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## Assessing the Influence of Social Media on News Sourcing Practices in the Kenyan Mainstream Media

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to systematically assess the influence of social media on news sourcing practices within the Kenyan mainstream media. The emergence of social media as a source of news to traditional media has presented both opportunities and challenges to mass communication researchers. The study reviews literature published on how social media influences (X, Facebook, WhatsApp) the traditional mainstream media in news sourcing practices. The objective of this study is to evaluate the transformation of news gathering practices, changes in newsroom practices, as well as consider the ethical concerns in the wake of social media. Using a systematic literature review approach, scholarly articles and doctoral theses published between 2016 and 2025 were sourced from databases including Google Scholar, International Journal of Current Science, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, and University repositories of Kenyan institutions. The review finds that while social media has democratized the news agenda through audience participation, it has also fundamentally challenged the traditional gatekeeping role of media practitioners. However, the quality of the news is sometimes compromised and thus the need for fact-checking techniques. The paper recommends that the mainstream media ought to encourage participatory journalism from the audience by integrating user-generated content responsibly. The audience concludes that social media is a complement to news sourcing practices and has shifted the mainstream media into a digital newsroom. The study contributes to broader discussions on media convergence and the evolving role of journalism in the digital era.

**Key words:** Digital journalism, Kenyan media, media ethics, news sourcing, social media influence.



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## INTRODUCTION

The entry of social media into news production and distribution has also brought innovative ways to tell stories, an area that keeps evolving very fast. Senior journalists in newsrooms from the United Kingdom, USA, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia interviewed in a global survey on their newsrooms' use of social media said that social media helps make a journalist's job better because journalists can narrow down an area of focus that they want to research and report on, and as well get expert comments from industry leaders, who can be sourced and contacted using social media platforms (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Social media and the internet in general have expedited the gathering of different types of news and increased the speed with which audiences receive or access such news (Safari, 2018).

In Kenya, the use of social media platforms is getting progressively integrated into traditionally closed, tightly controlled editorial practises of news production and dissemination. News media organisations are continually adopting methods of involving audiences in the news process by encouraging them to share news material, such as photos or video clips from a location where there is breaking news, to comment on a story, or share a news link on their social networks (Kiunga, 2023).

There has been phenomenal growth in the use of social media in Kenya, partly contributed by the relatively cheaper internet and availability of cellphones among most of the people in the country (Owilla, 2023). Consequently, the journalism industry has undergone transformations because of the arrival of social media, which is designed to facilitate the process of news gathering and dissemination. According to Franklin (2014), social networking sites, email, instant messaging systems, blogs, and websites have created opportunities for journalists to collaborate, exchange information, and connect among themselves. Nyamboga (2014) notes that Kenya is embracing social media as a tool to disseminate information, thus everyone has the potential to be a watchdog, citizen journalist or photo journalist and constantly survey the world around them and share what they source online.

While existing studies highlight the speed of news gathering and the breadth of audience participation, there remains a notable research gap in comprehensively synthesising how social media specifically alter the

internal structural routines and ethical frameworks of Kenyan newsrooms. Many studies address social media as a generalised phenomenon but fail to critically evaluate the specific "armchair reporting" ethical dilemmas alongside the structural shift in traditional gatekeeping. This study addresses these gaps through a systematic analysis of contemporary literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship emphasises that the proliferation of social media platforms has drastically compressed news gathering timelines, forcing Kenyan media houses to balance the speed of digital information with the traditional demands of comprehensive research (Bhadur et al., 2025; Gitau et al., 2023). This digital shift has effectively decentralised the news production process, as citizen-led reports and real-time footage now frequently preempt legacy reporting during major sociopolitical events (Radoli et al., 2025). However, this reliance on user-generated content often introduces significant verification challenges, necessitating a re-evaluation of editorial gatekeeping as journalists grapple with the high volume of unvetted information (Kabunda, 2025). Beyond these operational shifts, the rapid digitisation of the industry has compelled media professionals to actively restructure their workflows to better accommodate content derived from collaborative digital spaces (Munuku, 2025). In this regard, this review addresses the following question: How do social media platforms influence the news sourcing practices in the Kenyan media? Accordingly, the objective of this study is to critically examine the transformation of news gathering practice, changes in newsroom practices, and ethical concerns that arise in news sourcing practices.

## Theoretical Framework Gate-Keeping Theory

The intersection of social media and journalism has fundamentally altered the Gatekeeping Theory. Historically, editors and professional journalists served as the sole custodians of news, dictating the public agenda in a top-down approach (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, the digital era has moved gatekeeping toward a multidirectional model where the audience is a critical component. Bruns (2005) describes this evolution as "gate-watching," where journalists and audiences collaboratively compile, filter, and redistribute news. In Kenya, this theoretical shift is evident as ordinary citizens increasingly act as watchdogs, effectively multiplying the "gates" through which information must

pass (Nyamboga, 2014). By synthesising these theoretical frameworks, this review identifies the mechanisms through which social media disrupts and rebuilds news sourcing hierarchies.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The paper adopted a systematic literature review design to minimise bias and ensure methodological transparency and validity of the results. It aims to identify key themes, patterns, and gaps in the literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving media landscape. The scope of this review focused on literature discussing how Kenyan mainstream media, i.e. newspapers, television, and radio, utilise social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp in their news sourcing routines. Emphasis was placed on the transformation of news gathering, identifying changes in newsroom practices, and ethical concerns in newsroom practice resulting from the integration of social media into journalistic workflows.

The process began by formulating a comprehensive search strategy that incorporates a set of carefully selected keywords to guide the retrieval of scholarly articles from multiple academic databases. The core keywords included: “digital journalism”, “Kenyan media”, “news sourcing”, “social media influence”, and “media ethics.” The keywords were entered both as standalone terms and in various Boolean combinations using AND/OR connectors to enhance the precision and recall of the search queries.

The literature search was conducted across multiple well-established academic databases, including Google Scholar, International Journal of Current Science, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Journal of Journalism, Journal of Arts, Media Sciences & Creative Arts, as well as University repositories of Kenyan institutions (e.g. University of Nairobi, Aga Khan, etc.) Publications were selected based on specific inclusion criteria. Peer-reviewed articles, master’s and doctoral theses, and credible institutional reports published between 2016 and 2025 were selected to ensure that the review reflects the most recent developments and emerging patterns of social media influence in news sourcing practice in Kenyan mainstream media. Opinion pieces, non-academic blogs, and studies lacking direct relevance to mainstream media sourcing were excluded.

The credibility of selected studies was assessed based on their peer-review status, the robustness of their empirical data, and their alignment with the study’s core objectives. Each selected publication was reviewed for relevance, and key information was extracted.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this review are presented through three central themes that emerge consistently from the literature: transformation of news gathering practice, changes in newsroom practices, and ethical concerns in newsroom practice in the wake of social media.

#### **Transformation of News Gathering Practice**

A good number of companies, politicians and prominent personalities sometimes prefer to communicate important information via social media instead of organising press conferences (Bull, 2015). This means it is up to journalists to follow news sources on social media. It is not optional for journalists to be on social media; they must follow news leads on new media. Before the advent of social media, editors broke news as they were the sole custodians of scoops. But social media has changed the situation, and journalists receive big stories third hand, fourth and sometimes fifth, long after they started doing rounds on social media (Alejandro, 2010). However, research done by Yvonne Okwara records that reporters in the field are required to send near-instantaneous texts, photos, and videos back to editors via apps like WhatsApp to generate “digital cards” for social media circulation (Okwara, 2024).

Data extracted and analysed from the Standard Group’s digital and online policies, procedures, and work instructions showed that the media institution requires that its journalists frequently monitor social media platforms for breaking news, events and trends. In fact, the Standard Group’s social media policy espouses that staff and journalists are encouraged to possess personal accounts on social networks, which they can use to gather news and share links to the media company’s published work. The Standard Group’s digital and online policies, procedures, and work instructions pinpoint that there should be live tweeting of all important events because social media has become a significant tool for reporters and other staffers in the media industry. (Kinyanjui, 2022).

### Changes in Newsroom Practices

A study done by Ferdinand Kamenchu in 2016 on how social media has changed the newsroom operations in the Kenyan media: A case study of Standard and Nation Media Group revealed that a majority of journalists used social media in news collection. Some indicated that they saw social media as an easier and faster way to reach sources who would otherwise have taken a long time to reach. Data collected proposes that the approach to news collection and dissemination is changing, with journalists using what would otherwise be considered informal approaches to news sources. At the same time, these media have made it easier for journalists to monitor developing stories from their mobile phones, as well as giving journalists a wider pool of sources, including those that would otherwise not fall under the umbrella of traditional news sources (Kamenchu, 2016).

Research conducted by Kiguta (2018) on the impact of social media on print journalism: a case study of the Star newspaper revealed that the impact social media has had on the Star newspaper has led to newsroom reorganisation to leverage multiple platforms to deliver more to the audience at lower costs. The Star has embraced convergence with journalists required to deliver news for the Group's TV channel, radio stations and newspaper, which has helped the Star to improve its content.

With the arrival of the internet and other new media technologies, scholars have questioned the applicability of gatekeeping in a highly digitised media scape. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) renewed the gatekeeping model and added an important component – the audience. They explained that modern-day gatekeeping, which takes place in online spaces, is not hierarchical, moving from sender to receiver, but rather, information is multidirectional and travels across multiple channels. In this media environment, contemporary gatekeepers do not just include reporters and editors, but the audience as well, who are key players in determining what information is newsworthy. This perspective considers each internet user as a potential gatekeeper who can disseminate and respond to news stories published by news organisations. Bruns (2005) noted that the process of gatekeeping had metamorphosed into gate-watching. Online, the proverbial gates of information had multiplied almost infinitely. Professional journalists and online audiences now watch the gates of trusted online sources and news organisations. They collaborated to

compose, compile, and redistribute news. (Shinde & Sathyaprakash, 2023).

### Ethical Concerns

A survey done by Shinde & Sathyaprakash (2023) showed that some respondents were wary of stories encountered on social media. While some suggested it encouraged armchair reporting, others stated that one could not rely on social media alone. Often, stories encountered online required additional fact-checking.

*In online stories, it is hard to discern fact from fiction. Social media cannot always be your only source; it has to be corroborated with on-field reporting.*

Research conducted by Kiunga (2023) on the effects of social media on newspaper content distribution (Star Newspaper) revealed that WhatsApp is unfortunately prone to abuse, as misinformation and fake news are shared quite fast, which gives the media teams more work in fact-checking and verifying information. The other disadvantage of using WhatsApp is that it has encouraged laziness in journalists' reluctance to get out of their comfort zone and look for stories, investigate and generally be curious about new things. In the past, when a journalist would speak to the news source directly, there was a probability of picking up the nuances of the respondent and their reactions and could even get more than one story through extra information (Kiunga, 2023).

### Discussion

The research findings highlight a profound shift in the way information flows between sources, journalists, and the public. Traditionally, editors and journalists were the gatekeepers of news, breaking stories through press conferences and official channels. The entry of social media has disrupted the hierarchy of news dissemination, forcing journalists to adapt to a new reality where they are no longer the first to break stories but often the ones catching up.

The Kenyan mainstream media acknowledges that social media is no longer optional but is integral to modern journalism. Journalists are not only expected to gather news from these platforms but also to contribute to the conversation in real time, which demonstrates how immediacy and audience engagement have become central to reporting practices.

The transition from exclusive gatekeeping to collaborative "gate-watching" is now an operational reality in Kenyan newsrooms. When news organisations formally mandate social media monitoring, they implicitly acknowledge the audience's role in determining the news agenda. However, while media convergence has improved operational efficiency, it has concurrently elevated systemic ethical risks. The findings suggest that the rise of digital "sourcing" often comes at the expense of journalistic depth. Therefore, traditional sourcing methods should not be replaced but must be strictly augmented with robust digital verification frameworks to maintain institutional credibility in a crowded information market.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** The influence of social media on news sourcing practices in Kenyan mainstream media is both profound and multilayered. This development has caused changes in the way newsrooms are structured and how they operate. The operations of journalists and their roles are evolving quickly. While social media has disrupted traditional journalism news sourcing practices, it also provides pathways for adaptation and growth. Kenyan media have navigated the complexities of the digital era while ensuring that traditional journalism continues to play a vital role in disseminating credible news.

Furthermore, the paper's findings indicate that social media is remodelling traditional gatekeeping roles, with citizen journalists and audiences increasingly influencing news agendas. By creating digital verification techniques and incorporating social media into editorial processes, Kenyan media professionals are gradually adjusting. However, there is a lot to learn regarding effective digital journalism practices.

**Recommendations:** The paper recommends that media houses ought to facilitate regular and mandatory media training for reporters in digital news gathering, verification, and news writing. Another recommendation is that the mainstream media should strengthen participatory journalism, where they can integrate user-generated content responsibly, and provide clear editorial guidelines in order to maintain credibility and accuracy of news.

Generally, social media has not replaced traditional sourcing methods but has become a crucial addition that is reshaping newsroom cultures and journalistic practices. Future research should evaluate the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on these sourcing practices to provide further guidance for the future of journalism in Kenya.

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