

NEW MEDIA AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE FIFTH ESTATE OF THE REALM

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Abstract

The advent of new media technologies has significantly transformed the communication landscape and reshaped human experiences, globally. The evolution of public discourse and democratic engagement has facilitated the emergence of new media as the fifth estate of the realm. Layered upon the traditional fourth estate (the press), new media channels - driven by digitally networked individuals and groups - have largely sidestepped propaganda and governmental control, to curate participatory communication, real-time mobilisation, and drive advocacy for attitudinal re-orientation and community development. This study adopts a qualitative methodology using a descriptive approach and is underpinned by the Networked Public Sphere Theory (Yochai Benkler) and Media Convergence Theory (Henry Jenkins). It interrogates the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp in facilitating hashtag activism (#), video call-outs, podcasts, photographs, animations, text-based content and live streaming to share real-time information and reactions for mass mobilisation. These practices activate citizen journalism by upholding the principle of collective intelligence, expanding democratic participation and amplifying marginalised voices through the connection of local issues to global audiences. The findings underscore the necessity for virtual complementation of traditional communication systems, as new media has become a crucial alternative platform for civic engagement and social change - towering as a formidable stratum in the power structure and social hierarchy of the society, and thus deserving recognition as the fifth estate of the realm.

Key Words: New Media, Communication, Multimedia, Social Media, Advocacy

Introduction

Human societies evolve in tandem with the technological discoveries of the age. The digital vein of the twenty-first century wields remarkable impact on the society by connecting and engaging people, ideas and projects through new media platforms. New media channels allow for digital transmission of information through the creative use of online communication channels dedicated to community-based exchanges, interactions, content-sharing and collaboration. The digital extension of conversations through highly technical platforms has remarkably intensified our communication experiences globally and altered our perception of community, both locally and globally. New media has subtly altered our collective reality and affected the way we do business and go about leisure; transforming all angles of human interface, from personal to communal.

New media in its digital-first nature makes for ease of use and distribution via technological formats which include: Mobile Applications, Videos, Blogs, eBooks, Emails, Podcasts, Video games and other Interactive contents. New Media channels deploy smart device applications like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Streaming, Snapchat, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and the like, as spread channels for its content. According to Bruce Warren, “the rise of digital platforms has transformed how content is created, disseminated and accessed. New media relies on digital methods of distribution such as the internet for reach; as such, new media is far more accessible for the average individual or small organization to produce” (2). This new reach has spiraled into a web of virtual communities, from the local friends list to an expanded list of millions of followers within reach. The evolution of the virtual community can comparatively match the live interactions of the moonlight gatherings in the early African experience; which featured a flow of face-to-face human interactions in dialogues, folktales, songs and dances.

According to Mbede, exploring the digital tools can conveniently foist creative images, videos, animation and sound scape to improve communication and presentations aired on multiple internet-driven applications like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook streaming (9). New media is reflected to be a potent tool for the convergence of ideas, helpful for the extension of societal conversations from local climes to global communities, through shared realities and formidable advocacies. From trending stories and blog posts, to the use of hashtags (#) to locate conversations, case notes, video, podcasts and info graphics; new media platforms allow multiple users a portal for easy communication and collaboration in commerce, theatre, education, entertainment and across the various strata of the human society. Beyond the socialising feature of such interactions, the sense of unity and close kinship births an accountability structure which positively influences the behavioural pattern of the community members.

The leadership operational in the administration and distribution of resources for the common good of the community members compelled a calibration of the modern day ‘three estates of the realm’, which creates a structure and social hierarchy responsible for a sovereign national entity. The separation of powers in the governance process, citing Nigeria, for instance, with the Executive, Legislature and Judicial Arms of Government. These arms of government are charged with the crucial social responsibility to provide leadership, distribute amenities for the benefit of citizens and not only make laws, but operate a functional social justice system to facilitate national integration and progress, although not without its peculiar sets of challenges.

In a socially impacting coinage in 1787, “Burke said there were the three estates in parliament, but in the Reporters’ gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all (Beattie Carlyle 4). The press emerged in the era of print technology as the fourth estate of the realm, and journalism emerged as a prodigious apparatus of society in reportage and the ripple effects of news breaking in the society provided citizens requisite information for participation in the governance process. The electronic media through the radio and television were also key features of the age. The term fourth estate remains a valid power force in the society. “The purpose, ‘raison d’etre’ of this forth estate is to act as a counterbalance, a systematically opposite force that is to report, verify and question matters of governance, public matters as well as commercial ones” (www.ubuntufm).

William Dutton in his work, *The Fifth Estate* acknowledges digitally networked individuals across social media platforms as, an emergent democratic force that operates outside traditional media institutions. Dutton submits that, “the fifth estate derives its power from the ability of networked individuals to search for information, access alternative sources and hold institutions accountable” (14). According to Aniebiet Mbede, “the application of social media becomes an indispensable tool for the ‘engineering’ of audience members” (96). Using hyperactive and interactive modules via websites and applications dedicated to forums, micro-blogging, social networking, social bookmarking and social curation, the power expressed through the participatory use of digital platforms have become a formidable force that shapes and changes lives, communities, touching all areas of our collective civilisation and shared humanity.

Theoretical Framework

The Networked Public Sphere Theory

The Networked Public Sphere Theory conceptualises digital communication networks as a platform for decentralised flow of information in a way that empowers citizens to participate in public conversations. The restructuring of public discourse in a peer-to-peer model which lowers the barriers to entry and promotes plurality of voices in the creation and circulation and contestation of information, within the ‘digi-sphere’. The principal proponent of this theory, Yochai Benkler in his 2006 work, *The Wealth of Networks*, posits that, “digital networks enable social production and participatory communication, fostering a more democratic public sphere where individuals collectively shape public discourse” (9). This summarily provides that, the fifth estate, occupied by digitally networked citizens can perform the watchdog function through online advocacy and social movements. At this level, local issues increasingly gain international attention and this makes for civic surveillance and accountability. The social media tool remains adept in speaking against the inequalities of globalisation and clearly reflects the perspective of those at the bottom of the digital divide. The use of pre-recorded video uploads, live streaming options, real time chat boxes (with instant response options) lend credence to the fifth estate claim of new media in the communication realm. This stance is pivotal in driving engagement from networked individuals as the dominant narrative of the new (and now prevalent) media of mass mobilisation and interaction, the social media. The broad-based tools available for mobilisation and building of online communities. The integration of people and ideas, sharing content, sparking honest conversations and debates ripples transformation even in the offline community, as new media seem to be redefining our sense of community in the digital age.

Media Convergence Theory

The cultural and technological fusion allows media content flow across multiple digital platforms. According to Henry Jenkins, convergence represents a world where every story, sound, brand and relationship plays itself out across the maximum number of media channels (2). This theory is applicable in the integration of smartphones, livestreams, hashtags, videos and online commentaries to amplify public issues. The multimodal circulation of protest footages across platforms in Nigeria during #EndSARS illustrates Jenkins argument that, “users co-produce through participatory culture” (6).

New media as an interactive computer-mediated technology facilitates the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks and has evolved into a formidable power stratum in the society, wielding influence enough to affect governance and other salient areas of human endeavours. This study examines the social impact of multimedia interactions and the influence of principal digital media outlets in the twenty-first century leading to global amplification of concerns and culture. In the light of the foregoing, the virility of new media sensibilities and sensitivities is noted to reconfigure our communal narrative by presenting a whole new dimension of societal interactions, monitoring of authorities and fostering a sense of shared interest and goals.

New Media: The Evolution of the Fifth Estate of the Realm

From News Media to New Media, the internet and the digitisation of information channels continue to alter the collective reality of our day-to-day communication. With an unending influx of people into the virtual community and the unlimited talk and engagement time available to be online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and without having to leave a spot. The digital age brings with it the ability to search for answers, create content, brand, advertise, network, and report to a global audience just at the click of a button. According to Manovich, “new media are forms of media that are computational and rely on computers for redistribution. Some examples of new media are computer animations, computer games, human-computer interfaces, interactive computer installations, websites, and virtual worlds” (Lev Manovich 12).

From the invention of postal services around 550BC to bridge communication gaps across long distances, to the invention of Telegraph in 1792; from the use of pneumatic posts in 1865, the entry of telephone and radio in 1890 and 1891 respectively, offline social media channels have always been in operation but needed improved technologies to enhance the pace and possibilities in the communication experience. The rapid change in network technologies from the use of CompuServe to network Super Computers in the 1940s, from 1997 when Six Degrees (a social media site) that enabled users upload a profile and make friends with other users came on board. With the innovations in computer desktops, laptops, smartphones and tablets, set the pace for technological participation in the lives of community members and with the advent of social media, the world became better engaged as a global community through information sharing which serves as a tool formidable for mass mobilisation.

Over the past decade, traditional media has undergone a fundamental shift. Traditional media channels such as television and radio providing content in a one-directional manner, disseminating content created by a company or corporation and to be consumed by passive viewers is challenged by the alternative provided by new media channels. The new media channels (which mostly used social media platforms) provide endless opportunities for users to act as both creators and consumers of the media products. Examples of interactivity on social media may include posting a new photo to Instagram, commenting on a YouTube video, or ‘downvoting’ content on Reddit. As Flew observes, “new media are digital, and often have the characteristics of being manipulatable, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive (Terry Flew 11)”. Jenkins corroborates that, “audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between new and old media, are demanding the right to participate within culture” (6). In a similar view, Deleuze reiterates that, “the outcome of this desire for involvement is creating room for regular people to create and distribute media content themselves, opening the door for diverse opinions and perspectives, or user-generated content” (Gilles Deleuze 7).

Computer applications like Myspace and LinkedIn became famous in the early 2000s and by 2006; Facebook founded by Mark Zuckerberg (in 2004) launched its now over 3 billion monthly user platform (as at January 2026). According to reports from an online source, www.smallbussinesstrends.com, “other sites like X (formerly Twitter), Google+ WhatsApp, TikTok, Spotify, Snapchat, Reddit, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram are emitting high degree energy through the forces of creative inputs of texts, video clips and animations; live feeds, tweets and retweets, chats and plethora applications that enhance high-speed communication”. As the online community provides a viable communication systems and structures to drive conventions and departure from conventions in the global community.

Social media has clearly distinguished itself by creating significant influence that is globally acknowledged as an advocacy tool for the mass movements which can trigger massive change. According to Pew Research Centre, “In America, about 90% of young adults 18-29 years use social media with equal gender representation in the online community”. Marshall McLuhan’s ‘Global Village’ is made more realistic as ever, through the convergence of ideas, sharing of thoughts and trends freely, across the globe. This is made possible by social media channels converging online communities and reaching the globe at a mouse click.

It is pertinent to note that consistent human interactions create communities. These communities are made up of not just the number of people within the geographical location, but their notions about life, which forms their collective reality and the number of people and their stance for or against an opinion influences the outcome of such matters; this on its own extends the conversation on what is permissible or not in the community. New media channels have become an apparatus of communication has proven to be not just an alternative rendezvous but a formidable coalition in the power vein and social stratum of the society. The emergence of new, digital technologies “signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources” (Ivon Shapiro 99). Online communities have become a great influence in the twenty-first century as this option for the creation and dissemination of information, cultures and opinion has gathered a global community into a space of interaction that is not limited by time. The real time mechanism of online systems fast track feedback, and makes for unified and universal knowledge, which can be translated into action in a spontaneous manner over any issue that affects the society, this can be termed, the fifth estate effect.

Beyond its fun overcoat, new media channels are becoming increasingly useful in changing the narrative of societal concerns paraded in online domains, which bother on social issues. The use of social media platforms for example, has enhanced the integration of the masses’ incoherent noises into formidable voices that speak and

spit volcanic change. From trending stories and blog posts, to the use of hashtags (#) to locate conversations, case notes, video podcast and info graphics; this emerging platform allows multiple users a portal for easy, on the spot communication and collaboration in commerce, education, and entertainment has indeed transformed the social fabric of humanity, this is the twenty-first century mystic which traverses every social media platform, with its uniqueness and strong feature point.

As a global platform with billions of users across the globe, Meta owners of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Threads and The Horizon Metaverse. These platforms allow users to connect as 'friends' and through that connection, we see what our friends are doing through live streaming and get to react in real time (or delayed), with options to 'like, love, wow, be sad and be angry' about the post. The interactivity allows for text comments, ability to share thoughts and experiences and also share voice and video calls on such an interactive social media platform.

Social media has not only transformed the information management system of institutions of governance and communication; but has caused a shift in the lifestyle and possibilities in the world of its users and non-users, in what Ramesh Srinivasan labels the 'digital revolution', considering how new technologies increasingly shaped labour, economics, and politics. In 2011, the Egyptian Revolution was driven on the wings of social media. The protesters formed their own media center. They compiled footage and distributed videos (and posted them online) to show their struggle against police brutality (Ramesh Srinivasan 3). In June 2011, I found an interesting T-shirt in Tahrir Square...emblazoned on the T-shirts were the logos of popular social media platforms: Facebook, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) below them, the words "Methods of Freedom". The people of Egypt wrote officially to Facebook to help them "organise their government" (Ramesh Srinivasan 17). This is a 'realm' of influence. Technology has expanded the scope of society to meet the need of time and this tends to put the communities at a vantage position economically, politically and socially. New media channels present a powerful converge for the read (online news feeds and newspaper); audio listening (radio and recorded sound); and an influential visual watch (in live and recorded videos). And the number in the network is the power to cause change. It is the place of the users to properly leverage on these platforms to speak, listen to, and form opinions to arbitrate in matters of concern in the global and local community.

The Fifth Estate of the Realm: Advocacies and Advancements in Nigeria

New media channels are commonly presented (or misrepresented) to be distractive to the users of traditional communication systems, who reduce the best side of new media to just its ability to excite or sell markets online. Contrarily, "new media channels have evolved into a powerful and forceful network that can influence public opinion, public policy and is noted to increase citizen's access to information and social consciousness. For instance, the impact of social media advocacy in movements and departures from movements has earned its successful promotion to climb to the social rung as the fifth estate of the realm.

Social advocacies are largely to persuade the public to support specific issue positions (McHale 5)". The citizens now have a platform for mobilisation, sensitisation and collective action, for a just cause. In practical instances social media has proven effective in influencing public opinion, promoting a collective identity, to shape political participation, garner support for a cause via fundraising and most importantly, to demand for fair treatment of the people in the society. The symbiotic relationship between technology and social change has tremendous impact. "No one expected a revolution to take place in the land of the Nile but it did. it all played out at a breakneck speed of like a video reel with the whole world watching it, with over 100,000 protesters in Egypt (Srinivasan 3)". In 2014, when 276 school girls were abducted by Boko Haram in Chibok, an online campaign caused a global steer. In 2017 an outcry on Twitter #EndSARS and #EndSARSNOW, a social media protest in Nigeria revealed countless stories and implicating videos which indicted the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a special branch of the Nigeria Police Force. The stories revealed the exploitation, torture and killings which were alleged to have been perpetrated by SARS, hence the call for the immediate scrapping of the department through tweets and retweets with the hash tag #EndSARS and #EndSARSNOW. This campaign compelled the attention of the Federal Government of Nigeria. The Inspector General of Police ordered for an immediate restructuring of the Department.

The fifth estate of the realm is an electronically driven estate, the e-estate. Even the electronic justice (e-justice) system deployed by new media users (as instituted by Digitally Compliant Governments - DCGs) also strategically changes the pace and the procedure for justice should be prompt. These are made possible by automated courts processes and electronic communication tools. Such e-justice solutions create an innovative environment as the judicial service of Ghana and Namibia has gone paperless with online public portals for queries. This supports the cause for advocacy in e-justice social crusades, e-advocacy. Such advocacies are made possible through specific tools generated to initiate and sustain interactions with a point spread that does not only aid mass communication but 'mass action'. An example is the use of hash tags (#).

Hashtag (#) is the social media tool that is used in grouping the conversation through multiple platforms linked through the unity reference tool. As an indexing system, it makes it easier to store, search for and collect information. Celebrities with a huge fan base now called 'followers' on social media platforms to find content

hyperlinked on a topic or an issue, and assists content creators navigate this feature to get the users to find already existing audiences. Whether it is campaign a political campaign #nextlevel or protest, #EndSARS #lekki #elzazaky #leahshaibu #freesowore #dasuki #blacklivesmatter #bringbackourgirls, or social global fun #icebucket challenge, #selfie, #pf3hotooftheday #tenyearchallenge, or the need to raise awareness for Cancer in the #Noshavenovember or religious programmes like #halelujahchallenge, #nsppd; social media circumvents the bottlenecks in the reportage and reach of traditional media systems by instantly trending news and issues by the number of users aware of the information at a go. This is one of the greatest benefits of new media channels as a communication system of the fifth estate.

In 2019, a serving law maker in Nigeria, Senator Elisha Abbo (Adamawa North) was trending as he was caught on video repeatedly slapping a nursing mother at an adult toy shop in Wuse 2, Abuja. The Senator who initially denied the allegation later admitted to the offence, when the CCTV footage went viral on several social media platforms. The outrage on social media forced the ninth senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, to set up a committee to investigate the matter. It is speculated that the senator offered a humongous amount of money running into millions to settle the feud, and charged to court and the matter settled with huge compensation paid to the victim, this is the societal watchdog function which new media avails the world.

The case of Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan (PDP Kogi-Central) involved in an altercation with Senate President, Godswill Akpabio (APC) over seating arrangements on the floor of the senate on the 20th of February, 2025. The disagreement escalated to a broader feud between the politicians, the brew drew national attention and sparked conversations and significant public debate on issues such as: gender equality, legislative ethics, moral conduct, institutional integrity and the political culture. The operational role of the fifth estate within Nigeria's contemporary communication landscape, bypassing the institutional gatekeeping of traditional media consistent with Network Public Sphere Theory with multiple voices contesting on who was right or wrong on the matter and its attendant surrounding issues. The videos of the senate session were in wide circulation, screenshot of statements widely circulated, the livestreaming of interviews and opinion threads across platforms demonstrates media convergence. The issue gained global attention and intensifying pressure and a call to tread with caution.

Social media influencing through the use of new media channels emboldens its claim as the fifth estate. The case of Martins Vincent Otse (popularly known as VeryDarkMan #VDM) emerging with the Ratel Movement in the Nigerian social space. He is a digital activist with over 2.8 million followers on Instagram and 4 million followers on Facebook (as of January 2026). VDM is known for condemning corruption, highlighting societal issues, philanthropy and mass mobilising for social justice. Otse embodies a contemporary manifestation of the fifth estate of the realm as reports from Pulse Nigeria reveal that, "VeryDarkMan launched a non-profit organisation, the Martins Vincent Otse Initiative (MVOI) raising over N377 Million (as at January 2026). VDM and his team (the Ratel Movement) undertake on site interventions by providing borehole water supply to selected communities, mobilising youths across Nigeria for monthly sanitation exercises and intentionally uses his social media platforms to create awareness on matters of public concern, for example: the killing of Christians in Benue state, Nigeria. Otse visited Yelwata community (live streamed the rummage of the attack) and the outcry forced the issues to international concern and intervention, this can be viewed the fifth estate of the realm finding expression and forcing action for community goals.

This illustrates how technology shapes our world and expresses the potency of the voice of the people in the digital age. According to Manuel Castells, "Advances in media technology and communication has continued to force tangible changes in our lives producing a unifying fast, fluid and functional society. It is information that creates awareness, awareness spurs action, and action brings change, the kind that is as prompt as those championed by social media advocacies" (19). However, the challenges of new media channels include, credibility of source causing the menace of fake news and verifiability in the case of carefully construed blackmail, or doctored videos (deep fake) to serve an ill-intent. Hate speeches and cyber bullying are also the down side of the otherwise innovative system of digital dissemination of information and ideas in the human society.

Conclusion

This study concludes that new media possesses the capacity to converge diverse voices and opinions, transmitting a wide range of ideas across borders, while retaining the ability to transform traditional mindsets and deconstruct systems that hinder progress, thereby creating new pathways for societal advancement. New Media has emerged as a platform for social change and has evolved in both reach and impact, functioning as the fifth estate of the realm.

In light of the foregoing, it is evident that the virility of social media has reconfigured communal narratives by introducing a participatory and regulatory dimension to society. Acting as a societal watchdog, new media is fit to be heralded as the fifth estate of the realm. Through real-time documentation, transnational visibility, online communities and influencers have demonstrated that the convergence of communication through digital channels can shape public discourse and drive change.

The findings underscore the necessity for virtual complementation of traditional communication systems, as new media has become a crucial alternative platform for civic engagement and social transformation - towering

as a formidable stratum in the power structure and social hierarchy of society, and thus deserving recognition as the fifth estate of the realm.

Recommendations

This study recommends the strengthening of digital media through comprehensive digital literacy programmes and policies that promote responsible civic engagement in digital advocacy. Such measures should encourage digital content creators to produce factual and ethical content, thereby reducing issues of inauthenticity and credibility and curbing the spread of fake news and photoshopped images, AI-generated content, deepfakes and other forms of information distortion.

Furthermore, the use of social media should be institutionalised, with users offered digital trainings as part of registration or platform upgrade processes. This will encourage collaboration between the fourth estate (traditional media) and the fifth estate (digital media). Rather than disputing the legitimacy of bloggers as journalists, traditional journalists should engage in blogging, while professionalism is encouraged across the board.

Social listening, connectivity and interconnectedness should be promoted to extend the influence of new media, particularly in political and social campaigns. In addition, appropriate laws should be enacted to prevent cyberbullying and offline assaults arising from trending issues and social campaigns.

Future research should further examine the long-term effects of new media usage on both local and global audiences. New media will continue to serve as a vital tool for activating and sustaining citizen journalism by upholding the principle of collective intelligence, expanding democratic participation and amplifying marginalised voices through the linkage of local issues to international audiences.

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