nature. This trend is called the post-truth era. Scholars like McIntyre and Gyldensted characterize the post-truth environment as one where "emotions and personal beliefs increasingly overshadow objective facts," posing critical challenges for traditional journalism[1]. Contemporary academic research has extensively studied the post-truth era, shedding light on its impact on journalism and public discourse. This aligns with the rapid development of information dissemination technologies, as this paper outlines, which examines the shifting values, communication methods, and public trust in journalism.

Vosoughi et al. emphasize the role of social media platforms in accelerating the spread of misinformation driven by algorithms prioritizing engagement over factual accuracy[2]. Underscore the urgency of addressing the challenges identified in this thesis, including the spread of misinformation and the dominance of emotional narratives.

Building on these existing studies, this paper examines journalism's characteristics and limitations in the broadcasting, digital, and post-truth eras. Integrating prior research insights, it proposes strategies that uphold journalism's commitment to truth and public trust in an increasingly complex media landscape.

2. Characteristics of Different Media Times

Journalism has undergone profound transformations throughout history, aligned with technological, social, and cultural changes. Its evolution can be broadly categorized into three critical phases: the broadcast era, the digital era, and the post-truth era.

2.1. Broadcasting Era

The broadcasting era, spanning much of the late 19th and 20th centuries, was characterized by the centralized dissemination of information through mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television. Broadcasting utilized electronic communication technology to deliver content like sound, images, and films to the public. Rigorous editorial processes ensured the credibility of news, but a few powerful entities dominated the media landscape. This concentration of control allowed the wealthy elite to shape public opinion; as Henry Ford noted, "People can have any color they want, as long as it's black". This exemplified the power imbalance at that time[3]. The broadcasting era (late 19th to 20th century) reflected McLuhan's "medium is the message" theory, where the nature of centralized mass communication inherently shaped societal structures. Mass media's one-way dissemination model not only reinforced top-down information control but also mirrored industrial society's hierarchical nature. While this era solidified journalism's role as a trustworthy source of information, it left little room for audience interaction or alternative viewpoints.

2.2. Media in the Digital Age

The advent of the Internet and digital technologies in the late 20th century marked a shift toward the digital era. This phase introduced new platforms like websites, blogs, and social media, revolutionizing how news was produced, distributed, and consumed. Information became instantaneous and accessible, breaking the one-way communication model of the broadcast era. Audiences could interact with content, participate in discussions, and even contribute to news creation through citizen journalism.

The digital age democratized information, as seen in the proliferation of citizen journalism platforms like Twitter during major global events (e.g., the Arab Spring in 2011). However, the same technologies have facilitated the "clickbait economy," where competition for attention often prioritizes sensationalism. For instance, Pew Research Center reported that during the 2020 U.S. elections, 73% of top-performing Facebook posts contained emotional or sensational language, reflecting the platform's algorithmic bias towards engagement-driven content. Economic pressures on traditional media organizations further eroded journalistic authority as audience engagement became increasingly tied to click-driven metrics. Studies highlight how the shift to digital platforms blurred the line between professional journalism and amateur content, complicating the public's ability to discern credibility[4][5].

2.3. Post-Truth Era

The post-truth era, driven by social media's dominance, has further decentralized information dissemination. In this context, emotional appeal and personal beliefs often precede factual accuracy in shaping public opinion. The term "post-truth", popularized after becoming Oxford Dictionaries

Word of the Year in 2016, describes a societal condition in which objective facts have diminished influence on public discourse, overshadowed by emotionally charged narratives and confirmation biases.[6]

In this era, individuals, influencers, and non-traditional outlets can bypass traditional gatekeepers and publish directly to global audiences. Emotional appeal outweighs factual accuracy, as content designed to evoke anger, fear, or empathy spreads more effectively[7]. Algorithms on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter amplify polarizing content, reinforcing echo chambers where users encounter information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs.

This phenomenon has eroded trust in traditional journalism and fragmented public discourse. The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation poses significant threats to journalism's role as a unifying force, undermining its capacity to be a reliable source of truth in democratic societies. One study notes that “truth becomes secondary to engagement” in the attention economy, reflecting a fundamental shift in how information is valued and consumed[2].

The historical evolution of journalism reflects its adaptation to changing technological and social contexts. From the authoritative and centralized model of the broadcast era to the interactive and decentralized digital age and finally to the emotionally driven post-truth era, journalism has continually redefined its practices and values. However, the post-truth era poses unprecedented challenges, requiring journalism to move forward in an environment where traditional norms are under constant pressure.

3. Journalism and the Transformation of Public Trust

As journalism evolved through the broadcast, digital, and post-truth eras, public's trust in information sources has also undergone significant changes.

In the broadcast era, journalism established its authority through centralized control and strict editorial standards. Public trust was closely tied to the credibility of institutional gatekeepers, with audiences being passive recipients of information. However, this trust was largely one-sided, with audiences being passive data recipients rather than active participants.

The digital age democratized information dissemination, enabling audiences to interact with and contribute to the news through blogs, social media, and citizen journalism. This participatory shift has diversified voices but also created challenges. As media were in face of economic pressures and competition for attention in a 24-hour news cycle, sensationalism often replaced depth and accuracy. Public skepticism grew, especially in cases of bias or errors in news coverage [8][7].

The post-truth era has profoundly changed the dynamics of trust in journalism. Social media platforms now dominate information dissemination, bypassing traditional gatekeepers entirely. Trust is no longer primarily rooted in institutional authority but in relevance, emotional appeal, and community recognition. Algorithms amplify content that generates engagement—often emotionally charged or polarizing—rather than fact-based reporting[9].

Public trust in traditional media further eroded during the COVID-19 pandemic. While media outlets attempt to provide timely and accurate information, many viewers started questioning their motives and reliability. For example, in the early days of the pandemic, conflicting reports about the virus's severity, changes in mask use guidelines, and debates over vaccine effectiveness undermined public confidence in the official narrative. According to a Reuters Institute study, trust in traditional news sources plummeted during the pandemic, with audiences increasingly turning to social media for alternative explanations[2]. This was further exacerbated by perceptions that reporting was influenced by politics and corporations, leading beliefs in traditional media outlets were biased or involved in pushing a particular agenda.

This environment aligns with the emotional dynamics of the post-truth era, where emotions often matter more than facts in shaping public perceptions. Against this backdrop, journalism faces not

only the challenge of disinformation but also the challenge of trust fundamentally shifting to one driven by emotions. News content that evokes anger, fear, or sympathy tends to resonate more deeply with audiences, creating and disseminating emotionally charged narratives that often lack factual basis[10].

As journalism grapples with these changes, it must adapt to a reality in which trust in the post-truth era is fragmented and increasingly tied to emotional engagement. This shift requires a reassessment of journalistic practices to adapt to a media environment in which factual accuracy and emotional resonance must coexist. By understanding the emotional underpinnings of trust, journalism may find ways to rebuild its credibility and reconnect with audiences in a profoundly altered information environment.

4. The Emotional Changes of News in the Post-Truth Era

Today, the post-truth era has reshaped how news is produced, distributed, and consumed, prioritizing emotional appeal over factual reporting. This shift reflects broader societal changes driven by the dominance of social media, where algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, and audiences are drawn to stories that resonate emotionally rather than intellectually. Understanding the shift in emotion in news against this backdrop is crucial for analyzing journalism's challenges.

In the post-truth era, emotions such as anger, fear, and sympathy play a central role in shaping the news agenda. As platforms such as Facebook and Twitter amplify content that gets clicks, shares, and comments, stories that evoke strong emotions are more likely to go viral. Research highlights emotionally charged headlines and sensational narratives are often more engaging than objective reporting.[11] As a result, the emotional tone of news has shifted toward dramatic and impactful content, often at the expense of depth and analysis.

This emotionalization of news also reflects changes in audience behavior. Modern consumers are less likely to engage with news that challenges their beliefs or seems overly complex. Instead, they gravitate toward content that fits their worldview or confirms their feelings. This phenomenon has given rise to echo chambers, in which emotionally resonant stories reinforce pre-existing biases, creating a feedback loop that amplifies polarization [2].

Social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping the emotional dynamics of news. Algorithms designed to maximize user engagement favor content that evokes strong emotional responses. For example, research by Vosoughi et al. found that false information spreads significantly faster than factual news on social media, mainly due to its novelty and emotional appeal [11]. In this environment, news organizations face pressure to adjust their content to meet these emotional standards, often at the expense of journalistic rigor.

The emotionalization of news is not limited to sensationalism or panic. Positive emotions such as hope and inspiration are also used to attract the audience's attention. For example, in the "Pang Mao" incident, where a man jumped into the river and did not attract much attention, the story that prompted him to jump caused an uproar on the Internet. However, relying solely on emotion in news selection can detract from authenticity, undermining perceptions of credibility and fairness. Audiences may perceive emotional content as manipulative or biased, especially when it prioritizes sensationalism over substance. This skepticism is further exacerbated by the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, which exploit emotional narratives to spread rapidly[12].

The decline in trust has also led to a fragmentation of audiences. In the past, journalism was a unifying force, providing a common factual foundation for public discourse. In contrast, the emotionalization of news in the post-truth era has led to a fragmentation of the information landscape, with different groups consuming completely different narratives based on their own emotional and ideological preferences.

The emotional shift in news in the post-truth era reflects a broader change in how information is valued and consumed. While prioritizing emotional resonance challenges traditional journalistic standards, it also highlights the need for journalism to adapt to new audience expectations. By balancing emotional engagement and factual integrity, journalism can navigate the complexities of the post-truth era and reassert its role as the cornerstone of informed public discourse.

5. Journalism as a Mirror of Broad Social Change

Throughout history, journalism has documented social transformations and served as a reflective mirror, embodying changes in technology, culture, and societal norms. As societies evolve, so does journalism's role and nature, which adapts to meet its audience's informational needs, values, and expectations.

In the broadcast era, journalism mirrored industrial societies' hierarchical and centralized structures. A few influential organizations dominated information dissemination, reflecting the era's emphasis on efficiency and standardized systems. The mass production model of newspapers, radio, and television operated much like the industrial production systems of the time, delivering uniform content to a broad audience. This approach positioned audiences as passive recipients of information, similar to how goods were distributed to consumers in a linear, one-directional process.

This era coincided with the rise of nation-states and the emergence of a shared cultural identity, which journalism helped foster by disseminating uniform narratives[13]. News was a tool for social cohesion, reinforcing shared values and creating a collective understanding of national and global events. However, it also mirrored the era's inequalities, with marginalized voices rarely represented, reflecting broader social exclusion and power imbalances paralleled the shift from industrial to information-based societies[1]. The transition to the digital age mirrors the transition from industrial to information-based societies. As the internet and digital platforms emerged, journalism adapted to reflect the growing emphasis on individual agency, diversity, and participation. The democratization of information dissemination through blogs, social media, and citizen journalism paralleled the broader societal shift toward decentralization and individual empowerment [14].

Just as society embraced technological advancements that disrupted traditional hierarchies, journalism experienced a fragmentation of authority. Centralized news organizations' dominance gave way to diverse voices, representing modern societies' pluralistic and networked nature. This era also reflected the growing economic pressures of globalization, with news outlets adopting click-driven models to compete in a saturated information market, mirroring the precariousness and competition of the broader economy[15].

The post-truth era reflects significant societal changes driven by social media's rise, communication dynamics shifts, and evolving public expectations of information sources. Journalism's emotional focus aligns with a broader cultural emphasis on personal identity, relatedness, and individual perspectives. As public discourse becomes increasingly segmented into like-minded communities, journalism adapts by addressing specific audience preferences and delivering emotionally resonant narratives.

The evolution of journalism responds to societal changes and reveals the broader cultural and technological forces at play. For example, the advent of television journalism in the mid-20th century reflected the growing dominance of visual culture, just as today's social media-driven news reflects a society oriented toward instant gratification and interactivity[2]. Journalism captures and reinforces these social dynamics, shaping and being shaped by the cultural zeitgeist.

Journalism's transformations across the ages demonstrate its role as a recorder and a participant in social change. From the broadcast era's singularity and authority to the digital age's individualism and the emotional resonance of the post-truth era, journalism reflects the evolution of social values, structures, and technologies.

6. Conclusion

Journalism has evolved alongside societal transformations, adapting to technological, social, and cultural shifts. From the centralized control of information in the broadcast era to the democratization of news in the digital age and the emotional appeal of content in the post-truth era, journalism reflects the broader changes within society. Each phase highlights shifts in how people engage with information, understand truth, and establish trust.

In the post-truth era, however, journalism faces significant challenges, including spreading misinformation, declining public trust, and prioritizing emotional over factual content. These shifts threaten journalism's traditional role as a reliable source of information. Despite these challenges, journalism remains essential for democracy, fostering informed public discourse and contributing to societal cohesion.

As the media landscape evolves, news organizations must navigate these complexities by finding ways to rebuild public trust and maintain their commitment to truth and accuracy. Journalism's ability to adapt and continue serving as a credible source of information will be crucial for its future role in society.

Although this paper summarizes and discusses the changes in journalism in the broadcast, digital, and post-truth eras, this study does not combine empirical research, such as data analysis or interview cases, to verify its views. This may limit the practical applicability and universality of the discussion. In addition, the number of references is relatively limited. Although key topics are covered, they may only partially reflect the complexity and diversity of the development of journalism. Experiments such as quantitative analysis and qualitative research can be added to verify the changing trends of news content in different eras and gain a deeper understanding of the views and behaviors of news practitioners and audiences in the post-truth era.

References

- [1] McIntyre, K., & Gyldensted, C. (2018). *Constructive journalism: An introduction and practical guide for applying positive psychology techniques to news production*. *The journal of media innovations*, 4(2), 20-34.
- [2] Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). *The spread of true and false news online*. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151.
- [3] Kietzmann, J. H., & Hermkens, K. (2011). *Social media's role in modern communication*.
- [4] Ford, H., & Crowther, S. (1922). *My life and work*. Binker North.
- [5] Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. Alien Lane.
- [6] Oxford University Press. (2016). *Word of the Year 2016: Post-Truth*. Oxford Languages.
- [7] Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2021). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism.
- [8] McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press.
- [9] Ladd, J. M. (2012). *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*. Princeton University Press.
- [10] Nielsen, R. K., & Graves, L. (2020). *The Changing Trust in News During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- [11] Rowland, F. (2011). *The filter bubble: what the internet is hiding from you*. portal: Libraries and the Academy, 11(4), 1009-1011.
- [12] Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). *Defining "fake news": A typology of scholarly definitions*. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137-153.
- [13] Schudson, M. (2001). "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism." *Journalism*, 2(2), 149-170.
- [14] Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- [15] Deuze, M. (2007). *Media work*. Polity.