



THE ALGORITHMIC TRAP OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF DEEP DIVE JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The digital age has advanced the relay of information on digital platforms, although with some attendant implications on journalism practice. The penchant for engagement on social media platforms appears to have marginalized professional news with journalistic perspectives that gives media audiences' immersive experiences. This has resulted in placing undue pressure on digital journalists to meet up with engagement demands of the social media at the detriment of professionalism. The research was set out to exact how social media algorithms and content affect the journalistic values of news content on social media handles in Nigeria's digital space. The research took its theoretical standpoint from the spiral of silence theory and the mediatization theory of the mass media. The study was anchored on the interpretative phenomenological analysis method. The review and discussions of the research revealed that the flow of journalists' prowess is experiencing less visibility on the social media, in addition to the fact that social media algorithms are heavily anchored on engagements. The discussions also revealed that editorial integrity on social media is blurred, due to the value placed on sensationalism over context on social media algorithms. The discussion further revealed that media audiences who look out for deep dive journalistic experiences are often demoralized when social media narratives trigger their emotions with summarized news stories. The research recommended that the deployment of signature journalism, the integration of multimedia elements and the use of AI technology for the enhancement of visibility for deep dive digital experiences could serve to breach the algorithmic trap.

Keywords: Algorithm, Journalism, Media Audience, News, Social Media.

Introduction

The coming of the digital age has revealed some challenges along with the attendant advantages it holds. These challenges could not be farfetched especially within the parlance of journalism practice. Traditional journalism is known to be inundated with gatekeepers that ensure editorial vigour to news content in a way that depicts professionalism and credibility of traditional news. Consequently, the emergence of the digital age characterized by the social media and digital journalism according to Lee and Ma, (2026) has served to blur the lines of editorial integrity of media contents by blurring the lines of gatekeepers such as editors, and producers, who no longer play a frontline role on the dissemination of news content as a result of the attendant democratization of news on digital platforms. This democratization is clearly demonstrated in the way digital platforms provide avenues for engagements on digital platforms by way of comments, likes and shares, and thereby enabling instantaneous and real-time feedback (Charuwan, 2025). Apparently, the digital media ecosystem in the words of Hatice, and Hasibe, (2026) appears to be saturated by frameworks orchestrated to optimize engagements on digital platforms otherwise known as algorithmic structuration that serves to eliminate intensive and immersive storytelling experiences of news by journalistic prowess. This reality has served present news stories that lack depth and context, but limited to straight-line information that elicits engagements and interactions at the detriment of professionalism.

Surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of online newsrooms today are placed under intense pressure. These pressures are premised on the need to align with the contemporary trend of delivering news stories to command engagement. Owing to economic pressure, these contemporary news stories are delivered at the expense of salient journalistic narratives that serves to not just enrich news stories, but also to provide context and trajectory for immersive media audience experiences (Debbarma, & Sonia, 2026). This according to Imaralu and Osamuyi, (2026) has come to be herein identified by as the algorithmic trap. This entrapment plays out via a multiplicity of digital pressures ranging from the structuration of search engines on social media platforms and applications that give priority to engagement and followership over the need for the public to know and understand. Others include the proliferation of sensationalism in journalistic headlines on social media that undermines journalistic integrity, and the compromise of editorial rigour in order to attract followership and engagement, and thereby sacrificing context to content

(Bellaaj, 2025). Unquestionably, deep dive journalism is fast gravitating to extinction in today's digital ecosystem. This is largely because the technique demands study time, deliberate effort by media audience to immerse themselves in the news experience, in addition to the fact that it is also a capital intensive effort. Regrettably, Dian, & Aptist, (2026) posit that investigative techniques that once depicted journalistic prowess is gradually giving way by digital contents created by Artificial Intelligence (AI) which lack depth and context. This growing anomaly if not properly checkmated may lead to a professional crisis where the journalism profession could eventually become a mirage and an endangered practice (Jerica, 2026). The sad reality is that while the social media was welcomed as a contemporary technology that brought about the democratization of online media content, the platform has evolved into a systemic trap that has propelled the sensationalism of media news content and sacrificed the journalistic profession on the altar of emotional engagement (Andrey, 2025). There is a dire need to examine how this new reality has systematically segregated deep dive journalism and the resultant effected of the relegation of the role of the press to content creation on digital platforms.

The consequent justification for this research is anchored on the attendant friction between the morale and motive of paywall and revenue driven platforms on the social media and the departure of deep dive journalism aimed at infusing immersive journalistic experiences on online media audience. While traditional journalism is sequenced on professional technicalities of research and narrative storytelling, the digital ecosystem is cluttered by algorithmic miming fuelled by the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for visibility and engagement purposes (Aizat, 2026). This aberration has resulted in the production of viral driven stories saturated with shallow narratives. In addition, the role of gatekeeping formerly played by journalists, editors and producers has been taken over by citizen journalists who have dominated social media platforms with misinformation, fake news and polarizing news contents devoid of source verification and accuracy. Inherently, research has revealed that social media algorithms are not just perpetrators of journalistic marginalization, but they serve to amplify social disparities especially on vulnerable demographics.

The intentional aim of this research is set to exact the nature of social media algorithms. This would be done by evaluating the way they demean and relegate journalistic experiences at the altar of public interest in order to be able to advance the intellectual framework that will serve to close the algorithmic trap of marginalizing deep dive journalism on the social media. The

research also intends to examine how online news rooms are re-strategizing in order to meet up with the algorithmic trap rather than serving public interest in professional news reportage.

Statement of the Problem

The contemporary digital space appears to be currently characterized by the prioritization of engagement over deep dive journalism, where news is premised on objectivity, accountability, contextualization and interpretation. Today, on the digital space, digital algorithms especially on the social media seem to be prioritized to attract visibility over accuracy and objectivity which serves as the core annals of journalistic integrity (Irena, & Mentus, 2026). This misplacement of priority may have evolved into economic expediency for most news organizations who have been pressurized into the creation of news content that foster engagements. Angelica (2026) avers that these engagements serve to attract more digital traffic to their social media handles in order to boost their revenue drive via online subscriptions.

The resultant effect of the aforementioned state of digital newsrooms especially in a developing nation like Nigeria may create the marginalization of deep dive journalism especially with the elimination of gatekeepers on digital social media platforms today. This will eventually expose Nigeria's digital public with limited opportunities to comprehend contextual issues of national discourse that will serve to advance the economic, political, social and educational fortunes of the nation if care is not taken. The attendant consequences of this growing anomaly could enhance the elimination of the demand for accountability from public officers and institutions due to limited knowledge of their responsibilities and obligations to the nation, arising from the absence of deep dive journalistic experiences on digital platforms.

Objectives of the Study

The core objective of the research is to be able to examine the gap between social media architecture and journalistic ethics in order to be able to determine how social media algorithms and social media content impact on the journalistic value of news content on social media handles in Nigeria's digital space. This will be addressed via the following:

1. To be able to exact on the systemic marginalization of deep dive journalism within the engagement driven trajectory of social media handles.
2. To be able to comprehend how interactivity on social media handles are replacing and eliminating editorial integrity of decision making for media institutions.

3. To be able to differentiate between the values of media audience and social media algorithmic narratives.
4. To propose the way forward for the harmonization of social media engagement and journalistic rigor.

Clarification of Concepts

Algorithmic Trap

In the digital age where access to information has been succinctly democratized by blurring the role of gatekeepers, surfing the digital environment for information has been systematically censored by the architectural structure of social media algorithms (Ting, & Yufei, 2026). Algorithms refer to the implicit directive inserted on computer networks for trouble shooting and task performance. Within the framework of journalistic discourse, algorithmic trap infers the nature of feedback especially on social media platforms that accords importance to the emotional intonations and dispositions of messages over factual integrity (Aybike, 2026). This results to the overshadowing of professional reportage needed for contextual understanding and advancement of development driven discussions on social media platforms and handles. This algorithmic trap is fuelled by the lack of alignment of individual biases and nuances over the optimization of engagements and digital traffic. Liran (2026) buttressed that social media algorithms are exclusively created for the enhancement of engagements and emotional appeals via the promotion of sensational messages via the click bait syndrome over factual saturated news content. The victim of this skewed information epidemic is journalistic integrity and professionalism.

Findings from previous studies have revealed that there appears to be a disconnect between information rich content on social media and algorithmic bias (Jian, & Cao, 2025). This results from the complication that arises when interactivity on social media platforms declines, which is often translated by social media algorithms as absence of information quality, even if the content is factual. Investigative stories that take time to produce are often outpaced by AI generated summaries or sensationalist narratives that trigger the emotions of media audience (Irena, & Mentus, 2026). This has resulted into putting pressure on online newsrooms to sacrifice journalistic integrity on the altar of engagement and algorithmic compliance, often leading to a gradual elimination of professionalism and immersive journalistic experiences.

Deep Dive Journalism

In the modern media parlance, the concept serves to elucidate on the process of intensive news reportage that is immersed in factual presentation, in-depth analysis, and extensive narratives (Tetiana, 2024). The concept is mostly anchored on revelation of truth from a structured technique that serves to expose issues from the foundation over the simple relay of information. A regular news report may take a few hours to be put together, but a deep dive journalistic narrative could take weeks or months, and some cases, even years (Mandela, 2024). The technique is mostly rooted on intensive editorial rigour to establish the essence of a factual story within the purview of ethical and legal considerations. Deep dive journalism traces the historical trajectory of a news story and serves to transform a story into an immersive experience by not just creating an understanding, but contextualizing the essence of a story within the broader framework of societal and social constructs (Yang, & Sannusi, 2025). The technique enables the retention of complex societal discourse into relatable experiences of systemic significance that serves to effectively foster developmental discussions.

Deep dive journalism takes time, efforts, professionalism and editorial rigour to put together. This is a journey that social media algorithms and social media audiences are not willing to take, owing to the fact that interactivity and engagements on social media platforms are often characterized by hyper immediacy and real time reactions (Mandela, 2024). If not checkmated, the proliferation of interactive content for engagement on social media platforms designed by social media algorithms may lead to the elimination of developmental and economically driven discussions that require extensive journalistic research on the premise of sensationalist narratives and digital traffic.

Theoretical Framework

The research is anchored on the Spiral of Silence Theory and the Mediatisation Theory.

The Spiral of Silence Theory

The theory was created in 1974 by a German political scientist and communication scholar by the name Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The theory came about as a result of the voter apathy displayed by German voters in the 1965 German elections when she noticed that adherents of the winning party were more vocal than supporters of the losing party in Germany whom were visibly silent (Anahit, 2020). The theory assumes that individuals are often petrified when they notice that they have been social isolated or excluded in societal discourse (Suyasa, & Putri, 2022). The theory

also assumes that when the mass media gives significance to the opinion of the majority by repetitive coverage, most media audiences are susceptible to accepting such views as the accurate perspective of the discourse in context. Petric and Spela, (2024) also posit that the theory believes that most individuals survey their environment via media messages and social interactions in order to determine whose opinion is being portrayed the most and whose opinion is given less significance by the media.

The theory relates to the research in the sense that within the context of algorithmic trap, online platforms can marginalize deep dive journalism when messages portrayed especially on the social media become increasingly superficial and thus, presenting a perspective to media audiences that deep dive journalism holds no significance to the understanding and the contextualization of national and developmental discussion.

The Mediatisation Theory

The theory was developed in late 1990 by Friedrich Krotz, Stig Hjarvard and Andreas Hepp. The theory came about as a result of the growing realization that traditional media messages were too limited for the 21st century media audience. As a result, many societal institutions and social structures were beginning to adjust their methods of operation in order to align with the demand of the 21st century digital media which they consider as their only alternative to across to their target publics (Evgeniya, 2025). The theory is anchored on the core assumptions that every medium has requirements which subscribers must adopt in order to keep their messages relevant to their target audiences and to enhance the visibility of their messages especially on digital platforms (Tong, & Kim, 2025). The theory also assumes that when certain societal institutions are mediatized, they tend to lose some of their values and principles in order to fit into the demand of the medium they choose to relay their messages. The theory perceives the media as an institution that has its own requirements of patronage that media audiences align with in order to reach out to the world (Romashkin, 2025).

Within the purview of this research, the theory fits into the niche of the study in the sense that the requirements of the digital media which are often anchored on real-time, immediacy, interactivity and multi-media integration has been mediatized especially by social media platforms. This denotes that news stories are now constructed in a way that aligns with the rules and algorithm of social media platforms at the detriment of professionalism and editorial rigour in

order to attract visibility and engagement by media audiences devoid of journalistic depth and professionalism.

Methodology

The study adopted the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The method is a qualitative one that seeks to proffer information on how individuals within a demographic context ascribe meanings to an observable social reality (Tanner, 2025). The method dwells on individual and subjective interpretations of events and issues from a scientific context. The approach according to Sepinood, and Nastaran, (2025) exacts comprehension on individual experiences in the search for truth and also acknowledges that a researcher may not be able to understand the perspectives of research participants without seeking to understand what they value in their real world from the determination of a single individual experience to that of a sample population with interest on the select subject matter of discourse.

The method within the context of this research seeks to examine the perspectives of professionals on the subject matter from secondary data sources by exploring concerns that has led to the marginalization of deep dive journalistic experiences on social media platforms from documented discussions and observations proffered in literature works.

Discussions

The Systemic Marginalization of Deep Dive Journalism on Social Media Handles

The digital age has emerged with a plethora of ambiguities on the digital ecosystem. Regardless of the fact that digitization of news and communication has not only democratized the flow of information on digital platforms, the visibility of journalistic prowess is currently experiencing less visibility on the social media (Zhang, & Kang, 2025). This reality is not a deliberate attribute of media audiences as such, but a systemic iniquity that has been propelled by the technicalities and framework of social media platforms. Feryade, (2025) posit that the systemic overshadowing of journalistic depth starts with the ideological friction of journalistic professionalism and social media logic. While deep dive journalism is conceived from deliberate efforts, time, research and scientific exposition of developmental and societal narratives, most social media algorithms are premised on interaction and engagement (Hayes, 2025). This is further exacerbated by the immediacy of engagements via likes, shares, and comments in real-time. Owing to the fact that deep dive journalism explores and simplifies complex societal issues,

it doesn't necessarily elicit real-time engagement that serves as an indispensable component of social media algorithms. Welskop, (2025) asserts that social media algorithms were designed to interpret data heavy and extended narratives as contents that propel delayed engagements. As such, these interpretations automatically translates into low priority content that is often given less visibility. In addition, news content with rich journalistic experiences are summarized into treads or given hyperlinks in order to meet up with the structural requirement of social media algorithms (Alvaro, 2026). In the course of this the very contents of deep dive immersive journalistic experience is often loss in the process, leading to a systemic marginalization of deep dive journalism.

Another area of marginalization is revealed in the deliberate self-censorship of editors who are under pressure to align news content on digital platforms into the niche of growing demands of social media algorithms. As a result of this, funds for journalistic research are exponentially reduced and investigative journalism departments are grossly underfunded, leading to journalistic pieces that are devoid of depth, quality and professional construction (Welskop, 2025). This inadvertently results in the limitation of the roles of the media as the watchdog of the society, and thus, leaving the media audience in a vulnerable state of misinformation and propaganda. Grant, (2026) averred that this translates to a state of dark accountability, where deep dive journalistic pieces on news are stifled and inaccessible to media visibility and leaves the projection of truth to be sacrificed on the altar of sensationalism and yellow journalism.

The Interactivity of Social Media Handles and the Elimination of Editorial Integrity of Media Institutions on Digital Platforms

In the 21st century digital era, the line between the newsroom and the living room has significantly disappeared. The emergence of social media handles as the medium of news has brought to bear a new hierarchy of interaction that was hitherto envisaged as an impossibility. This emergence has come with its consequences which can be succinctly attributed to the absence of editorial integrity (Boadi, & Silas). In as much as interactivity on social media platforms propels virtual engagement with media audience, Ashif (2026) believes that these engagements appear to have taken over professionalism, thus, pressurizing media institutions into an uncomfortable state of compromise. The niche feature of social media is interactivity, which suggests the leverage given to media audience to interact with online information have taken the place of professionalism. While traditional journalism was heavily anchored on professional gatekeeping, where editors determine what information and news should be available to the media audience,

social media algorithms on the other hand prioritize engagements often tagged as high velocity content (Cubillo, & Emilio, 2025). This technique has resulted in putting pressure on editors to shape their headlines in a way that will elicit interaction rather than reflection, resulting in the situation of the click bait syndrome. In addition, breaking news on social media handles has created an immediacy culture, where being the first to disseminate a current story is often prioritized over truth and accuracy (Heltai, 2025). This is why many editors today have been relegated to the position of social media managers who curate news on social media handles in order to meet up with the high velocity content drive.

Conversely, editorial integrity is largely anchored on context. However, the emergence of the social media has brought to bear, the atomizing of media content, where important news is summarized into shareable bits that makes professional news stories lose their essence in terms of context and depth (Cubillo, & Emilio, 2025). Significantly, the emergence of social media handles has also resulted in the transformation of professional journalist into social media influencers, who now disseminate news in order to attract followership and digital traffic on their social media handles due to the absence of editorial credibility of their news stories. Consequently, the interactivity of social media handles has also placed a lot of professional journalists in a difficult position due to pressure for engagement that has resulted to the reduction of objectivity on digital platforms due to absence of editorial rigour (Burri, 2026). Most editors on social media handles now systematically avoid controversial stories for fear of cyber harassment by media audience who interact directly with the news on social media, and thus, leading most professional editors into a state of self-censorship.

Differences in Values of Media Audience and the Proliferation of Social Media Algorithmic Narratives

The prevalence of digital interactions on social media handles today has brought about a heated polity between individual values and digital algorithms especially on social media. Ayala, (2026) emphasized that most media audiences who rely on the social media for the enhancement of shared reality have succeeded in placing high value on sensationalism over context. While traditional media is centred on editorial integrity, the values of social media algorithms place priority on share-worthiness of news narratives. In a research conducted by Pew Research Centre, findings revealed that most media audiences who value objectivity are often demoralized when they come across digital narratives on social media platforms that triggers their emotions rather than gratifying their desire for news (Debbarma, & Sonia, 2026). In addition, most digital media

audiences prefer summarized news stories, that news stories that will give them a deep dive journalistic experience on social media platforms. Emre, (2026) posit that it is worthy of note to take cognizance of the fact that social media algorithms are designed for unique individual experiences, where information available to individual users are personalized in order to give nuanced narratives from the same news sources for individualistic experiences rather than collective understanding, based on individual past behaviour on social media platforms.

Another value that polarizes individuals on social media algorithmic narratives is the reinforcement of biased echo chambers, where individuals are often exposed to information that aligns with their interests and preferences, even in news dissemination, owing to their browsing histories, and thus, exclude them from the broader context of societal engagements arising from development news information (Mustafa, 2026). These divisive narratives are often exacerbated from individual preferences from online behaviours. Carlos, (2026) indicated that these noticeable nuances and proliferation of algorithmic narratives however, does not in any way suggest that social media audiences are passive and helpless against social media messages. The implication is that social media audiences are becoming increasingly aware of how they are being perceived on digital platforms and thus, they are increasingly self-conscious on their knowledge of manipulative narratives, leading to a rise in selective perception of social media handles that gratifies their nuanced desires. The glaring tension between traditional media audience values and social media algorithmic narratives has become an issue of implicit media debate (Debbarma, & Sonia, 2026). While social media algorithms offer flexibility and individualization of narratives, the way forward is not the elimination of such algorithms, but the congruence of individualistic values towards contextual perception as opposed to interactive based engagements only.

The way forward for the Harmonization of Social Media Engagement and Journalistic Rigor on Digital Platforms

The proliferation of the social media on digital platforms has transformed the social media into the main platform for news dissemination, and thus, the need for the alignment of journalistic rigour on digital platforms and social media engagement must be brought on the table (Rani, 2025). Both options are necessary for the advancement of digital democracy and contextualization of news. Kato, (2025) proffers that the practice of journalism in the digital ecosystem must gravitate towards interaction, which characterizes the main distinction between the social media and the traditional media. This implies that journalists on digital platforms today must not just limit

themselves to the distribution of news on social media, but they must be able to explain the processes that led to the veracity of news stories for their digital media audiences. They must also display the geo-location of their filmed interviews in order to enable their message recipients distinguish same from deep faked videos created by AI (Riesta, & Rahmad, 2025). Digital Journalist on social media platforms in the 21st century must also be able to integrate AI for the cross referencing of their social media news footages against reliable databases in real-time in order to dispel possible misinformation and propaganda that might tarnish the credibility of their news stories.

Consequently, the survival of Journalists in the 21st century digital age is highly dependent on the relay of news and information on digital platforms anchored on truth, accuracy and source verification by the providence of hyperlinks to information sources that will serve to boost the credibility of news stories (Wiriani, 2026). In addition, Journalists on digital platforms today must be able to acquire sufficient digital literacy skills that will enable them to understand user preferences on social media applications. This will enable them to be able to curate Journalistic narratives that will attract the attention of niche media audiences in a way that will also enhance the radiation of deep dive Journalistic experiences that will serve to inspire developmental national discussions from economic, political, social and entertainment standpoints. However, Novianti, (2023) believes that Journalists who are able to navigate the attention span of social media audience by encouraging engagement, while maintaining Journalistic ethics of accuracy, objectivity and source verification will be able to close the algorithmic gap and release media audiences from the algorithmic trap of social media engagement while holding on to the annals of Journalistic ethics and rigour.

Conclusion

The discourse on algorithmic trap has evolved into a quest for the contextualization of the attention span of social media audiences. The research was able to establish that the saturation of social media narratives for news dissemination is mostly inundated by interaction and engagement. This has resulted in the relegation of deep dive journalism into the background of immersive digital experiences in news, largely owing to the summarization of news information on social media platforms for the attraction of active engagement. Social media algorithms place overt priority on interactive behaviours at the detriment of Journalistic experiences in news that take time, effort and empirical research. This has brought about the algorithmic trap of Journalistic marginalization where the line between editorial rigours of news content has been blurred by the public interest of

interactivity and engagement on digital social media platforms. There is a dire need for the contemporary Journalist on social media spaces to integrate these interactions and engagements in order to build professionalism in news content, while maintaining Journalistic ethics that will serve to foster and elicit nationalistic discussions that will serve to propel holistic societal development.

Recommendations

The research hereby proffers the under listed recommendations:

1. Journalists on digital platforms today must as a matter of consequence, deploy signature journalism techniques that will enable them curate niche reports that will serve to gravitate social media audiences to news stories that cannot be summarized or atomized by AI software.
2. Digital Journalists today should integrate all elements of multi-media in their social media news reportage in order to enhance the contextual elements of their news stories for deep dive journalistic experiences.
3. There is a dire need for Digital Journalists today to also make use of AI technology to augment their structured reports to enhance the visibility of their news stories for deep dive digital experiences.
4. Media organizations and institutions should consider merging their thoughts with data scientists in order to determine the algorithmic trajectory of Journalistic pieces on social media platforms that will amplify their headlines and encourage social media audiences to take time to engage with factual Journalistic stories for deep dive experiences.

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