Research on the Impact of Digitalization on the Democratization and Decentralization of the Media Industry

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Abstract: *The emergence of digital technology has brought tremendous changes to the media industry. This paper will discuss the impact of digitalization on the democratization and decentralization of the media industry. In the digital age, people have easy access to media through a variety of mobile devices. This lowers the threshold to join the media and encourages people to actively choose and participate in the dissemination process of media products. In this way, the discourse power of the media industry is diluted by the general public, and digitalization expands the possibilities of public democracy and resource decentralization. However, digitalization also brings limitations to the media industry, including digital inequality and algorithmic text control.*

Keywords: *Digitalization; Media Industry; Democratization; Decentralization*

1. Introduction

Since the advent of mobile devices such as smartphones and computers, digital technology has increasingly permeated various aspects of daily life. The process of digitaliszation has expanded the presence of media in online domains, facilitating easy access to media for a growing number of individuals, enabling them to consume media products, express their opinions, and engage in group discussions[1]. Moreover, it has enhanced the efficiency with which media products are delivered to audiences, allowing people to choose from a wider range of options and participate more extensively in media practices[2]. This surge in audience initiative implies that the media can no longer capture everyone's attention as effectively as before. Consequently, the discourse power once held exclusively by the media industry has been diluted by the general public; meanwhile digitalization expands the possibilities for public democracy and resource fragmentation. However, it is important to acknowledge that digitalization also imposes certain limitations on the media industry. Therefore, this paper aims to explore both the opportunities and limitations digitalization brings to the democratization and decentralization of the media industry.

This paper tries to discuss the problem and find the answer. First, the advent of digital technology has enabled the media industry to offer more media products for people to choose from. As a result, the media industry loses access to most information and audiences, while digitization expands the possibilities of public democracy and diluts the media industry's voice. Digitalization can therefore be seen as an impact on the democratization and decentralization of the media industry. However, digitalisation has not always democratised and decentralised the media industry. It also brings limitations to the media industry, including digital inequality and algorithmic text control.

2. Opportunities

2.1 Self-choice and self-participation

Compared to the past, digital technology has facilitated easy access to media resources for the audience, providing them with increased opportunities for engagement. The broad participation of the people is one of the characteristics of democracy[3-4]. Technology has liberated people from previous constraints and expanded our choices[5]. It has dismantled barriers and broadened avenues for people's involvement in the media industry. Consequently, individuals now have greater prospects to participate actively in shaping the democratic nature of media. Moreover, internet users can explore diverse perspectives and exercise their right to select content and media that align with their own interests.

When a media product sparks discussion online, digital technology enables its rapid dissemination to millions of users through information sharing and hyperlinks. By monitoring user popularity trends, such discussions generally attract attention from various media platforms[6]. Therefore, digitalization not only enhances audience participation by expanding democratic engagement but also advances democratization within the media industry by elevating public discourse into mainstream attention.

Digitalization has fostered a more liberated environment for the media industry, facilitating enhanced freedom and interaction between the media and the public while promoting autonomy of the audience. Freedom is also a crucial aspect in evaluating democracy[3-4]. With advancements in technology, interactive elements have been incorporated by the media, transforming public participation from passive to active engagement[7]. The development of the media industry is intricately linked with its audience. This novel form of communication between the media and its consumers has been termed as "mass self-communication" by Castells. Digitalization enables content reformatting into various forms that can be widely disseminated through self-generated in content creation, self-directed in emission, self-selected in reception via internet platforms involving multiple individuals. This new mode of social communication is now pervasive across all sectors of the media industry. Through social media platforms, individuals can publish news reports and videos at a faster pace than journalists while expressing their own opinions akin to professional journalists. Information flow between audiences and media outlets has become more unrestricted with an increasingly egalitarian relationship compared to previous times.

Technological innovation has expanded the quantity and diversity of information sources, rendering it impractical for a few media entities to maintain control over information dissemination. The advent of digital technology and network platforms has decentralized the distribution of media products, resulting in more flexible, less structured, and inherently unstable new media organizations, which means the dominance of traditional media in shaping public discourse is being diluted[8].

People can effectively access the information they require through network platforms and express their own opinions on the Internet by posting and commenting on content. With an increasing number of media products being delivered online, individuals have a wider range of choices; however, audiences are selective about the information they consume and actively choose what aligns with their interests[9-10].

According to Webster and Ksiazek, public attention is limited in this digital age—leading scholars to describe it as an "attention economy". In this context, media companies are no longer exclusive vendors within a localized area but rather participants in a vast supermarket setting. Media products are categorized and displayed on various shelves while audiences enter this metaphorical supermarket to select and purchase goods. To entice audiences into choosing their offerings amidst numerous alternatives available at their fingertips requires significant effort from media outlets. Audiences also play a crucial role as consumers by leaving feedback that influences subsequent purchasing decisions.

The digitalization of media has facilitated the accessibility of information, thereby empowering audiences to exercise their right to choose and actively participate in various media platforms. Consequently, audiences have become more engaged than ever before across all facets of the media landscape. This paradigm shift has fostered a more egalitarian and liberated relationship between the media and its audience, elevating the significance of the audience's role within the communication process.

2.2 Horizontal Communication and Interaction

The process of digitization has facilitated the emergence of "We Media" and empowered individuals to actively engage as participants and creators within the realm of media production. This phenomenon not only amplifies public voices in cyberspace but also enables extensive scrutiny over the media industry, thereby advocating for and safeguarding their legitimate interests.

In the contemporary media industry, individuals have the ability to function as both journalists and media outlets, granting them greater autonomy in disseminating information. With just a website or app at their disposal, people can access the latest news and share their own ideas through instant messaging and rapid forwarding. As highlighted by Barber and Castells, this immediacy fosters horizontal communication among citizens rather than the vertical communication between elites and the masses that representative democracies tend to support[11]. New media empowers individuals to become active democratic producers once again, transcending their passive audience role. In contrast to traditional media controlled by a well-trained elite, people in the digital age can utilize media platforms to engage

with others anytime and anywhere via the Internet. Consequently, media is no longer an exclusive tool wielded from above but rather an accessible resource for everyone.

The advent of new technology offers a valuable alternative to elite mass communication since it enables ordinary citizens worldwide to directly communicate without intermediaries. By challenging hierarchical discourse, new media encourages direct interaction. Governments are increasingly unable to conceal or manipulate information as thousands of individuals can promptly initiate debates and mobilization through their mobile phones without central coordination. No piece of information can evade public scrutiny. At the same time, digital media allows the public to challenge hierarchical discourse. People can directly use new media to communicate, protest online and participate in democratic voting around the world. People can also express their views on any social issue in an open public space, where they can also see the views of other citizens. In the process of participating in media activities, the audience becomes an active participant in democracy.

In the digital era, the media industry has witnessed an expansion of media channels, facilitating greater accessibility to information for individuals. Digital media enables public communication and active engagement in selecting and participating in media products. Simultaneously, the diversity of information, audience autonomy, and interactive nature contribute to an increase in public power that impacts the authority of the media industry. This fosters equitable dialogue between the media and the public. Castells and Barber suggest that horizontal communication encouraged by digital technologies empowers citizens to challenge hierarchical dialogues and counter centralized discourses. For instance, following Prime Minister Aznar's defeat in the Spanish elections of 14 March 2004, he tried to manipulate public opinion by condemning the perpetrators of tragic events such as the Madrid massacre of 11 March 2004. However, the spontaneous mobilization of Spanish youth with mobile phones prevented such manipulation[12]. Undoubtedly, through digital media platforms, the public exercises enhanced oversight over both government actions and the operations of the media industry. Confronted with potentially conspiratorial information sources, audiences can synergize their perspectives through intercommunication while voicing dissent against governmental authorities and advocating for citizen rights protection.

3. Limitations

3.1 Digital Inequality

Digital technology has the potential to enhance democratization by facilitating allowing people to participate and interact broader. But this participation and interaction that benefits democracy and society is limited by "unequal access" to technology and networks, and perhaps even by the "very different skill levels" that people may have. This disparity in access is commonly referred to as "digital inequality"[13].

With an increasing number of social issues and activities being conducted online, citizens who lack internet access are deprived of their right to obtain media information and resources, leading to a form of citizenship deprivation[14]. Moreover, disparities in product use skills and ownership of digital technologies based on factors such as class, gender, and education levels result in certain social groups gaining greater influence while others become marginalized. This aligns with Burns' concern that further digital inequality will emerge between privileged and disadvantaged classes within society. The availability of resources is closely intertwined with the right to express oneself; hence, new technologies exert more control over information dissemination and resource allocation.

In addition, media convergence has exacerbated the imbalance between individuals and media companies. Despite the vast amount of information available to people, it remains concentrated within a few dominant media conglomerates. While the Internet may have initially been provided by numerous providers, it is increasingly being monopolized by major communications groups, mirroring their dominance in telecommunication and broadcasting systems [15]. This trend can be likened to staking claims in cyberspace to maximize profits. Consequently, only a limited number of media companies can emerge as prominent players in the competitive landscape, leading to a re-centralization of available platforms and channels for users.

3.2 Text Manipulation under Big Data Algorithm

In the era of digitalization, media companies can swiftly identify user commonalities through big

data algorithms. Once individuals are captivated by a media product, others who share similar interests may also be drawn to the same content. These intersections subsequently evolve into highly popular cultural products[10]. Therefore, in order to retain audiences' attention, the media industry tends to produce more analogous products with hopes that audiences will consistently gravitate towards these "most popular products".

As a result of this shared interest among audiences, new flexible organizations often emerge within the realm of new media. For instance, various social applications showcase different groups or tags representing specific interests. However, as representation of interests becomes increasingly scattered and new participants exhibit greater instability, these group formations tend to be vague and uncertain [8]. The cohesion within such organizations is primarily based on communication and social interaction; thus any divergence in opinions among team members may lead to disbandment. Nevertheless, team members promptly seek out new like-minded individuals to form fresh teams. The high mobility and instability inherent in these groups often results in lower-than-expected participation rates while casting doubt on their ability to serve as reliable and stable interlocutors during governmental selection processes or decision-making procedures—ultimately making it challenging for these groups' voices to garner attention.

Digital technology facilitates efficient information retrieval for users; however, it also exposes them to algorithm-driven content, thereby limiting their access to diverse information. Users create personalized online profiles, known as "Daily Me," to conveniently obtain desired information[16]. While this choice allows individuals to concentrate on specific areas of interest, it restricts exposure to new information and alternative perspectives. Additionally, media companies employ big data technology to recommend products based on user preferences. For example, when watching a video, viewers are presented with links to other engaging videos that may prolong their viewing experience. This is what Stengrim mentioned that new technologies disrupt the traditional media landscape by predicting audience choices and creating an illusion of voluntary selection of media products[17]. But in fact, it is important to note that the big data algorithm meticulously records every action of the user, thereby predicting their movements. Consequently, the information presented to the user is not autonomously selected and ultimately contributes to the phenomenon known as information cocooning.

The digitalization-induced textual control and the media industry's ability to shape consensus by maintaining control over textual interpretation have made the Internet less free and democratic than one might think[18]. All internet-based information is either meaningless data blocks or or filtered and selected available messages[11]. Such filtering acts as a form of mediation that hinders direct access to original data and establishes an insurmountable barrier between media companies and users. For instance, individuals predominantly rely on search engines as their primary means of accessing information. Users are required to input keywords into the search box or examine the top search rankings in order to obtain information; however, it should be noted that all the information obtained is sourced from the extensive communication network supporting the search engine. In reality, users do not directly interact with original data but rather access filtered information provided by the search engine. Therefore, users' access to information is inherently restricted by the influence exerted by the media industry.

4. Conclusion

The process of digitalization enables simultaneous global and local connectivity, while also facilitating universal access alongside personalized experiences. Its pervasive integration into various aspects of our lives has fostered a closer interconnection between media platforms and individuals. This paper focuses on the impact of digitalization on the democratization and decentralization of the media industry. Undoubtedly, digitalization has significantly contributed to enhancing democratization and decentralization within the media industry. With the support of digital technology, individuals are provided with a wider range of choices and opportunities for participation in media-related activities. People can access various media products and practices based on their personal interests, thereby ensuring greater autonomy and participation rights. Simultaneously, this phenomenon also leads to audience attention being dispersed across different media products, resulting in diverse discourse groups sharing common interests that may challenge the authority of the media industry. Consequently, there is a decline in power status for traditional media while public influence continues to rise.

However, digitization does not always exert a positive influence, as there exist numerous factors that hinder its democratizing and decentralizing effects. This article primarily focuses on two such

impediments: digital inequality and algorithmic manipulation. The existence of digital inequality highlights how access to digital technology affects both quantity and availability of media products; consequently creating disparities among audiences that restrict their choices and level of engagement. Furthermore, through horizontal and vertical concentration facilitated by digital technologies, the media industry gains more resources while maintaining control over content interpretation by utilizing algorithms determining the "most popular media products" which centralizes both its message dissemination, its audience reach-ability as well as the authority of its own voice.

Currently, it remains challenging to determine whether digitalization primarily promotes or diminishes democratizing processes within the media industry. But in the future, future developments driven by technological innovations may alter this parallel dynamic.

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