

The Influence of Social Media on News Consumption and Public Perception

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of social media platforms—specifically X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—on news consumption and perceived credibility. The research addresses how platform algorithms, user-generated content, and news influencers contribute to shifts in public trust and engagement with journalism. Framed by key communication theories, including agenda-setting theory, cultivation theory, and framing theory, the paper investigates how these platforms’ structure information exposure and affect public perception. Three case studies are analyzed to illustrate these dynamics: X’s role during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Facebook’s involvement in the dissemination of misinformation, and TikTok’s emergence as a primary news source for Gen Z. The findings suggest that social media platforms not only alter how news is consumed but also challenge traditional journalistic authority by elevating alternative voices and reshaping audience expectations. The paper contributes to ongoing discourse on digital media literacy, algorithmic influence, and the future of credible journalism in the digital age.

Introduction:

In the digital age, the way individuals consume news and form opinions about current events has undergone a profound transformation. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter, hereinafter referred to solely as X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have not only changed the facets of traditional journalism but also redefined the mechanisms through which information is disseminated, evaluated, and trusted. This paper explores the central research question: *How do social media platforms influence the way people consume news and perceive its credibility?*

Specifically, the focus is on understanding how algorithms, user-generated content (UGC), and news influencers interact with platform dynamics to shape public opinion and trust in journalism, through the lens of established communication theories.

The traditional news ecosystem, once governed by professional gatekeepers such as editors and reporters, has evolved into a participatory environment where ordinary users and content creators can influence public discourse. While this shift has broadened access to information and enabled real-time coverage, it has also introduced significant challenges related to misinformation, polarization, and declining trust in journalistic institutions. As social media platforms prioritize content based on engagement likelihood rather than factual integrity, the credibility of news is increasingly subjected to social validation metrics rather than editorial standards.

This issue holds critical relevance in today's information landscape, particularly as global societies navigate an era characterized by political division, algorithmic personalization, and evolving standards of digital literacy. Public trust in media has shown signs of volatility, with skepticism toward traditional journalism coinciding with increased reliance on social media as a primary news source—particularly among younger audiences. Major events such as the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of TikTok as a credible

platform for civic discourse emphasize the urgency of examining how social media reshapes news perception and journalistic authority.

To frame this analysis, several foundational definitions are necessary. According to Ashar, social media refers to “web-based applications that promote the creation and exchange of user-generated content,” encompassing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok. Naab defines UGC as content created and distributed by users rather than the platform operators themselves. These platforms serve as facilitators, offering the tools for individuals to generate, customize, and disseminate media. Golino’s definition of algorithms emphasizes their function as technical mechanisms that prioritize content based on engagement probability rather than chronological publication, thereby influencing what users see and interact with. Additionally, Stocking introduces the concept of “news influencers,” defined as individuals with significant followings (100,000 or more) who regularly post about current events and civic issues and may or may not have traditional journalistic affiliations.

This paper integrates key communication theories to explain the phenomena at play. Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by McCombs and Shaw, explores how media influences public perception by selecting which topics receive attention. In the social media context, trending hashtags and viral content increasingly shape news coverage, often preceding traditional journalism. Cultivation Theory, developed by George Gerbner, suggests that prolonged media exposure cultivates users’ perceptions of reality. This is particularly evident in platforms like Facebook or TikTok, where algorithmically curated feeds reinforce political and ideological beliefs. Framing Theory, advanced by Goffman and Entman, provides a lens to understand how media presentation, through wording, emphasis, and imagery shapes audience interpretation and emotional response.

To ground these theories in real-world application, this research will examine three case studies:

(1) Twitter/X's role during the 2020 U.S. election in shaping political narratives and combating misinformation; (2) Facebook's algorithmic involvement in the spread of disinformation during electoral cycles; and (3) TikTok's emergence as a trusted news source among Gen Z, focusing on the platform's influence on media literacy and the role of influencers in shaping civic engagement.

Collectively, these components provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the evolving relationship between social media platforms, news consumption habits, and public trust in journalism.

Theoretical Framework

The current media environment is increasingly shaped by the dynamics of social media, where news dissemination and public perception are no longer directed solely by traditional journalism. Understanding this shift requires foundation in communication theories that explain how media content and exposure influence public discourse. This section explores three foundational theories; Agenda-Setting, Cultivation, and Framing to assess how social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok affect news consumption and public trust.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory, first developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, posits that while the media may not dictate what individuals think, they significantly influence what individuals think about. The theory originated from their research during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, which found a strong correlation between the issues emphasized in the

media and the issues voters considered most important. “The mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the ‘agenda’ of the campaign” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176).

Historically, agenda-setting was viewed through the lens of traditional news organizations—television networks, newspapers, and radio which curated and prioritized issues based on editorial judgment. However, in the current digital landscape, social media platforms have assumed much of this gatekeeping function. Instead of editorial, algorithms now determine the prominence of issues by promoting content based on engagement metrics. As Lang and Lang observed, “The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about” (as cited in McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177).

In the context of social media, agenda-setting has become decentralized. Trending topics on X, viral TikTok videos, and algorithmically promoted Facebook posts often shape the issues that gain public attention, sometimes compelling mainstream news organizations to follow these grassroots leads. Influencers and user-generated content now play a significant role in setting the public agenda, often challenging the authority and credibility of traditional journalism. For example, during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, X served as a central platform for real-time updates, misinformation, and corrective content, with hashtags and retweets dictating the news cycle.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner in the late 1960s, focuses on the long-term effects of media exposure. Originally designed to study television, cultivation theory argues that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality. According to Gerbner (1969), mass-produced messages form "a common culture through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence" (as cited in Potter, 2014, p. 1016).

Gerbner's theory was distinct in its macro-level systems approach. It emphasized the interplay between media institutions, content, and audience perceptions. Cultivation was understood not as immediate attitude change, but as a gradual process of socialization whereby repeated themes and narratives in media shape collective worldviews. As Potter (2014) explains, "Cultivation begins with the insights of the study of institutions and the message systems they produce, and goes on to investigate the contributions that these systems and their symbolic functions make to the cultivation of assumptions about life and the world" (p. 1017).

While originally applied to television, cultivation theory is highly applicable to social media environments. Social media platforms provide continuous streams of curated content, often reinforcing users' pre-existing beliefs and perceptions through algorithmic personalization. For instance, Facebook users engaging with politically conservative content are likely to receive more of the same, cultivating a worldview that may be disproportionately negative or polarizing. Similarly, TikTok's "For You" page, which uses AI-driven personalization, frequently presents users with ideologically aligned or emotionally resonant content that shapes their perception of political events and societal issues.

The theory's relevance is especially pronounced among younger demographics. Gen Z, for instance, increasingly relies on TikTok or X for news consumption. The content they engage with, ranging from influencers' opinions to quick explainers on complex topics can subtly cultivate attitudes about issues such as climate change, race, and public health, even when not rooted in traditional journalistic standards. This continuous exposure forms a self-reinforcing media environment that contributes to selective perception and belief reinforcement.

Framing Theory

Framing theory, rooted in the work of Erving Goffman (1974) and expanded by scholars like Robert Entman, explores how information is presented and what effect this presentation has on audience interpretation. According to Entman's framework, framing involves emphasizing certain elements of perceived reality within a message too shape how audiences understand an issue, guiding their interpretation of its causes, moral significance, and potential solution.

Framing theory investigates how media emphasize specific elements of a story such as keywords, metaphors, or images to influence perception. Historically, framing was operationalized through print and broadcast journalism, where headlines, photos, and tone could dramatically affect how an issue was understood. Today, social media platforms amplify this happening, often through emotionally charged, sensationalist, or visual content optimized for engagement.

On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, visual storytelling plays a significant role in framing. A viral video of a protest may emphasize either peaceful demonstration or violent confrontation, depending on the framing intent. Hashtags and captions often provide moral or ideological context that shapes interpretation. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok

creators used humor and music to frame public health messaging, influencing both awareness and behavioral compliance among younger users.

Furthermore, social media's participatory nature allows users to act as framers themselves.

Influencers discussing current events with large followings—referred to as “news influencers”—can shape discourse by selectively presenting facts, adding commentary, or curating sources.

These user-driven narratives often bypass traditional verification processes, allowing alternative frames to gain traction rapidly. As a result, the framing power of social media can challenge or reinforce journalistic authority, depending on alignment with mainstream narratives.

Framing theory also extends to platform design. Algorithms that prioritize emotionally stimulating or divisive content inadvertently contribute to the prominence of certain frames over others. This dynamic aligns with Entman's observation that framing involves “salience,” or making particular ideas more noticeable and memorable to audiences. Social media platforms are designed to promote salience not necessarily based on importance, but on likelihood of engagement.

The integration of agenda-setting, cultivation, and framing theories provide a multidimensional lens for examining how social media platforms influence public understanding of news and trust in journalism. These theories, while originating in the context of legacy media, are deeply applicable to today's algorithmically driven, user-powered, and visually immersive information landscape. The convergence of real-time dissemination, personalized feeds, and participatory content creation demands a critical reassessment of media effects in the digital age.

Digital News Consumption, Media Trust, Algorithmic Influence, Misinformation, and Generational Trends

The digital era has dramatically reshaped the landscape of news consumption. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok have emerged as dominant sources of news for millions, particularly younger generations. While these platforms provide rapid access to information, they also introduce complex challenges related to credibility, selective exposure, algorithmic bias, and misinformation. This synthesis examines the implications of these developments by integrating current research findings on five interrelated themes: digital news consumption, trust in media, algorithmic influence, misinformation, and generational consumption trends.

Digital News Consumption

Social media has transformed from a supplementary source of information to a primary news outlet, especially for younger audiences. According to the Pew Research Center, nearly half of U.S. adults report obtaining news from social media "often" or "sometimes," with over 50% of X users using the platform regularly for news updates (Walker & Matsa, 2021). These platforms allow users to consume news passively, often without seeking it directly, a phenomenon that contributes to accidental exposure to diverse viewpoints and events (Masip, Suau-Martínez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018).

However, scholars have noted that while access has broadened, attention has become fragmented. Digital news is often consumed in short, decontextualized bursts—"soundbites and snippets," as described by President Obama, potentially compromising audience comprehension and critical thinking (Lee, Lindsey, & Kim, 2017, p. 254). This dynamic has also contributed to a

perception of social media news overload, with consumers reporting feelings of fatigue and anxiety due to the continuous flow of information across platforms (Tian, 2022).

Media Trust and Perceived Credibility

Trust in news media has become increasingly fragile, particularly in the digital age where users interact with a diverse mix of traditional journalists, independent influencers, and algorithmically curated content. Cha (2025) emphasized that the perceived credibility of social media as a news outlet is shaped by three key dimensions: the message, the source, and the media. “Users’ with their contacts, source credibility, trust in alternative news sources, reliance on social media, and frequency of using social media to get news positively predict the perceived credibility of social media as a news medium” (Cha, 2025, p. 2).

Interestingly, a sizable portion of social media news consumers trust influencers individuals who may or may not have journalistic backgrounds more than traditional outlets. Pew Research revealed that one in five U.S. adults, and 37% of adults under 30, regularly obtain news from influencers on platforms like TikTok and X, with a majority stating that these figures help them “better understand current events and civic issues” (Stocking et al., 2024). This shift in news authority reflects a transformation in public expectations of journalism, where personality and relatability increasingly influence perceived trustworthiness.

Algorithmic Influence

Central to the structure of digital news consumption is algorithmic filtering, a mechanism that tailors content based on user behavior, interactions, and preferences. Golino defines algorithms in social media as “technical means of sorting posts based on relevancy instead of publish time,

in order to prioritize which content a user sees first” (Golino, 2021). This level of personalization based on user behavior can inadvertently reinforce users’ existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse or opposing viewpoints.

Moreover, many users remain unaware of the extent to which algorithms curate their news feeds. Studies show that over 60% of Facebook users were unaware of how content was filtered and ranked, which raises ethical questions regarding transparency and the autonomy of users in navigating digital information (Tian, 2022).

Algorithms also influence content framing. Platforms prioritize content that drives engagement that may typically be emotionally charged, sensational, or visually stimulating posts, thus shaping the way news stories are presented and interpreted. Matthes (2009) notes that framing in media involves “selection and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages” (p. 349). On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, the framing of news through trends, hashtags, and visual storytelling significantly impacts public perception.

Misinformation and Information Overload

A major consequence of algorithmic curation is the proliferation of misinformation. As Lee et al. (2017) observed, “top ‘fake election news’ stories generated more engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined” (p. 254). This trend highlights how misleading or false content, often designed for virality, can overshadow credible reporting.

News overload further exacerbates this issue. Consumers overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information may adopt selective exposure strategies or disengage from news entirely. According to Holton and Chyi (2012), “news surplus forces consumers to tune some content out... cope with

frustrations, develop stronger filtering habits, or simply ignore the news altogether” (as cited in Lee et al., 2017, p. 255). In response, audiences have begun filtering news based on emotional resonance, perceived reliability, or social validation, rather than journalistic integrity.

Tian (2022) also found that media literacy plays a moderating role in news avoidance. Users with higher levels of media literacy were better equipped to filter information effectively and were less likely to experience news fatigue. This highlights the importance of equipping audiences with the critical skills necessary to navigate complex digital media environments.

Generational Trends

Generational differences in news consumption are particularly pronounced. Younger demographics especially Gen Z and Millennials, show a distinct preference for digital-first platforms. Research by Masip et al. (2018) that 46% of U.S. citizens use social networks to access news, with figures rising significantly among individuals under 30. TikTok, in particular, has emerged as a key player among younger users who increasingly rely on short-form video content for news updates.

This shift brings both opportunities and concerns. On the one hand, the accessibility and immediacy of social media democratize news consumption, enabling broader civic participation. On the other hand, younger users may be more susceptible to biased or incomplete information, especially when news is consumed in highly visual, context-light formats.

The rise of news influencers, particularly those without journalistic training raises questions about the long-term implications for media literacy and democratic engagement. Pew’s 2024 report found that 77% of influencers who share news content have no formal affiliation with a news organization, yet they hold significant sway over public opinion.

The convergence of digital technology and social media has irreversibly altered how news is consumed, perceived, and trusted. While platforms such as TikTok, X, and Facebook offer unprecedented access to information, they also pose challenges related to algorithmic bias, misinformation, and declining trust in traditional journalism. As generational patterns of media consumption continue to evolve, so too must efforts to foster media literacy, promote credible journalism, and encourage responsible content curation.

Case Studies Analyses

In an era defined by rapid information exchange, social media platforms have emerged as both indispensable news conduits and prolific grounds for misinformation. This section examines how three dominant platforms; X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok functioned as sites of news dissemination during pivotal political and public-health events. Drawing on agenda-setting, cultivation, and framing theories, each case study illustrates how platform design, user behaviors, and moderation strategies influenced what users saw, how they interpreted it, and the degree to which they trusted it. By exploring concrete examples from real-time election updates to the COVID-19 “infodemic” and Gen Z’s embrace of short-form video news, we illuminate the complex dynamics through which social media shapes public perception of news credibility in digital spaces.

Case Study 1: X and the 2020 U.S. Election

Social media platforms such as X have reshaped how individuals consume news and assess its credibility, this was most acutely evident during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. As a dynamic of real-time news, X attracted a majority of its users to consume news directly on the

platform, with 55 % reporting regular news engagement there (Walker & Matsa, 2021). This instance, however, also accelerated the spread of misinformation: emotionally charged rumors, particularly allegations of widespread “voter fraud” traveled more rapidly and widely than neutral or factual updates, driven by a pronounced negativity bias in user engagement (Youngblood et al., 2023). Faced with a surge of unfiltered content, many users narrowed their feeds to ideologically aligned sources, reinforcing echo-chamber behaviors and exacerbating political polarization (Tian, 2021).

Features unique to X such as hashtags and retweets served as powerful conduits for both legitimate reporting and unverified claims. Rallying tags such as #Election2020 and #StopTheSteal enabled peer-to-peer resharing that often outpaced traditional media channels, and research indicates that news shared by trusted contacts carries greater perceived credibility than content issued directly by publishers (Lee, Lindsey, & Kim, 2017). Recognizing the platform’s critical role in shaping discourse, X introduced “soft moderation” measures in late 2020, appending warning labels to disputed tweets. However it was revealed these labels exerted minimal corrective effect and, in some instances, reinforced partisan beliefs among highly engaged users—stressing the limitations of such interventions when they lack prominence or enforcement (Blanchar & Norris, 2024).

More stringent actions such as preventing retweets of labeled content inadvertently redirected misinformation to other social ecosystems, such as Facebook and Reddit, where it often re-emerged with renewed traction (Dvoskin, 2021). This cross-platform spillover highlights a critical challenge: platform-specific policies can suppress false narratives locally, yet without broader coordination, these narratives simply migrate, undermining overall efforts to protect the public against falsehoods.

Beyond mechanics of engagement, X exerted a decisive influence on public discourse and journalistic practices. Agenda-setting theory posits that media influence operates not only by informing audiences but also by directing attention toward particular issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Throughout the 2020 campaign, elite voices from political leaders to opinion-makers, leveraged X to amplify narratives about mail-in voting and electoral integrity, compelling mainstream newsrooms to respond in real time and thereby reinforcing the salience of those topics. This two-way dynamic created a feedback loop: social media trends dictated newsroom priorities, and traditional outlets' coverage, in turn, fueled further social media engagement. Cultivation theory adds another layer, suggesting that sustained exposure to consistent media frames can normalize specific worldviews (Mosleh & Rand, 2022). Repeated exposure to rumors of election fraud cultivated a collective anxiety about the sanctity of the vote, even when evidence-based belief in those rumors was uneven. This "moral panic" effect emphasizes how repeated themes can shape audience perceptions, creating a reality in which misinformation's emotional resonance outweighs its factual basis.

Journalistic adaptations during this period included live-blogging, rapid fact-checking, and real-time "truth meters" embedded in televised coverage. Nevertheless, nearly half of Americans continued to source news via social media at least occasionally (Walker & Matsa, 2021), underscoring that even the most rigorous newsroom interventions reach audiences already engaged in platform-mediated echo chambers. Consequently, frames established on X frequently spilled into mainstream coverage, compelling journalists to chase social media-driven talking points even as they endeavored to uphold professional standards.

Ultimately, X's experience during the 2020 election illustrates the platform's dual role as both a rapid news distributor and a powerful opinion-shaper. Real-time updates facilitated

unprecedented access to unfolding events but also amplified misinformation; the ease of retweeting and hashtagging acted as engines of agenda-setting and framing; and moderation tools, while necessary, have yet to fully restore public confidence or prevent falsehoods from migrating across platforms. As democratic societies grapple with the implications of social media polarization, these dynamics offer crucial insights into how news consumption habits and perceptions of credibility evolve in digitally mediated public spheres.

Case Study 2: Facebook’s Misinformation Crisis

Facebook’s role in the COVID-19 “infodemic” provides a stark illustration of how social media platforms shape both news consumption and perceptions of credibility. An infodemic as defined by the World Health Organization is when “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak”. During the pandemic, Facebook became a primary source of health information for many Americans: in 2021, roughly half reported obtaining at least some vaccine-related news via social media (Mitchell & Liedke, 2021). With this broad reach, Facebook emerged as a key battleground for accurate information as well as for adversarial networks seeking to spread harmful falsehoods. Global disinformation efforts were estimated to generate some 3.8 billion views on Facebook within a single year, fueling confusion and contributing to real-world harms such as vaccine hesitancy and eroded trust in health authorities (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025).

Facebook’s algorithmic design played a pivotal role in amplifying these false narratives. The News Feed algorithm prioritizes content that engages users, which inadvertently favors sensational or emotionally charged posts. Research shows about 75% of news links shared on Facebook are posted without the sharer reading the article, a phenomenon termed “sharing

without reading” (Brundidge & Rice, 2021). This behavior allowed misleading headlines and partial truths to spread unchecked, as users forwarded posts based on headline appeal or peer endorsement rather than on content accuracy.

Compounding the problem, Facebook’s algorithm reinforced existing beliefs—confirmation bias—by surfacing content aligned with users’ prior preferences and social circles. False narratives that resonated with preexisting fears or political predispositions found receptive audiences and could rapidly achieve viral status. One study of COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook found that dedicated misinformation spreaders often occupied central positions in the network, coordinating across groups and topics—outpacing the reach of fact-checkers who tried to debunk the false claims (Yang et al., 2021).

In response, Facebook partnered with third-party fact-checking organizations and introduced warning labels on flagged content. Yet these measures had limited reach: an Avaaz report found that only 16 % of COVID-related misinformation posts carried a warning label, leaving the vast majority to circulate without notice (Avaaz, 2020). Moreover, studies demonstrated that debunking content rarely traveled as far as the original falsehoods, since misinformation purveyors often leveraged network centrality to amplify their messages beyond the reach of corrective interventions.

This ambivalence toward aggressive moderation culminated in an early-2025 announcement that Facebook would scale back its reliance on third-party fact-checkers, deeming their interventions “too much censorship” and not sufficiently effective (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025). This pullback, despite evidence that fact-checking can reduce belief in false claims, underscores the tension between curbing misinformation and maintaining user engagement on the platform.

Beyond algorithmic mechanics, Facebook’s interface design and social context further shaped credibility judgments. In the News Feed, posts from reputable news outlets appear alongside those from friends and ambiguous websites in a uniform format, blurring traditional signals of authority. Research has shown that when a news article is shared by a trusted friend, users tend to attribute greater credibility to it—regardless of the source’s actual reputation (Metzger et al., 2015). As a result, a questionable story can acquire legitimacy through social endorsement, while objectively reliable reporting may be undervalued if not personally validated..

In sum, Facebook’s COVID-19 misinformation crisis highlights how platform policies, algorithmic incentives, and social dynamics converge to shape what users accept as credible news. By amplifying content that drives engagement and relying on imperfect fact-checking mechanisms, Facebook inadvertently enabled the rapid spread of dangerous falsehoods. The case shows the need for reform of algorithmic adjustments to deprioritize sensationalist content, enhance resistance for sharing unverified claims, and transparent credibility signals to ensure that digital news ecosystems support informed public discourse rather than undermine it.

Case Study 3: TikTok as a News Source for Gen Z: Impact on Consumption and Credibility

Short-form video platform TikTok has rapidly become a primary news source for Generation Z, exemplifying how social media’s evolving formats influence news exposure and credibility frameworks. Since 2020, the proportion of young Americans reporting regular news encounters on TikTok has grown more than fivefold; as of early 2024, approximately 39 % of U.S. adults under thirty say they get news on the platform (Pew Research Center, 2024). Despite institutional news organizations comprising fewer than one percent of the accounts followed, nearly nine in

ten users encounter news—ranging from humorous takes to breaking updates—via algorithmic recommendations (Wang et al., 2025).

TikTok’s algorithm functions as an informal gatekeeper: rather than editorial judgment, by prioritizing videos based on user engagement and viewing history rather than editorial judgment, the platform amplifies certain stories and voices, shaping which issues appear most salient to Gen Z (Pew Research Center, 2025). Users who spend more time watching videos about climate activism or social justice may suddenly find related content dominating their feeds, regardless of their explicit search queries.

Simultaneously, charismatic creators and influencers have emerged as de facto news anchors. A 2024 Pew–Knight analysis found that 37 % of TikTok users regularly get news from social media influencers—84 % of whom lack formal affiliation with legacy news outlets (Pew Research Center, 2024). These influencers distill complex events into concise, personalized videos that blend humor, personal anecdotes, and commentary. For many young viewers, this peer-to-peer style resonates more than traditional top-down reporting: authenticity and relatability now often eclipse institutional authority.

The Reuters Institute reports that audiences on short-form video apps pay more attention to influencers than to credentialed journalists (Reuters Institute, 2023). As a result, TikTok videos on protests, policy proposals, or election developments can amass millions of views, driving news awareness among demographics that might otherwise overlook conventional media sources.

However, this shift carries significant implications for news literacy and perceived credibility. With limited space for context, TikTok videos may omit vital details—sources, dates, data—leaving viewers to rely on tone and popularity cues. Only 16 % of Gen Z respondents in one

study expressed strong confidence in established news media, and many indicated higher trust in influencer-provided information than in institutional reporting (Kim, 2025). Moreover, media literacy research reveals that high school students often struggle to detect manipulated or misleading content—even when provenance clues are present (Breakstone et al., 2021).

The rapid-fire visuals and minimal explanatory framework on TikTok can obscure the distinction between fact-based reporting, opinion, or satire. When a popular creator shares a sensational claim, its virality can lend it an air of credibility, especially if it aligns with viewers' preexisting beliefs. At the same time, the decentralized nature of TikTok's news environment democratizes information dissemination and invites diverse voices into civic conversation.

To reconcile these opportunities and risks, media literacy initiatives must evolve alongside platform innovations. Teaching young users to cross-check viral claims, recognize algorithmic biases, and value transparent sourcing is critical. Platforms themselves can support these efforts by incorporating prompts that encourage users to verify information or by partnering with educational organizations to embed micro-lessons on discerning credible content.

In essence, TikTok's rise as a news source illustrates how social media platforms influence both the form of news consumption and the underlying credibility frameworks. Algorithmic gatekeeping determines which stories capture attention, while influencer-driven narratives reshape trust dynamics. In this new ecosystem, institutional reputation matters less than engagement metrics, content style, and peer endorsement. Ensuring that digital-native generations can navigate this landscape responsibly will require collaborative efforts from platforms, educators, and news organizations to foster robust critical-thinking skills amid ever-evolving media environments.

Insights & Opinions (Industry + Gen Z/Millennials)

The current media landscape, reshaped by social platforms, reveals a dynamic interplay between legacy outlets, emerging creators, and younger audiences. In discussions with Gen Z and millennials, it became evident that social media serves as the principal gateway to news for the majority of young adults. Individuals stated they check Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Reddit multiple times daily, illustrating a clear shift from traditional channels to algorithm-driven feeds . Young consumers value immediacy and convenience but express wariness toward trustworthiness. While nearly all millennials and gen-z spoken to, acknowledged social media as a primary news source, however many considered the content they see on social media as “neutral” or “somewhat untrustworthy,” and described feeling overwhelmed by the volume of news information put out on social media. While speaking on the subject some millennials and gen-z admitted they follow “news influencers” and rarely verify the information disseminated by influencers.

From the vantage of a seasoned news industry professional, adaptability and authenticity are nonnegotiable. As one executive explained, “news consumption on social media is on the rise ... and it’s more important than ever to be adaptable and meet the audience wherever, whenever, and on whatever device they’re on” (personal communication, April 2025).

Authenticity and transparency emerged as core tenets for building and maintaining credibility online. The executive noted when discussing the changing landscape of having “news influencer” “Authenticity and transparency are the most important attributes ... an audience that will come back and trust you” (personal communication, April 2025). Reporters across legacy outlets have increasingly leveraged TikTok, bringing the same journalistic rigor to short-form social videos as they do in traditional broadcasts exemplifying this principle.

A recent fireside-chat panel hosted by communications agency Peppercomm, “Beyond the Newsroom: How Media Are Becoming Influencers,” further illuminated these trends. The session featured Kathleen Hays, former Bloomberg anchor and creator of the Substack podcast *Central Bank Central*; David Gaffen, Reuters Breaking News editor and author of the LinkedIn newsletter *The Business of America*; and Alex Puutio, Ivy League professor, Forbes and *Fast Company* contributor, and AI entrepreneur. Each brought distinct perspectives on trust, credibility, and audience engagement.

Kathleen Hays emphasized the power of niche expertise and consistent branding in fostering trust on non-traditional platforms. By focusing on central banking content and tailoring newsletter length to subscriber preferences, her Substack has cultivated a dedicated readership that values specialized insight over general news bulletins (Hays, 2025). Her approach underscores the value of depth and stability in content curation.

David Gaffen cautioned that trust often aligns with ideological affinity, warning that “people develop trust simply based on their point of view,” which can reinforce echo chambers and fragment public discourse (Gaffen, 2025). He noted that personal accounts often outperform faceless newsroom feeds, as audiences gravitate toward familiar voices that create compelling narratives around breaking stories (Gaffen, 2025).

Alex Puutio highlighted the authenticity signals that resonate most strongly with Gen Z: unpolished, in-the-moment video formats. He observed that “young viewers don’t trust a person or an ad if the camera doesn’t shake ... they trust it more if there is this camera shake,” explaining that raw production values suggest genuineness rather than manufactured messaging (Puutio, 2025).

Collectively, panelists agreed that while creators and influencers provide immediacy and relatability, audiences still demand rigorous fact-checking and source transparency. In conversation with millennials, many articulated a dual reliance on social feeds for speed and on legacy outlets for accuracy, a balance that newsrooms must strike to retain credibility.

In response, established organizations are embedding bite-sized news segments within popular apps and training social-media teams to adopt a conversational, less corporate tone. “We have young people on the team using these tools every day—that’s influencing what we’re doing,” noted the executive, describing efforts to humanize communications and cultivate ongoing dialogue with followers (personal communication, April 2025).

These insights reveal a media ecosystem in flux, where immediacy and authenticity coexist with the enduring value of journalistic rigor. Younger demographics lead consumption trends, prompting news organizations to refine strategies that combine niche expertise, targeted platform engagement, and fact-based reporting. By coordinating the speed of social distribution with the credibility of legacy journalism, outlets can bridge the gap between real-time engagement and informed discourse.

As Gen Z and millennials continue to shape norms around authenticity, platform preference, and trust, media leaders must remain agile prioritizing the channels where their audiences reside, delivering content in formats that resonate, and upholding the highest standards of transparency. Through this balanced approach, organizations can sustain trust, promote well-informed engagement, and chart a sustainable path forward in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social media platforms influence both the manner in which news is consumed and the public's perception of its credibility. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, cultivation theory, and framing theory, the analysis demonstrated that algorithmic design, user-generated content, and social endorsement mechanisms collectively reshape traditional journalistic authority and public trust. Through three case studies: X's role in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Facebook's COVID-19 misinformation crisis, and TikTok's emergence as a news source for Gen Z, this paper illustrated the multifaceted ways social media platforms structure information exposure and guide audience interpretation.

First, the agenda-setting function of social media platforms has become decentralized, transferring much of the gatekeeping power from editorial boards to algorithmic processes. On X, trending hashtags and retweet dynamics determined which political narratives gained prominence during the 2020 election, often compelling mainstream outlets to follow users' interests rather than set their own agendas (Walker & Matsa, 2021). This crowd-driven prominence can elevate issues rapidly, but it also allows misinformation to gain traction before fact-checking interventions can take effect (Youngblood et al., 2023). As a result, users' newsfeeds reflect a blend of professional reporting and peer-amplified rumors, challenging audiences to distinguish between vetted and unverified content.

Second, cultivation theory underscores that sustained exposure to algorithmically curated content cultivates users' perceptions of reality over time (Gerbner, 1969). On Facebook, personalized news feeds reinforce existing beliefs through confirmation bias, amplifying sensationalist or emotionally charged posts at the expense of balanced coverage (Tian, 2022). During the COVID-19 infodemic, this dynamic resulted in widespread vaccine misinformation, as sensational

narratives outperformed factual news stories in engagement metrics (Lee et al., 2017). The gradual normalization of these skewed perspectives can foster collective anxieties, such as doubts about vaccine safety, demonstrating how long-term algorithmic exposure shapes public attitudes.

Third, framing theory revealed that not only what news is presented but how it is presented dramatically affects interpretation (Entman, 1993). On TikTok, short-form videos rely on visual cues, tone, and concise narration to frame complex issues for Gen Z audiences. Influencers act as informal news anchors, blending personal anecdotes and humor to make content relatable (Pew Research Center, 2024). Yet the brevity that makes these videos engaging can omit critical context—sources, statistics, and opposing viewpoints—leading viewers to assess credibility based on popularity signals rather than journalistic rigor (Puutio, 2025). Consequently, framing on TikTok privileges emotional resonance and relatability over nuanced analysis.

Insights gathered from conversations with Gen Z and millennial individuals emphasized that social media is now their primary news gateway, yet they remain wary of credibility. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information and admitted to relying on “news influencers” without routinely verifying their claims. From the perspective of a seasoned news-industry professional, authenticity and transparency emerged as indispensable for maintaining trust online; audiences return to sources they perceive as genuine and forthcoming about methodology and sourcing (personal communication, April 2025).

Collectively, these findings highlight the paradox of social media as both an enabler of broader civic engagement and a facilitator of misinformation. While platforms like X, Facebook, and TikTok democratize news access allowing diverse voices to contribute to public discourse, they also destabilize traditional credibility cues, inviting audiences to navigate a more complex

information ecosystem. The implications for journalism are profound: news organizations must adapt by integrating real-time engagement strategies, embedding clear sourcing in social content, and collaborating with platforms to enhance transparency around algorithmic processes (Stocking et al., 2025).

In conclusion, social media platforms have irreversibly altered news consumption patterns and credibility judgments. By reframing who sets the news agenda, cultivating selective realities, and redefining frames of interpretation, these digital environments demand new approaches from both journalists and news consumers. Only through a combination of adaptive newsroom practices, platform accountability, and empowered audience literacy can the promise of democratized information be realized without compromising the integrity of journalism in the digital age.

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