



Audience Chasing In The Age Of Social Media Dynamism: Another Look At Selective Influence Theory

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Abstract

The debate on audience has continued to be a central focus for many communication scholars, just as those in the business circle are battling with an increase in customers' purchases of their commodities. What makes the media's challenge regarding audience more critical is the fact that the media sells abstractive products in terms of news, information, advertising, public relations, education, and entertainment, unlike merchandise organizations that sell tangible products that can be negotiated at will by the target customers or consumers. This changing nature of media consumers is due to the fact that the new media, embodied primarily in social media, have given them the interactivity platform that is missing in traditional media. This paper therefore takes a look at issues surrounding media audiences in the 21st century using conceptual interpretative analysis as its methodology, with the aim of presenting empirical arguments regarding the connectivity of selective influence theory and how it strengthens current audience dynamism in the age of social media. It is, however, concluded that the mainstream media needs to align and adapt to these changing ties that the emergence of new media technology has brought to the fore and recommends that training and retraining journalists, reporters, and media practitioners in alignment with these changing ties is the lasting solution that can have a meaningful impact on media legacies in the 21st century.

Keyword: Audience, Social Media, Selective Influence Theory

Introduction

At the centre of media messages are the audience whose interests drives every nook and cranny of the media system. Denial of the fact that everything the media does is in one way or the other to satisfy their teeming audience who are heterogeneous, anonymous, homogenous and even synonymous. That the media focuses on getting the attention of its audience is not new, this has been since the media became part of the social fabric of any society. The reason for this centric focus on the audience is not farfetched if one considers a typical business environment where competition make

different organization with one form of products or the other scramble for customers. This scenario applies to the media too because if the media with all its principles, ethics, paraphernalia and glamour do not develop and disseminate their messages with the audience being the focal point, media's societal relevance would be gradually eroded. Prior to this time, the primary avenues of information distribution and mass media communications were mainstream platforms such as Radio, Newspaper, Magazine and Television with experienced and professional reporters/journalists taking the roles of news and information distributors. The dynamism in audience individual preferences is due to the arrival of online media which is embedded in New Media Technologies which has created exclusiveness that was held by the traditional media and its personnel over the years (Bruns et al., 2012). Long before now, news and information that formerly required strict gatekeeping and editorial peer review but widespread use of the Internet has reduced this relevance to the barest minimum due to the audiences' ability to choose what suites them (Jurrat, 2011). With the widespread internet-connectivity and audience access to essential information technology gadgets, the one-time consumers of mass media staples on a daily basis have turned into active media content providers setting agenda for public policy and discourse (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

In the world today, there is strong competition in the use of new media, most especially social media as user-generated content appears to be in stiff competition with that of traditional media in terms of fast spread, open access and far-reaching social media usage coupled with the introduction of digital media that makes content highly attractive to the vast majority (Jack, 2010). Furthermore, the stratified ascendancy structure of mainstream media appears to be challenged by the freer bottom-up approach and interactive character of online media that social media characterises (Kramp, 2015). The highlighted differences between the characteristics, structure and use of traditional and online media have sparked wide range of concerns and suspicions among varied audience in every strata of the world's population. Many audiences at times are concerned about the veracity of the endless information that the online media platforms disseminate on a daily basis, while on the opposite journalists/reporters are always caught in a dispute regarding the professionalism and ethics of these media platforms, yet the audience pitches their tents with them (Keen, 2007).

Significantly, audiences have indirectly and primarily taken over the media space by determining their information preferences and media that are mostly relevant to them per time, therefore the competition among various media organizations to keep their customers at all cost is indeed a huge challenge for 21st Century media practice, be it radio, television, newspaper, magazine etc. this is regarding how to get their attention and sell their messages like commodities to them. No one is blame for this dynamism and change, but there is a need to have better understanding of how these trends are evolving with the nature of the 21st century audience which is highly populated by youths armed with the requisite technology that fits their tastes at every point in time. This paper takes an interpretative disposition to look at issues surrounding how audiences have continued to be the focus of media organizations with a critical look at individual or selective influence theory and the competitive nature of the 21st Century dynamic media system.

Media Audience Choice and Information Selection

People have the option to choose from a variety of major media outlets that cater to their individual interests, and the emergence of digital media has exponentially enhanced these options (Bruns et al., 2012). Early media studies portrayed the media audience as passive receivers who were often controlled by media messages and at the mercy of the media (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). More recent scholarship has

challenged this previous assumption, arguing that the audience is actually an active consumer who chooses which media messages to pay attention to (Katz et al., 1973). The active role of the audience members has been established by research using the uses and gratification approach, which has also provided a foundation for audience choice.

According to literature on selective exposure, people actively choose the media they use and consciously choose the media material they pay attention to. Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory provided theoretical support for the idea of selective exposure, which is the idea that people are exposed to media content that supports their pre-existing beliefs while avoiding information that contradicts those beliefs. According to this hypothesis, people actively choose and reject media platforms and content based on their own personal tastes, giving media consumers greater authority over their media experiences than does the mass media. However, research has shown that even though viewers may be able to deliberately pay attention to information that supports their pre-existing opinions, they unintentionally receive exposure to it.

Weeks et al. (2017) claim that these unintended and incidental exposures give media audiences a higher incentive to look for additional attitude-reinforcing information. The selective decisions and preferences of people are highlighted by the selective exposure theory. People access online and conventional media platforms for a variety of reasons and objectives depending on their personal tastes and preferences given the abundance of media outlets available for information and enjoyment (Daramola, 2003). For instance, a person might like reading newspapers or watching television for political news while choosing social media websites or blogs for entertainment news.

Additionally, audiences may choose to focus on certain pieces of information on both traditional media and digital media depending on its design and features, which may unintentionally affect how reliable they perceive both platforms to be. This phenomenon is explained by the "medium is the message" idea, which Marshall McLuhan proposed in 1964 to describe the relationship between media elements and how they affect people's attitudes and experiences. The adage "medium is the message" refers to how different forms of communication "differ not just in terms of their substance but also in reference to how they activate and alter thoughts and senses... therefore impacting perception" (Gross, 2011).

Traditional Versus New Media and Information Credibility among Audience

The daily deluge of information produced by traditional and digital media, particularly in the Nigerian media sector, has made Nigerian audience question the veracity of the material and the dependability of the media outlets that provide it. The need to examine public opinion of media credibility has taken on new social significance and historical urgency as a result of the quick development of new media technologies, the increase of politicised reporting, and the prevalence of fake news. Many media and communication academics have focused on the varied perspectives of the professional practise of journalism in traditional media and digital media, as well as the perception of the credibility of information distributed by these two media platforms. Confounding findings have emerged from empirical studies on how audiences view the professionalism and credibility of traditional media and digital media over time.

Some studies show that audiences view digital media as more professional and credible (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Wilson et al., 2011), while others show the opposite (Kiousis, 2001; Kovaic et al., 2010; Mehrabi et al., 2009). Other researchers have looked into the relationship between media exposure and how credible and trustworthy people perceive the media (Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005; William, 2012). Although earlier studies found a link between media exposure and perceptions of credibility, little scholarly focus has been given to how information preferences may

affect assessments of media credibility and how news and information are perceived in traditional and digital media. The purpose of this paper is to advance this field of study by examining the effects of Nigerian audiences' exposure to traditional media and digital media, as well as their preferences for information, on how credible they perceive traditional media and digital media to be. This article analyzes how information audiences like to access on both media platforms influences their sense of credibility on both platforms by looking at information preference as a mediator in the relationship between media exposure pattern and perception of media credibility.

Over time, academics have empirically observed developments in the public's assessment of the reliability of various media outlets and the variables affecting public perception. Since the advent of digital media, studies on this topic have shown that public perceptions of media credibility are dependent upon factors like interpersonal discussion, media use, and demographic factors like age, gender, and level of education. While earlier investigations conducted in the pre-internet era show that perceptions of media credibility are primarily influenced by media literacy and demographic factors like age, gender, and level of education (Golan & Anita Day, 2010). More recently, with the expansion of news organisations and media organisations, the media audience has never been more overrun with options for media platforms and media contents, leading to widespread doubt about the accuracy of the information that these platforms produce (Banda, 2010). The study of media credibility has recently attracted increased interest due to these recent phenomena. The notion of selective exposure is supported by literature that shows people are more likely to pay attention to media platforms they trust and absorb media information that matches their predispositions while avoiding media they distrust (Kioussis, 2001; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Tsfati (2010) explored any links between distrust of traditional media and online news consumption and made the claim that exposure to a given medium is correlated with trust in that medium. He discovered a significant link between exposure to mainstream media and media trust, while nonmainstream news intake was linked to media scepticism. William (2012) offered proof that audience trust in the message, source, and media is correlated with news attention. Similar to past studies on the impact of media exposure on audience trust in media, Hopmann's et al (2015) investigation into the relationship between mass media use and media trust found that the use of particular media types increases trust in those media. Although these studies have considerably improved our understanding of how media exposure affects public attitudes toward the media, there are several problems with the way media trust is operationalized as a variable.

Many of these studies (e.g. Hopmann et al., 2015; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, 2005; William, 2012) conceived media trust with respect to confidence in and reliance on media platforms, while other studies explore media trust based on perception of veracity of media coverage (e.g. Kioussis, 2001; Wanta & Hu, 1994). Media credibility research has consistently been constrained by this conceptual inconsistency between media trust and media credibility (Hellmueller & Trilling, 2012), leading to methodological errors (Guo, 2018). Evaluations of media credibility and faith in the media, while there are some similarities between the two notions, are fundamentally different. Hellmueller and Trilling (2012) contend that although credibility research is more reliant on interpersonal elements, trust research depends on the societal roles of the media. Guo (2018) went on to say that the semantic differences between the two ideas are rather stark; therefore, a careless application could skew the assessment of media performance evaluation.

Audience in the Digital Age and Convergence Cycle

Because of the prevalence of modern Internet networks and digital gadgets like smart phones, tablets, and smart televisions, media consumers now have access to media content in a quickly hybridising media environment (Nadaf, 2019). The distinctiveness of one media form is no longer associated with a specific media category, such as a print newspaper, print magazine, broadcast, or radio, according to Nadaf (2019). A single device, such as a smartphone nowadays, offers access to a wide variety of media content in various forms and formats, including text, video, audio, and photographs. He goes on to say that news organisations are now seen as providers of news information that comprises all media types, including text, videos, audio podcasts, and radio, rather than simply being associated with one single media form like print, audio-visual, or radio. The development of digital technologies has led to the fusion of digitisation and computer networking, which has broken down the barriers of the conventional segmentation of media forms and contributed to the convergence in the media sector. Due to the integration of both traditional and new media, news information may now be shared instantly and quickly around the world.

The 1990s saw an expansion in Internet networks, which also sped A typical Internet user can now access digital media on a computer network, as well as create or distribute media material, thanks to the democratisation of media made possible by the development of digital technology. The way journalism is practised in the media sector has undergone some noticeable modifications as a result. The ability to spread information is no longer just in the hands of content creators, and digital technology has empowered those who were once considered to be "media consumers" to also be "media producers" and "communicators." Users can now create material and expand their media production responsibilities thanks to digital technologies. Convergence in technology has sped, increased, and facilitated both the distribution and dissemination of media material, leading to global media industry convergence.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the media industry's convergence for increased profits and corporate business encouraged the merging of major media organisations, which then gave rise to enormous digital media giants that now control the majority of the world's media output. The major media companies that combined as a result of corporate convergence are NBC-Universal in 2004, Disney-ABC in 1995, Viacom-CBS in 2000, and Viacom-Paramount in 1994. (Flew, 2017). The merger of media and entertainment behemoth Time Warner and America On Line (AOL) is frequently cited as the largest corporate merger and a prime example of how different media delivery and production platforms have converged (Nadaf, 2019).

In their study, Agbo and Chukwuma (2016) looked at how much broadcast journalists in South-East Nigeria use social media for news gathering and dissemination. The survey-research approach's measurement "instrument" was the questionnaire schedule. All 867 broadcast journalists in the South-East geopolitical region of Nigeria made up the research population, from which Taro Yamane's technique was used to choose a sample of 274 journalists. Using the purposive sample method, the researchers found that South-East Nigerian broadcast journalists have not widely embraced social media for news gathering and dissemination. Among other things, it was noted that South-East Nigerian broadcast journalists had embraced social media platforms as potent tools for the practise of modern journalism.

Oladosu et al. (2021) looked into Nigeria's online publishing trends and patterns. The concepts of metamorphoses and technological determinism served as the foundation for the investigation. It made sense of both the trends and patterns of two online newspapers in Nigeria, namely "Sahara Reporters" and "Premium Times," using content analysis as its design method. A study of the usage habits of the two selected online news sources revealed a preference for in-depth investigative pieces and multimedia presentations with hyperlinks that make it simple for readers to access different parts of the stories. Additionally, it was noted that the two online newspapers

frequently link their articles to little video clips that readers may view on their mobile devices.

Chukwu (2014) also looked at the modifications made to Nigeria's media landscape by Internet journalism. While technological determinism asserts that technology is the primary driver of social change, metamorphoses theory contends that the changes brought about by technology can be reconciled with previously established institutions. As a result, traditional media must work with new media to enhance its operations rather than being replaced by Internet journalism. He recommended that since online journalism is here to stay, the Federal Government of Nigeria and media professionals collaborate to give media organisations the infrastructure they need to survive in this digital age.

Audience, Selective Exposure, Selective Perception and Selective Retention Theory

Selective exposure happens when people tend to only expose themselves to communication that generally supports their pre-established ideas and avoid communication that appears to question those convictions. This hypothesis refers to audiences' exposure to media and in this age of social media dynamism, audiences tend to actively engage the media with business mindset because of the many options it presents. According to the concept of selective perception, information, message or news that is perceived favourably is more likely to be remembered by a reader, viewer, or listener than news that is perceived unfavourably. Additionally, a viewer's mindset will influence how they understand a news occurrence. Selective perception also refers to people's propensities to misunderstand and misinterpret persuasive communications in light of their own biases. Selective exposure and selective retention are two concepts related to selective perception.

The effectiveness of initiatives to alter attitudes through informational campaigns is influenced by selective retention. People retain information that they desire to recall. Between selective perception and selective retention, there is a fine line. According to Joseph Klapper, selective retention happens when someone who has been exposed to communication from a few minutes ago gives a distorted or incomplete account of its contents. It can be challenging to tell whether the content of the media exposure was initially selectively perceived, correctly perceived but not retained, or whether the two processes worked in concert.

Conclusions

The changing ties with the advancement in Information Communication Technology (ICT) is not the mainstream media's fault but it will be a huge disadvantage and abysmal to them if they do not fast-track the need to live up to expectations regarding catching up with this rapid development. Majorly, the mainstream media needs to align and adapt to these changing ties that the emergence of new media technology has brought to the fore through investment in modern technology and equipment, as well as training and retraining of media handlers who are already armed with the instruments of ethics and professionalism.

Recommendations

Aside the training and retraining of journalists, reporters and media practitioners need deliberate alignment with the changing ties the 21st Century rapid technological development that takes place almost on a daily basis. This deliberate alignment with the rapid 21st Century ICT move will make the media to be able to retain substantive part of their audience instead of losing them to other platforms that have low or little knowledge in journalism practice. Alignment and training of media practitioners is the

lasting solution that can have meaningful impact on media legacies in the 21st Century.

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