The lack of ethics in digital media and its influence on political decisions in America

Narrative 1: Emphasis on Gatekeeping in social media

By

IBRAHIM KANTE

The information role the media has played since the appearance of journalism has grown exponentially as technology advanced. Its impact followed the same motion especially with the coverage of political activities to the point where it plays an unavoidable and dynamic role in the conservation of a republic. As the number and diversity of content sources increases, people are more likely to receive distorted or dishonest information and act accordingly. In such an environment, people need credible and reliable journalism to understand their community and the world at large, and to make decision as informed citizens. It is that perspective that this paper will present the lack of ethics in digital journalism and what it means for future elections.

Digital media is any media that is encoded in machine-readable formats. Digital media can be created, viewed, distributed, modified and preserved on digital electronics devices. Their proliferation correlates with the arrival of the internet and have now become a very popular source of information. According to Pew Research (2017), 4 in 10 Americans often get their news online. One of these digital media outlets is social media and its growing role as a news source. In that regard, an article from Political Research Quarterly (2015) admitted that “young adults, especially, use social networking sites such as Facebook as supplemental tools for communicating with offline. [..] These communication habits include information disclosure and political engagement” (p.139). As to show the perfect match of social media with information seeking and political advocacy.

What makes technology great is that it is value neutral which means it provides data to people who then decide how they want to use these data. So, being provided with more and more data gives us a better ability to choose. Value neutral becomes more important when it comes to journalism and news in general. It is totally fine to a be non-value neutral source that supplements its data with a piece of opinion to let the public judge if the interpretations are good or not but what can’t be done is pretending to be value neutral and then actively promoting an agenda. This is where social media and some of the online sources are really crossing the line which may lead to some legal consequences.

It used to be that traditional media (Tv, radio, newspaper) were gatekeeping because of lack of competition. There were only three major television networks: ABC, NBC, CBS. These networks dictated what the people could see through gatekeeping, creating an oligopoly in news sectors. Technology and internet (in this case) was supposed to counteract this phenomenon, and it has. Progressively, journalism became less regulated because no one’s approval was needed to create a website and no one interfered in your interaction with your audience. That’s why you can google any news outlet or listen to your podcast on YouTube. Social media came with the promise of continuing this neutral behavior and everybody embraced these platforms on the promise of free and transparent interaction. The implicit guarantee was that a site like Facebook would not interfere between the content and the audience. However, with the investment of capital in social media for marketing campaigns to target specific groups, we have experienced a clear shift of the earlier guarantee. Indeed, instead of being just a social media platform, these sites tried to promote an agenda regardless of the subscriber’s preferences. In that regard, certain channels are being unjustly silenced while others are being actively promoted. For their defense, they claim to promote “better news”, a term only they can interpret.

This is the kind of reshaping of ethics in journalism in the aftermath of the creation of the internet that Dombrowski (2007) pointed out and claimed has caused the wrath of some people, particularly conservative voices. As an example, Prager U, a non-profit conservative digital media outlet, is suing Google/YouTube for “discriminating against its right to freedom of speech solely because of PragerU’s political identity and viewpoint as a non-profit that espouses conservative views on current and historical events” (PragerU, 2017). Despite being able to lawfully refuse service because of private ownership, these companies are engaging in a lie of neutrality that may have some legal ramifications. Free speech regulations such as libel and slander aren’t under the liability of the social media platforms and the internet in general but instead are the responsibility of the faulty person or organization. Therefore, when Facebook or twitter decide to automatically mute speech they deem unacceptable, they shift away from their original contract of free and open platform to become a publisher. These companies ought to be wise in their judgement of their role otherwise there will be serious copyright issues in the near future.

Furthermore, these sorts of clever censorship are also noticeable in newspapers that transitioned to online platforms. Many of these traditional newspapers now have websites designed for online publications and social media pages for better interaction with their audiences. Despite their transition, they did not leave out their gatekeeping attitude prevalent to traditional medias. Indeed, the enormous blowback received by *The Atlantic* for hiring the Kevin Williamson, a writer known for his conservative views, shows how much resentment there is towards opposing viewpoint. Such behavior, however negative, is acceptable from a publisher but absolutely forbidden from a supposed free and open interaction platform like social media.

Having analyzed the different aspects in which digital media sources are doing a poor job maintaining fundamental codes of ethics through their gatekeeping abuses, it is necessary to understand the impact of these abuses in the political world. In fact, given the high number of people receiving their information from social media and internet in general, journalistic power has been granted to internet giants like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and per extension Google. Also, the fact that these companies reshaped their original roles has turned them into cultivators of content. Consequently, the importance given to these platforms gave tremendous power over politics and future elections. J. Gainous and K. Wagner (2013) rightfully noticed that social media in politics has occasioned “a fundamental shift in the way people interact with each other, obtain and process information, and ultimately use this information to choose who governs” (p.3). They effectively made their case by also pointing out two complementary changes that social media brought to American political communication system. These sites regrouped like-minded people into the same arena while simultaneously lowering their exposure to opposite opinions thus strengthening polarized political debates. The extremism of both sides, enhanced by social media, has created a bad precedent for the representative system we cherish and the reaching of a common ground. Besides, given their discriminatory habits towards certain channels there is a strong case made to objectivity on the political field. Their tendency to silence contents they deem bad has risen doubts about whether or not they are actively pushing for an agenda. If such claim were to be true, it would mean that “Silicon Valley is flipping election in its spare time.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Through the digital media, politicians hope to inform and influence media users, in other words voters. However, the science of communication somewhat undermines this hope. Indeed, opinions are formed mostly through personal contacts with opinion leaders or reference groups. In addition, the consumer of the media product prefers the information that justifies his political choice, so that in the best cases, we only touch the independents or the hesitant. Social media has therefore become a preponderant factor of indirect political influence, especially since traditional print media is losing ground as we are experiencing a big technological makeover. Their role on the political field should (and will) be further scrutinized as an attempt to promote a level playing field.

The lack of ethics in digital media and its influence on political decisions in America

Narrative 2: Emphasis on fading traditional ethics in digital media

By

IBRAHIM KANTE

The information role the media has played since the appearance of journalism has grown exponentially as technology advanced. Its impact followed the same motion especially with the coverage of political activities to the point where it plays an unavoidable and dynamic role in the conservation of a republic. As the number and diversity of content sources increases, people are more likely to receive distorted or dishonest information and act accordingly. In such an environment, people need credible and reliable journalism to understand their community and the world at large, and to make decisions as informed citizens. It is that perspective that this paper will present the lack of ethics in digital journalism and what it means for future elections.

After previously analyzing the preponderance of digital media (pew research) in the political “game” and how it is fundamental to conserve the ethics of basic journalism in this era in order to sustain open and healthy political discourse. In other words, this topic will revolve around how digital media outlets can perform their job in accordance with the respect of the ethics of their profession. To do so, we will first retrace the texts that serve as a foundation for journalistic ethics while contrasting them with the pitfalls of contemporary journalism, particularly due to the changing conditions of practice of the profession finally; we will propose some ideas to reconcile these traditional ethics with digital media given its influence on the political platform.

As aforementioned, digital media are lacking on key ethics in their field it is impacting the political discussion. But first, what is ethic or ethics of journalism for that matter. According to the French Professor Nillès, “ethics is an individual disposition to act according to the virtues, in order to seek the right decisions in a given situation” and this statement has been reflected on most of the texts defining the ethics of traditional journalism throughout Europe. In that regard, the introductory sentence of the Munich Charter (1971) states “the right to information, free expression and criticism as one of the fundamental freedoms of every human being. [...]The responsibility of journalists towards the public takes precedence over all other responsibilities, in particular towards their employers and the public authorities.” (p.1). This mention shows the moral responsibilities journalists must have towards their audiences and always seek the truth. On the other hand, the right of information must not trump the right to privacy. In that regard, the United States scored 14/40 on violations of user rights according to the freedom house report (2017). Indeed, while this score is low compared to other countries, it shows the malice of social media companies (and the federal government) by mining user data and use it in dishonest ways. The latest of these misconducts is the well-known Cambridge Analytica Scandal with data collected from about 87 million users according to the Guardian (2018). If they were able to “steal” user data from Facebook and allegedly meddle with the 2016 election, it means that Facebook was collecting data in the first place. This is an astonishing violation of the God-given right to privacy outlined in the 4th amendment.

One other canon of journalism revolves around the independence of the press. This principle was to relieve journalists from any obligation other than public's. In the code of ethics adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1926), this rule was included to promulgate impartiality and avoid conflict of interests within the editorial body. Needless to say that this code is long gone in nowadays digital media. Not only their main revenue is funded by ads but also their use user data to target specific groups likely to adhere to a narrative. This dependence on external funds makes them less objective and very vulnerable as we have seen instances of firing because of political disagreement (Vox, 2017). Also, this is a form of censorship because it provides news stories to users according to their supposed “preferences”. Instead of providing news “naked” from any interpretation and help the population to make informed citizenry decision, these sites engage in an auction off our time (on their platform) to channels that are ready to pay for it in accordance to our data. On top of that, even the supposed “preferences” aren’t respected entirely. Tucker Carlson (2018) made a segment on that by pointing out how YouTube uses tricks censor certain videos and with very vague/subjective explanations. In these circumstances, many conservative and center-right outlets are unable to get their messages across since the oligopolies in the digital media industry decide who has the floor (Heins, 2014).

Furthermore, the new digital era brought about a new wave of information as pointed out in the previous research through Dombrowski’s work (2007). However, he failed to point out the real danger of infotainment epidemic that is ravaging digital journalists. Indeed, since the hierarchy between information and entertainment is blurred nowadays, journalists have decided to mix them together. That practice, often seen on social media, creates three fundamental evils. First, it lessens the accuracy of the news in favor of catchy headlines (bad for the credibility of the publisher). This was exactly what Bruno (2011) in his “tweet first, verify later?” rhetorical question. Second, since the public got attached to these headlines, it alienates objective journalism whose work is deemed “boring” or “too complicated”. Finally, it emboldens the powers of these tech companies since they decide which stories can be trending as cleverly highlighted by Serazio (2018). His work pointed out how the race to fresh and trendy information challenged the political discourse in America (p.143).

To deal with this lack, even inexistence of ethical standards, this paper will try to address plausible solutions. First, to deal with the issue of data mining and misuse, an active campaign of awareness should be done to inform the people (users) about the real price to pay in order to use these “free” platforms. In that perspective, efforts are being done both by Facebook and Instagram to inform users as accurately and as often as possible. Also, these companies will be held automatically accountable for any stolen data from their servers. A payable version could even be adopted to secure sensitive information for those who can afford it. In addition to this disclosure, these sites can engage in an appeal process to identify (accurately) what are the criteria for a ban/demonetization of contents instead of ambiguous buzzwords like “inflammatory content”. Also, the influence of these platforms should be limited to channels one subscribes to instead of some “you might like” sections. In a nutshell, the control should be given back to the user. Finally, journalists on these platforms should do a better job of informing the population rather than seeking for “likes” and “retweet” (Bruno, P.21). Given their importance in American politics, they must be part of that awareness and cultivate the conservation traditional ethics in their profession.

The deontology of the journalist implies that the journalism is both independent, objective and favoring the pluralism of opinions. To do this, the journalist abides by an ethical charter that recalls the different objectives of the profession he carries out, as well as his rights and duties. Observing today that this profession is increasingly reshaping itself with the rise of digital media, it seemed important to identify the points criticized in the opinion, to propose, if not solutions, at least some lines of thought in the material. At a time when the necessity of ethics in digital media increases from year to year, it seems essential that a profession whose main mission is that of informing itself to grasp the flaws that concern it, to better adapt to the new demands of information consumers. Journalists, and now digital journalists participate in the proper functioning and preservation of democracy because the quality and relevance of the information they produce and transmit enables the various economic, political and judicial actors to make the right decisions. That is why they are affected by a perpetual questioning of their way of appropriating professional ethics in a rapidly changing world. The field of solutions that remain to be imagined and experimented is vast.

References

American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). Code of Ethics or Canons of Journalism (1926). Retrieved April 28, 2018 from <http://asne.org/asne-principles>

Bruno, N. (2011). TWEET FIRST, VERIFY LATER? How real-time information is changing the coverage of worldwide crisis events. Retrieved April 29, 2018, from <https://nicolabruno.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/tweet_first_verify_later2.pdf>

Dombrowski, P. (2007). The evolving face of ethics in technical and professional communication: Challenger to Columbia. Ieee Transactions on Professional Communication, 50(4). doi:10.1109/TPC.2007.908729

Evans, H. (2014). Book review: Tweeting to power: The social media revolution in American politics. *The Journal of Politics,* *76*(3), 15.

Freedom on the Net 2018. (March 01, 2018). Retrieved April 28, 2018 from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/united-states>

Gainous, J., & Wagner, K. M. (2014). Tweeting to power. The social media revolution in American politics. Cary: Oxford University Press US.

Greenfield, P. (March 25, 2018). The Cambridge Analytica files: The story so far. Retrieved March 26, 2018, from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/26/the-cambridge-analytica-files-the-story-so-far>

Heins M. (2014). The Brave New World of Social Media Censorship. Harvard Law review. Retrieved April 26, 2018, from <https://harvardlawreview.org/2014/06/the-brave-new-world-of-social-media-censorship/>

International – Munich Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists (1971). Retrieved April 29, 2018, from <http://www.mediawise.org.uk/european-union/>

Nillès J. J. (2003) « l’éthique est une compétence professionnelle », le Journal du Net, mars 2003 <http://www.journaldunet.com/management/0404/040432_ethique.shtml>

Pew Research center (2017) Pathways to news (updated March,2018). Retrieved from April 29, 2018 from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/04/key-trends-in-social-and-digital-news-media/>

P., P., R., & D. (2015). Talking politics on Facebook: Network centrality and political discussion practices in social media. Political Research Quarterly, 68(2), 377-391. doi:10.1177/1065912915580135

Romano, A. (2017, August 09). Google's fired "politically incorrect" engineer has sparked a broad ideological debate. Retrieved April 29, 2018, from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/9/16112050/google-fired-engineer-james-damore-alt-right-free-speech>

Serazio, M. (2018). Producing popular politics: The infotainment strategies of American campaign consultants. Retrieved April 26, 2018, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08838151.2017.1402901>

1. Common expression used to describe the preponderance of social media in politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)