

Shadows of Truth: Media Framing, Agenda-Setting, and the Commodification of Reality through Classical Philosophical Paradigms

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Abstract

This paper examines how media framing, agenda-setting, and economic incentives influence the perception of truth, employing classical theories to reveal underlying dynamics. Using Plato's Allegory of the Cave, investigate how media can shape belief systems by presenting selective "shadows" of truth, which impacts public understanding of misinformation. Linking Machiavelli's views on power, the agenda-setting role of media highlights whose interests are served in framing specific narratives. Foucault's ideas on power and knowledge further analyse how media constructs the notion of "fake news" to align with prevailing economic and political objectives, while Aristotle's ethics provide insight into whether economic motives override the pursuit of societal good. Adopting the content analysis technique, the study indicates that these perspectives offer a critical framework to understand the commodification of truth and the implications of selective framing on public perception, media ethics, and governance, emphasising the need for accountability and ethical journalism.

Keywords: Shadows of Truth, Media Framing, Agenda-Setting, Communication

Introduction

The fast growth of digital communication technologies has significantly changed how information is shared, making it harder to tell what's true in the ever-evolving online media environment. Fake news is a type of misinformation or disinformation that is spread to deceive or manipulate, and it has become a global issue affecting media systems around the world. Numerous studies indicate that as digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp evolve into main sources of news for countless individuals, they also create an environment where misinformation can thrive, impacting public perception and eroding trust in traditional media outlets (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). This analysis focuses on the complex relationship between power and misinformation, using Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory to shed light on how specific narratives are arranged and portrayed in the media. Agenda-Setting Theory, first introduced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, suggests that the media play a crucial role in shaping public conversation by emphasizing specific topics, which in turn affects what issues the public considers important. Framing Theory adds to this by looking at how media and various actors choose to shape and present information in ways that highlight specific viewpoints (Entman, 1993). These theories show that manipulating truth is about more than just sharing information; it involves ideological, economic, and political areas where various parties vie for power and influence.

The rise of fake news has sparked a significant conversation around the ethical, political, and social responsibilities of media platforms worldwide. In that circumstance, Cambridge Analytica scandal serves as a significant example, showing how manipulation through data on social media can change election results and shape political conversations around the globe (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). During the scandal, it raised both public and academic worries regarding the roles and responsibilities of digital platforms in spreading disinformation, leading many to call for more robust regulatory measures to address its impact (Gorwa, 2019).

Fake news is closely linked to how platforms make money, focusing more on engagement numbers than on the truth of the content. This leads to the creation of sensational and misleading information designed to boost user interaction and, in turn, increase advertising revenue (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Further complications are found to be more reinforced amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the issue of misinformation even worse worldwide, highlighting the public health dangers that come with the uncontrolled spread of fake news. Research shows that false information about COVID-19 has played a role in people being hesitant about vaccines, not following health guidelines, and increasing overall confusion among the public (Pulido et al., 2020). The results highlight the tangible effects of digital misinformation, where economic, social, and political interests come together, fostering a setting that is conducive to the commodification of truth.

In the sub-Saharan, Nigeria, like in several nations in the Global South, misinformation has especially disruptive impacts on social and political dynamics. The socio-political landscape of the country, marked by its ethnic diversity and sometimes heated political divisions, leaves it susceptible to the effects of fake news, which often fuels tensions and deepens misunderstandings (Amobi, 2019). For example, in the 2019 Nigerian elections, social media was flooded with misinformation, as false narratives spread to sway public opinion, create uncertainty about the election results, and intensify political hostility (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). The quick spread of fake news is worsened by a lack of media literacy and insufficient regulatory measures, which makes it tough for people to tell real information from false stories. Additionally, the philosophical aspects of turning truth into a commodity stand out, especially considering the country's past of socio-political manipulation via media. Scholars note that misinformation frequently aims at demoted communities or political adversaries, which can weaken democratic processes and reinforce systemic inequalities (Okoro & Adibe, 2013). This situation highlights how crucial ethical journalism is and the necessity for systems that keep media organisations accountable for the truth. Albeit, the study stipulates that the public needs to trust the media as a source of accurate information instead of a means of manipulation.

In the purview of theoretical discourse and framework, the business models of social media and digital news platforms in Nigeria are facing criticism for unintentionally promoting misinformation. As many media organisations rely heavily on advertising revenue, sensationalism often turns into a lucrative approach, ranking engagement over the principles of journalistic integrity (Salawu & Ojebuyi, 2019). Agenda-setting theory is important in this context because it shows how economic pressures influence the media agenda, directing public focus toward trending or controversial topics. In a situation where resources are limited, this frequently results in the circulation of misleading stories that can divide communities and undermine public confidence.

The way truth is being treated like a product, especially with the rise of fake news, brings up important philosophical and ethical issues. According to Framing Theory, this commodification indicates that the truth in digital media is frequently shaped to align with particular agendas, economic goals, or ideological perspectives, which can distort objective reality. Some scholars believe that this practice weakens the foundational values of journalism, which line up truth and accuracy, and instead portrays truth as a substance cast by outside influences (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Insofar, as the study shows the manipulation of truth poses a significant challenge to journalism's role in democratic societies, informed citizens are crucial for fostering healthy public discourse and effective decision-making.

Significantly, since the study looks into the socio-economic aspects of fake news, examining it from both a global viewpoint and a Nigerian context, it helps us better understand how truth is shaped, valued, and consumed. This research uses Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories to place the issue of fake news within a context that takes into account the various interests involved in digital media. Digital platforms around the world influence public discussions and curate eye-catching content for profit, which continues the spread of misinformation (Bakir & McStay, 2018). In places like Nigeria, the situation is made more complex by social and political issues, where misinformation not only benefits economic agendas but also deepens existing divides and weakens democratic systems (Amobi, 2019).

This study emphasises the need for a deeper understanding of fake news, urging us to look past individual media platforms and to consider the wider socio-economic and philosophical impacts of how truth is treated as a commodity. As the distinction between truth and misinformation becomes less comprehensive, scholars, policymakers, and the public must examine the interests that digital media ecosystems serve. It is therefore critical for this to probe into the socio-economic effects of fake news and how truth is treated as a commodity. It is in light of the aforementioned, that the study investigates how truth can be seen as an issue that can be negotiated and the various stakeholders who may benefit or suffer from the shadows of truth.

Shadows of Truth

The concept of "shadows of truth" reflects the distortion or selective presentation of reality, where media acts as an intermediary, filtering and framing information to form specific narratives. This concept is deeply rooted in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which illustrates how individuals are often influenced by "shadows" filtered representations of truth, which are cast by those in power. In media studies, this allegory resonates with the theories of media framing and agenda-setting, where news outlets emphasise specific issues and viewpoints, shaping public perception and understanding of "truth" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When analysed alongside the commodification of reality, media framing, and agenda-setting reveal the influence of economic and political interests, raising questions about whose truths are ranked.

Whereas Media framing theory, introduced by Erving Goffman (1974), explains how media constructs realities through selective emphasis, which can shape public opinion and perception. This approach aligns with more recent studies that underscore the media's role in commodifying information by strategically framing content to appeal to audiences, often influenced by economic gains or political agendas (Entman, 1993; Druckman & McGrath, 2019). For instance, framing effects in news reporting can create selective truths, where

certain aspects of a story are emphasised while others are minimized or ignored. Foucault's ideas on knowledge and power also highlight how information framing can uphold specific power structures by controlling narratives, suggesting that "truth" becomes a commodity traded for influence (Foucault, 1980).

Agenda-setting theory posits that the media's focus on certain issues over others does not merely inform the public but actively shapes what audiences perceive as significant (McCombs, 2005). Scholars like Iyengar and Kinder (2010) argue that the media acts as a gatekeeper, selecting and emphasizing particular topics to direct public discourse. In the context of commodification, this selective presentation, or "agenda," may be aligned with economic interests, where media corporations shape content based on viewership metrics, advertiser expectations, and profit goals. Such prioritization may lead audiences to accept partial or biased truths, creating a commodified reality that promotes selective narratives aligned with media owners' interests (Coudry & Hepp, 2017). By the same token, classical thought on ethics and societal good, especially from Aristotle, emphasizes the importance of truthful and objective dissemination of information for the health of society. Aristotle argued that truth should be sought as an ethical imperative, highlighting the dangers of partial truths. By commodifying truth, media outlets may undermine these ethical standards, instead aligning more with Machiavellian ideas of power preservation, where media narratives may serve the interests of the powerful rather than societal good (Machiavelli, 1532; Lazer et al., 2018). The result is a compromised informational ecosystem, where the media's framing and agenda-setting contribute to a shadowed version of reality, obscuring impartial truth.

Recent studies suggest that this commodification of truth has significant implications. For example, Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) found that misinformation, when framed and distributed strategically, spreads faster than factual news, illustrating how the media can amplify certain "truths" through sensational framing. Napoli (2019) further argues that media's framing practices, combined with economic incentives, intensify biases, promoting narratives that may distort public understanding for profit. By so doing, shadows of truth" in media, today can be seen through framing and agenda-setting that commodify reality. From classical philosophical principles to modern media critiques, the selective presentation of information by the media shapes public perception, raising ethical concerns about the impact of these practices on truth and democracy. This commodification challenges the ideal of a well-informed public and underscores the need for critical media literacy to navigate the shadows cast by today's information gatekeepers.

Theoretical Discourse and Departure into Framework

This study looks into the ways fake news and the commercialization of truth influence social and political conversations and perceptions via digital communication platforms, utilizing Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory. These theories offer a solid foundation for grasping how misinformation is intentionally created, prioritised, and engaged within online environments. This study delves into the dynamics of these theories, especially within the Nigerian context, revealing how fake news functions as both an economic tool and an ideological instrument in the current media landscape.

Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory, formulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972), asserts that media entities not merely mirror reality but actively construct it by emphasising specific subjects over others. The theory posits that by concentrating on particular issues, media shape

audience perceptions of significance, thereby establishing a structured "agenda" of societal priorities. The fundamental principle is that although media may not determine individuals' thoughts, it shapes the subjects they contemplate. This emphasis renders the theory especially valuable for analysing the mechanisms by which platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp highlight specific narratives that may not authentically represent societal issues but rather reflect the interests of influential stakeholders (McCombs, 2005).

In Nigeria, agenda-setting dynamics illustrate a complex interaction among media, economic influences, and socio-political interests. Local research, including Amobi (2019), indicates that misinformation is frequently aimed at fostering ethnic, religious, or political divisions, with media exacerbating these fractures to enhance audience engagement. Digital platforms in Nigeria are not impartial; they embody underlying socio-political tensions and financial motivations, illustrating how digital media agendas in African countries particularly in Nigeria can be exploited to exacerbate existing conflicts and promote sensationalism. This prompts ethical inquiries regarding the accountability of platforms and conventional media in shaping public discourse and perpetuating misinformation for financial profit (Salawu & Ojebuyi, 2019).

Framing Theory

Framing Theory, introduced by Goffman (1974) and expanded by Entman (1993), explores how media shapes perception by selecting certain aspects of a narrative and emphasizing them over others. Framing involves context, diction, and selection, with media actors choosing specific "frames" that resonate with targeted audiences. According to Entman (1993), framing defines issues, diagnoses causes and makes moral evaluations, effectively influencing public interpretation and emotional responses. Framing Theory is particularly relevant to this study's aim of understanding how truth is commodified within digital platforms. Platforms frequently highlight emotionally charged narratives that resonate with audiences, thus promoting engagement over accuracy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

This is evident globally, where narratives surrounding social and political issues are shaped to fit ideologically charged frames, especially in politically charged regions like Nigeria. For instance, misinformation related to political violence is often framed to exploit ethnic and political divides, creating divisive narratives that fuel tension rather than resolve it (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). Consequently, framing by both formal media and users turns truth into a flexible construct, prioritizing sensationalism to attract attention and profits. One criticism of Framing Theory is its inherent limitation in explaining why certain frames succeed over others, which highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches that encompass socio-political, economic, and cultural factors (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). However, Entman (1993); Goffman (1974); Scheufele (1999); and Iyengar (1991) contends that the integration of Framing Theory into this study's framework provides insight into the mechanisms by which truth is selectively framed, manipulated, and monetised in digital spaces, reinforcing the study's hypothesis that truth is commodified in ways that align with powerful stakeholders' interests.

The commodification of truth, as illustrated through Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories, underscores a philosophical discourse that challenges traditional journalistic norms (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2007). These two theories (Agenda-setting theory and Framing Theory) emphasise the active construction of narratives by media actors position truth not as an objective reality but as a flexible commodity influenced by external forces. In digital communication, where engagement is prioritized, truth becomes a means to an end, moulded to fit economic or ideological goals. In contexts like Nigeria, where socio-political and

economic constraints exacerbate misinformation, this commodification raises ethical issues about media accountability. Scholars argue that the media's power to set agendas and frame narratives can distort public discourse, reduce trust in journalism, and disempower audiences, making them more susceptible to manipulation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Addressing this commodification requires a re-evaluation of media ethics and the development of mechanisms to enhance media literacy, particularly in politically fragile environments (Okoro & Adibe, 2013).

The study combines Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories to analyse fake news dynamics and truth commodification, as both theories complement each other in explaining the ways digital media shape socio-political narratives. Agenda-Setting Theory provides the foundational perspective on how digital platforms prioritize certain issues, while Framing Theory delves into how these prioritized issues are constructed to evoke specific responses. This combined framework allows a nuanced examination of the mechanisms that underlie fake news dissemination, linking them to broader socio-political and economic contexts. By applying these theories to Nigeria's unique media environment, the study advances the understanding of how digital platforms serve as sites of ideological and economic influence. It seeks to bridge theoretical perspectives with practical implications, emphasizing the need for both media accountability and media literacy initiatives. Moreover, this combined framework lays the foundation for exploring solutions that challenge truth commodification and resist the manipulative practices enabled by digital media platforms, ultimately aiming for a more ethical and transparent media landscape.

Examination of Media Shadows and Adjusted Potential System

The framing of "truth" in media coverage fundamentally influences public perception by delineating boundaries of accepted "reality" and, in many cases, shaping belief systems. This concept aligns with Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where the prisoners' view of shadows cast on the wall shapes their reality, although it is only an incomplete representation of the true world outside. Similarly, media serves as an intermediary that projects particular narratives or "shadows" of events, often through selective framing that can emphasise certain aspects while omitting or distorting others. This process is pivotal in guiding public perceptions of truth and misinformation in current events. Framing Theory asserts that the media selects specific aspects of an issue and elevates them as central, shaping the way audiences interpret and understand the broader context. In doing so, the media does not simply report information but creates frameworks that highlight or marginalise perspectives, often swaying public opinion toward a preferred viewpoint (Entman, 1993). As Entman notes, frames help "define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies," giving media the potential to influence the public's understanding of truth. Recent studies highlight how this power, used to sway opinion, is a direct consequence of the chosen narratives and the language surrounding issues. For example, the framing of political events can profoundly impact whether audiences perceive these as threats or as legitimate actions, shaping collective reactions and ideological divisions (Druckman & McGrath, 2019).

This concept parallels the prisoners in Plato's cave who, unaware of the world outside, base their understanding solely on the shadows they see. In modern contexts, social media platforms and news outlets employ agenda-setting tactics to line up particular narratives, which can influence whether the public views an event as urgent or trivial (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). When media highlights certain crises over others, audiences may unconsciously absorb these priorities, seeing the highlighted issues as inherently more pressing, thereby forming skewed perceptions of reality. In recent years, such media agenda-setting has been amplified by algorithms that filter information based on popularity or

engagement rather than objectivity, making it difficult for consumers to access diverse or opposing perspectives on truth. One critical challenge lies in the commodification of truth, where economic incentives often dictate media framing, potentially at odds with objective reporting. The competition for viewer engagement, driven by profit motives, can lead to sensationalism or bias, shaping the audience's understanding of events through emotive or sensational frames rather than fact-driven discourse. In effect, the “truth” presented by the media becomes more a reflection of market interests than of objective reality, presenting audiences with a mediated version of events that align with what is profitable rather than what is accurate (Freedman, 2018).

Moreover, the rise of digital platforms and "fake news" further complicates public perception of truth. Studies highlight that misinformation can spread rapidly through platforms that lack strict editorial oversight, contributing to polarized understandings of current events. Research by Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false information is disseminated more widely and quickly on social media than truthful content, illustrating how misinformation can shape public perception by crowding out accurate narratives. This is echoed in Plato's allegory, where the prisoners' understanding of reality is based on incomplete or distorted information. Today, the issue is compounded by “echo chambers,” which restrict information exposure and reinforce existing beliefs, making it increasingly challenging for individuals to discern fact from misinformation. As media shapes belief systems, it also affects the social cohesion and democratic functioning of societies. When consumers base their perspectives on filtered or framed realities, collective agreement on basic truths erodes, leading to divisions and distrust. This phenomenon is evident in contemporary political polarization, where competing news narratives contribute to fragmented realities, with opposing groups believing fundamentally different truths about the same event. This erosion of shared understanding can be particularly detrimental in democratic societies that rely on informed public opinion for policy and decision-making (Lazer et al., 2018).

To address these issues, media literacy, and critical thinking are crucial for helping audiences understand the mechanics behind media framing and agenda-setting. Encouraging a more discerning consumption of news can empower individuals to recognize when they may be shadows rather than objective truth. Additionally, policies that promote transparency in news algorithms and incentivise accuracy over engagement metrics could play an essential role in aligning media representations more closely with reality. Ultimately, Plato's allegory reminds us that truth is often complex and layered. The media's role, like that of the shadows on the cave wall, shapes public perceptions through selective framing and agenda-setting, which impacts what the audience considers to be the "truth." This underscores the importance of scrutinising media sources and remaining aware of the inherent limitations in any mediated portrayal of reality, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to news consumption and production to support a more informed and cohesive society.

Investigation Of Agenda-Setting in News Outlets Contribute to the Economisation of Truth: Machiavelli's Thought

Agenda-setting in news outlets significantly shapes public perceptions by collation of certain narratives and topics while downplaying or ignoring others, thus contributing to an “economisation of truth.” This selective focus often privileges specific narratives that align with economic, political, or ideological interests over a comprehensive or neutral portrayal of events. Machiavelli's thoughts on power and manipulation in *The Prince* provide a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics. He argued that the effective exercise of power often involves carefully controlling what information reaches the public, prioritizing certain narratives to reinforce the authority and goals of those in power (Machiavelli, 1532).

Agenda-setting theory posits that media outlets are not only informing the public nonetheless also scaling topic preferences, which influences the perceived importance of those issues in the public's mind. By highlighting some issues over others, media can shape societal discourse, making certain narratives "truths" within public consciousness. Recent empirical studies underscore how this agenda-setting helps economic narratives that align with dominant power structures, allowing certain groups to direct focus toward profitable or politically advantageous issues (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). This results in a biased public perception of "truth" where media reports heavily reflect the interests of their financial backers, sponsors, or political affiliations, reducing the visibility of alternative perspectives.

Machiavelli's perspective offers insight into how agenda-setting aligns with power interests, suggesting that those who control the flow of information also control the power to define reality. According to Machiavelli, the ends justify the means in power dynamics, and truth can be malleable, constructed to serve the purposes of those in authority. In contemporary media, these principles are evident in the selective framing of issues to serve economic and political agendas. Media institutions, particularly those driven by profit motives, are often influenced by advertisers or stakeholders whose interests may contradict public welfare or unbiased reporting. This tendency aligns with Machiavellian thought, where information is carefully managed to reinforce power, shaping public opinion to align with the objectives of influential stakeholders. Empirical data illustrates how this economisation of truth operates. For instance, research on climate change coverage in corporate-owned news media found that economic interests frequently shaped the narratives presented. News outlets with fossil-fuel funding or ownership ties were shown to either downplay the urgency of climate action or amplify skepticism about environmental regulation, thereby protecting financial interests linked to high-polluting industries (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). Thus, this study illustrates how agenda-setting serves the interests of the powerful by controlling the flow of information to downplay specific topics or foster public apathy.

Selective framing of certain narratives over others can also lead to societal consequences. When media prioritizes stories that stimulate their economic backers, other pressing issues may receive insufficient attention, fostering a skewed public discourse. The selective reporting on issues like poverty, systemic inequality, or social justice can create a distorted public understanding of these problems. For example, studies reveal that mainstream media outlets often portray economic crises through narratives that blame individual behaviour on structural flaws, aligning with neoliberal ideologies and downplaying systemic inequalities (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). By focusing on narratives that reinforce the idea of meritocracy, the media effectively serves powerful economic interests by masking the systemic causes of inequality and diverting attention away from reform-focused discussions. Moreover, agenda-setting contributes to the economisation of truth by influencing not only what people think about but also how they interpret these topics. Research into the framing effects within agenda-setting reveals that the language and context chosen to describe issues like immigration or protest movements significantly impact public opinion (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Framing protesters, for example, as "disruptive" rather than as "advocates for change" can lead to diminished public support for movements that challenge existing power structures. Through selective language, media outlets can subtly manipulate public interpretation, fostering societal perceptions that align with elite interests.

A recent study by Entman (2021) revisits the agenda-setting framework, suggesting that the alignment of news narratives with financial interests has intensified, especially with the rise of conglomerates that establishes multiple media outlets. Entman argues that this leads to a homogenisation of news content where diverse perspectives are minimised, and particular

narratives are consistently aided, ultimately contributing to an “economisation” of public discourse. This echoes Machiavelli’s principles of effective power, where controlling perception is essential to maintaining authority. In synthesizing agenda-setting theory with Machiavelli’s philosophy, it becomes apparent that modern media’s economisation of truth is not only a passive reflection of economic interests but also an active tool for maintaining influence over public opinion. Just as Machiavelli asserted the value of control over narratives to maintain political stability, contemporary media uses agenda-setting to foster public discourse that reinforces existing power dynamics. In this sense, the selective presentation of “truth” by news outlets serves those who benefit from specific narratives, while public discourse and thus public power is steered by economic and political elites. Addressing this issue requires a call for transparency, journalistic independence, and media literacy. Empowering audiences to critically assess information and understand the inherent biases of agenda-setting can help mitigate the adverse effects of selective media focus and promote a more pluralistic representation of truth, encouraging a media landscape that serves democratic and societal interests rather than solely economic ones.

Examining Media Framing Practices and Fake News Philosophisation: Foucault’s Notion

Michel Foucault’s insights on knowledge and power illustrate how these framing practices create hierarchies of legitimacy, transforming media into a battleground where information is selectively presented, contested, or discredited to serve particular interests. For Foucault, power does not merely repress knowledge but actively produces it, setting “truth” standards that conform to institutional or governmental needs (Foucault, 1977). This relationship between knowledge and power aligns with how media framing reinforces prevailing interests and obscures alternative viewpoints, rendering the “truth” a product of strategic selection and presentation.

Framing is a technique that organizes news narratives in ways that influence perception and legitimacy. By emphasising specific angles, omitting details, or employing suggestive language, media outlets shape the interpretive lens through which audiences view issues, often amplifying political or economic narratives that suit their sponsors or affiliates. Research shows that frames focusing on political corruption, foreign interference, or economic downturns can either legitimise or delegitimise news depending on which interest they serve (Entman & Usher, 2018). For instance, media often frames dissenting news or opposition viewpoints as “fake” or “illegitimate” by emphasizing uncertainty or contradictions, effectively filtering the perceived credibility of information in assist of more “official” narratives.

Empirical studies support that framing practices align closely with political and economic imperatives, especially in competitive media environments. Recent findings suggest that news networks strategically label information as “fake” to align audience perceptions with specific political ideologies. For instance, research examining U.S. media during election cycles showed that terms like “fake news” were disproportionately used in reporting on opposing political parties or in discrediting unfavourable economic policies (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This selective portrayal skews public perception, leading to a polarised understanding where “fake news” becomes a flexible, weaponised term used to undermine opposing views or critical reporting.

Foucault’s concept of “regimes of truth” illuminates how media constructs a hierarchy of news legitimacy, giving authority to certain perspectives while marginalising others. According to Foucault, institutions create and validate certain “truths” that uphold their

structures of power, fostering a circular process where power justifies the knowledge it produces (Foucault, 1980). This dynamic is evident in how mainstream media uses framing to promote government-endorsed narratives while delegitimising dissenting perspectives as unreliable or “fake.” For example, in cases where economic issues such as inflation or unemployment are debated, media outlets tend to emphasize official reports or statistics over grassroots testimonies or independent research that might present a more critical view of governmental performance. Thus, the media’s power to frame “fake news” effectively mirrors Foucault’s assertion that institutions have the authority to define what constitutes “truth,” marginalising competing narratives to secure ideological control.

Media framing also shapes how “fake news” is perceived across various cultural and social demographics. Research highlights those frames around “fake news” often exploits existing biases and partisan divides, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing views (Bakir & McStay, 2018). This effect becomes particularly pronounced in regions with politically aligned media outlets, where framing practices intensify polarization, making audiences more susceptible to ideologically driven “truths.” By embedding narratives that align with a specific political agenda, media organizations foster selective understanding, minimising exposure to alternative viewpoints that might disrupt their constructed “truth.” As a result, the notion of “fake news” becomes an adaptive label that shifts in alignment with media agendas, fuelling distrust among audiences and reinforcing hegemonic narratives.

Furthermore, media framing practices often go beyond political interests to incorporate economic imperatives determining which information is promoted or silenced. In an era where media outlets depend on advertising revenue and sponsorships, framing strategies are increasingly driven by the need to appeal to advertisers or uphold corporate interests. Studies in media economics show that organizations align their reporting to avoid alienating sponsors, sometimes framing contentious issues like labour rights, environmental policies, or tax reforms in ways that minimise harm to their economic backers (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Consequently, the framing of “fake news” around economically sensitive topics reflects Foucault’s analysis of institutional power, where the suppression of certain “truths” serves to protect the interests of those who fund and influence the media landscape (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). To mitigate the distorting impact of framing practices on the public understands of “fake news,” scholars and media experts advocate for greater transparency in reporting and broader media literacy initiatives (Vosoughi et al., 2018). By empowering audiences to critically analyse framing techniques, Bakir & McStay (2018) found that society can cultivate an informed citizenry less vulnerable to manipulative narratives (Doyle, 2019). Engaging critically with news frames can help the public differentiate between facts and strategic emphasis, challenging the “regimes of truth” that Foucault described as perpetuating power structures through controlled narratives.

Thus, media framing practices play a significant role in shaping the notion of “fake news” to align with political and economic interests. Through selective emphasis, exclusion, and suggestive language, media outlets cultivate a perception of legitimacy that supports prevailing power structures. Foucault’s insights into knowledge and power reveal how media framing reinforces these dynamics, establishing a “regime of truth” that marginalises alternative narratives and secures hegemonic control. Addressing the implications of this framing requires a commitment to media transparency and public education, fostering an environment where the legitimacy of information is scrutinized rather than passively accepted.

Assessing how Economic Incentives in the Context of Media Institutions Present The Truth to Audience: Aristotle Ethics

Economic incentives within media organisations can significantly influence the selective portrayal of truth, often raising ethical concerns about whether news is commodified or aligned with the societal good. Aristotle's classical thought on ethics underscores the importance of virtue and the common good, suggesting that truth in media, ideally, should not be influenced by profit motives alone but guided by principles that foster societal well-being. However, modern media often faces financial pressures that shape reporting and frame the truth in ways that may compromise ethical obligations to objectivity and impartiality. Economic incentives in media manifest in various forms, including advertising revenue, sponsorships, and shareholder interests. Studies reveal that media organizations often prioritize content that appeals to advertisers, given that advertising revenue remains a primary income source for many outlets (Napoli, 2019). Consequently, media content that may challenge the interests of sponsors or that fails to attract substantial viewership is often underreported, leading to a selective portrayal of reality. This dynamic reflects a commodification of truth where information that aligns with financial goals is abetted, potentially at the expense of issues essential to public interest.

In this framework, truth is not merely instrumental but has intrinsic value essential for informed civic engagement (Bakir & McStay, 2018). When truth becomes selective and contingent on economic gain, Aristotle would argue that media fails in its ethical duty to society, as it undermines the conditions for individuals to make informed, virtuous choices. According to Aristotle, virtue lies in moderation, so while media must sustain itself financially, it should balance profit motives with the responsibility to truthfully inform and uplift the public discourse. Further empirical research supports this notion, showing how financial pressures can lead to compromised journalistic standards, particularly in digital media. A recent analysis of online news found that algorithms optimized for ad revenue and clicks often promote sensationalized content, diverting attention from critical social issues (Petre, 2020). This shift in content prioritisation reflects an economic-driven “truth” that privileges engagement metrics over comprehensive, impartial reporting. The result is an information landscape in which certain narratives are amplified, and others are muted, creating a skewed public perception that aligns more closely with economic incentives than factual integrity or social responsibility.

Aristotle's ethics further introduce the concept of *phronesis*—practical wisdom, which emphasizes decision-making that serves the collective good. Applying *phronesis* in the media context would mean that media professionals and organisations exercise judgment that considers not only profitability, but also, the societal impact of their reporting choices (Freedman, 2018). For instance, the study of Couldry and Hepp (2017) describes while it may be financially advantageous to sensationalize news, practical wisdom calls for restraint and an emphasis on reporting that benefits civic understanding. A commitment to *phronesis* in media could thus act as a counterbalance to economic pressures, encouraging a journalistic approach that respects both truth and the audience's need for accurate information. Recent studies underscore how non-commercial media models, such as publicly funded or non-profit news organizations, often produce content with higher levels of impartiality and a broader focus on civic-oriented topics compared to their commercial counterparts (Benson, 2021). These models prioritize public interest by ensuring that financial incentives do not dictate coverage, reflecting Aristotle's ethical vision where media serves the good of society rather than commercial imperatives alone. However, the study fails to encapsulate that the

sustainability of such models remains challenging in a competitive, profit-driven industry, posing an ongoing dilemma for journalistic ethics and economic viability.

As a result, economic incentives shape the media landscape in ways that influence the selective presentation of truth, raising ethical concerns rooted in Aristotle's philosophy of virtue and the common good (Tandoc et al., 2018). When media coverage is driven primarily by profit motives, it risks compromising the ethical responsibility to provide unbiased, comprehensive information that supports informed civic participation (Pulido et al., 2020). Aristotle's concepts of eudaimonia and phronesis provide a valuable framework for considering how media might balance economic sustainability with its duty to society, advocating for a model where truth remains a public good rather than a commodified asset (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Future research should continue to explore models that align economic viability with ethical responsibility, supporting a media environment where truth serves the collective interest, not merely commercial gain.

Implications on Governance, Regulatory Agencies, and News Consumers

Media framing, agenda-setting, and economic incentives within news organizations critically shape public perceptions and beliefs, with far-reaching implications for governance, regulatory bodies, and news consumers. Governance is impacted as media-driven public opinion often steers policy decisions, especially when narratives are economically influenced or tailored to meet political objectives. This raises concerns about the potential for governments and influential actors to manipulate media framing for political agendas, thereby compromising democratic accountability and informed decision-making (Foucault's power-knowledge dynamic). For regulatory agencies, the selective portrayal of truth complicates the task of overseeing accurate and ethical journalism. These agencies balance preserving media independence with preventing misinformation and protecting the public interest, especially in an era where economic incentives risk commodifying truth (Machiavelli's view on power serves to emphasize this challenge). Contrariwise, regulatory bodies face the challenge of preventing truth distortion without stifling freedom of expression as a complex balance that calls for refined, adaptable regulatory frameworks in a digitally diverse media landscape. While, news consumers, exposed to a version of the truth that often prioritises profitability or political aims, navigate a highly complex and potentially misleading information environment. Plato's allegory of the cave illustrates this well, as consumers might be limited to "shadows" of reality, mistaking media-framed narratives for unfiltered truth. As such, consumers need enhanced media literacy to critically evaluate sources and discern potential biases, an essential skill in mitigating the impact of selective or distorted information.

Conclusion

The interplay of media framing, agenda-setting, and economic incentives deeply influences how truth is perceived and communicated. The implications reach from governance structures to individual consumers, all impacted by media practices that can either support or undermine democratic values and informed public discourse. Classical insights from thinkers like Plato, Machiavelli, Foucault, and Aristotle reveal the persistent ethical and societal questions surrounding truth and its portrayal. In essence, the commodification of truth and the privileging of specific narratives pose risks to the objective dissemination of information, while at the same time underscoring the necessity for media literacy and regulatory oversight that maintain media's integrity as a societal good.

Recommendations

- i. Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks: Establish and enforce transparent guidelines to reduce biased reporting driven by economic or political pressures, protecting both media independence and consumer trust.
- ii. Promoting Media Literacy: Governments, NGOs, and educational institutions should integrate media literacy programs to help consumers critically evaluate information sources, fostering a more informed society.
- iii. Encouraging Ethical Journalism: Media organisations should adopt voluntary codes that prioritise factual integrity and public interest, promoting balanced reporting over purely profit-driven narratives. Hence, implementing these recommendations, the study concludes that society can move towards a more ethically grounded media landscape that better serves the public interest and reinforces democratic values.

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