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Media Influence in the Platform Age: Intermediation, Trust and the Limits of Persuasion

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Abstract

The question of whether media influence people - and how much - has been asked for a century without being settled, but the terms of the question have changed decisively. This article examines media influence in an environment in which the principal intermediaries between producers and audiences are platforms and, increasingly, generative systems rather than editors. It reports a comparative secondary analysis of the 2026 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the 2025 Eurobarometer on disinformation, and recent experimental and meta-analytic evidence on misinformation. Four findings emerge. First, access has been platformised: for the first time across forty-eight markets, social media and video networks (54 per cent) exceed news organisations' own websites and applications (51 per cent) as a weekly source of news. Second, intermediation and trust move in opposite directions - trust in news overall has fallen to 37 per cent, the lowest recorded, while trust in news encountered through social media (22 per cent) and AI chatbots (20 per cent) is lower still. Third, the experimental record does not support the strongest claims: deactivating a major misinformation vector in Brazil reduced recall of false rumours but did not change belief accuracy, polarisation or wellbeing, and following news on social media can increase knowledge and belief accuracy. Fourth, the mechanisms that demonstrably operate - attention, framing, repetition and perceived social norms - are cumulative and conditional rather than direct and uniform. The article argues that the analytically useful question is no longer how powerful media are but which intermediaries allocate attention, under what incentives, and with what distributional consequences.

Keywords: media influence, media effects, misinformation, platformisation, news trust, algorithmic curation, selective exposure, agenda setting, framing, public opinion

1. Introduction

Every generation of communication research has reopened the same question and answered it differently. Early twentieth-century commentators, impressed by the reach of the popular press and later of radio and film, assumed a powerful and direct influence over a susceptible public; Lippmann's (1922) account of the world outside and the pictures in our heads supplied the enduring metaphor. Mid-century empirical work produced the opposite verdict. Studying the 1940 presidential campaign in Erie County, Ohio, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) found that media messages reached and converted very few voters directly, and that interpersonal influence mattered more - the origin of the 'minimal effects' conclusion that structured the field for two decades.

The contemporary environment differs from both moments in a way that matters theoretically. In the era of mass broadcasting, a small number of organisations controlled the channels, and the research question concerned the strength of their messages. Today, the binding constraint is not message strength but channel allocation: audiences encounter news through intermediaries whose ranking decisions are commercial and computational, and whose outputs are increasingly synthesised rather than selected. Across forty-eight markets, social media and video networks are now, for the first time, more widely used as a source of online news than the websites and applications of news organisations themselves - 54 per cent against 51 per cent - while seventy-seven per cent of respondents watch online news video each week (Reuters Institute, 2026). Ten per cent now use AI chatbots for news, up from seven per cent a year earlier, with use concentrated among younger audiences and growing fastest in developing markets.

Three features of this environment restructure the old question. Intermediation has moved outside the newsroom, so that the selection of what an audience sees is governed by engagement optimisation rather than editorial judgement. Authority has fragmented, so that trust attaches less to institutions than to individuals - twenty-seven per cent of respondents report getting news from creators, who score highly on comprehensibility and relatability

but poorly on trustworthiness and impartiality (Reuters Institute, 2026). And attention has become the scarce resource: people devote four to five hours a day to their smartphones, and news competes for a share of that rather than for a discrete place in the daily schedule.

This article makes four contributions. It synthesises four generations of media-effects theory into a single systems model that makes intermediation explicit (Figure 1). It assembles the most recent comparative evidence on access, trust and attention into a common frame. It reports what the strongest available experimental and meta-analytic evidence actually establishes about misinformation, which is considerably more modest than public debate assumes. And it proposes that the field's central question should be reformulated from the strength of influence to the governance of allocation.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature. Section 3 describes the comparative secondary analysis. Section 4 presents findings. Section 5 discusses their theoretical and practical implications, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Strong-Effects Tradition

The earliest systematic claims for powerful media effects were theoretical rather than empirical. Lippmann (1922) argued that modern societies are too large and too complex for citizens to observe directly, so that public opinion is necessarily built from second-hand pictures mediated by journalists - a dependence that makes the manufacture of consent politically decisive. Herman and Chomsky (1988) gave that argument a structural form, proposing a propaganda model in which ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and ideology filter news content in predictable directions without requiring conspiracy. McLuhan's (1964) aphorism that the medium is the message made a different and complementary claim: the form of a medium shapes cognition independently of its content.

The strong-effects tradition is frequently caricatured as naive, but its central insight survives: if most of what people know about the world arrives through a small number of channels, then whoever controls those channels exercises structural rather than merely persuasive power. That insight is more relevant to platforms than it was to newspapers, because platform intermediaries select not only what is published but what is seen.

2.2 Minimal Effects and the Two-Step Flow

The empirical challenge came from election studies. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) found that campaign communications reinforced existing preferences far more often than they changed them, and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) proposed the mechanism: mass media influence flows first to opinion leaders, who then interpret and transmit it through interpersonal networks. This two-step flow relocated causal power from the message to the social structure through which it travels. Klapper's distillation - that media typically reinforce rather than convert - became the field's default position, and Bennett and Iyengar (2008) later argued that the fragmented, high-choice environment had restored conditions in which smaller but more targeted effects could be detected reliably.

The two-step flow has been rediscovered rather than superseded. Creators and influencers occupy precisely the position that opinion leaders did - intermediary interpreters whose authority derives from perceived authenticity rather than institutional position - and the empirical question is whether their interpretive role produces the same reinforcement bias that Lazarsfeld's subjects displayed.

2.3 Conditional and Cumulative Effects

From the 1970s the field developed a third position: effects are real but operate on different dependent variables than conversion. McCombs and Shaw (1972) demonstrated agenda setting - that media influence not what people think but what they think about, with the salience of issues in coverage predicting their salience in public opinion. Entman (1993) described framing as the selection and salience of particular aspects of reality, which shapes how audiences interpret an issue rather than whether they attend to it. Gerbner and Gross (1976) proposed cultivation, arguing that long-term exposure to television's recurring representations gradually shapes perceptions of social reality. Noelle-Neumann (1974) described the spiral of silence, in which perceived media climate affects individuals' willingness to express minority views. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) framed media dependency as a function of how much a person relies on media to meet their goals.

These theories share a structure that makes them more durable than either extreme: each specifies a mechanism, a timescale and a condition. Agenda setting operates on salience, quickly, for issues about which audiences lack direct experience. Cultivation operates on perceptions of social reality, slowly, through cumulative exposure. The

spiral of silence operates on expression, not belief, and only where people perceive themselves to be in a minority. Figure 5 arranges the mechanisms by the site at which they operate and the degree of audience awareness involved.

2.4 High-Choice Environments and Selective Exposure

A fourth literature asks what happens when audiences can choose. Prior (2007) showed that expanding channel choice widened rather than narrowed knowledge gaps, because those most interested in politics concentrated on news while others defected to entertainment. Stroud (2011) demonstrated that partisan selectivity in news choice strengthens existing attitudes. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found that even minimal exposure to a counter-attitudinal channel can shift opinion, but that people avoid such exposure in practice. Sunstein (2001) warned that a system of unlimited individual choice would produce fragmentation and group polarisation, and Pariser (2011) described the 'filter bubble' in which personalisation silently removes the material that would challenge a person's existing views.

The empirical record on the filter bubble is more mixed than the metaphor suggests. Meta-analytic and review work has repeatedly found that selective exposure is real but bounded, that algorithmic recommendation often exposes users to more rather than less diverse material than they would choose unaided, and that the more consequential mechanism is not isolation from opposing views but the volume and emotional valence of the material to which people are exposed. This distinction matters for policy: remedies premised on 'breaking the bubble' may address a weaker mechanism than remedies premised on reducing low-quality high-arousal content.

2.5 Misinformation: From Alarm to Evidence

The last decade produced an enormous literature on misinformation, and a partial correction within it. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) showed that false news spread faster and further than true news on Twitter, a finding that shaped public alarm. Lazer and colleagues (2018) framed fake news as a scientific and policy problem requiring interdisciplinary response. Pennycook and Rand (2019) argued that sharing of false content reflects inattention rather than motivated reasoning, and that prompting people to think about accuracy substantially reduces it (Pennycook, Epstein & Rand, 2021). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) supplied the conceptual taxonomy that distinguished misinformation, disinformation and malinformation and shifted attention to the supply side.

Recent work has become markedly more careful about effect sizes. Pfänder and Altay (2025), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of news judgements, found that people discriminate between true and false news far better than the alarmist literature implies, and that the policy-relevant problem is as much unwarranted doubt about true news as credulity about false news. Altay, Hoes and Wojcieszak (2025) reported that following news on social media is associated with greater knowledge, better belief accuracy and higher trust - a result that runs directly against the assumption that platform exposure degrades the information environment. Altay, Lyons and Modirrousta-Galian (2024) found that exposure to higher rates of false news erodes media trust and fuels overconfidence, but the direction of that relationship is itself contested. And a large deactivation experiment in Brazil found that removing a major misinformation vector reduced recall of false rumours without measurably changing belief accuracy, polarisation or wellbeing - a result the authors interpret through the logic of minimal effects (Ventura et al., 2025). The cumulative message is that misinformation matters, but that its demonstrated effects are smaller and more conditional than the surrounding discourse assumes.

2.6 Algorithmic and Generative Intermediation

The newest literature addresses the intermediary itself. Gillespie (2018) argued that platforms present themselves as neutral conduits while exercising consequential editorial power through ranking. Tufekci (2018) documented how a recommendation algorithm can escalate users towards more extreme content through an optimisation logic that no one intended. Bennett and Livingston (2018) described a disinformation order in which the structural features of platforms, rather than the content of particular falsehoods, determine what spreads.

Two developments make this literature urgent rather than merely topical. The first is the shift from distribution to synthesis: generative systems do not select among existing items but produce new text, which dissolves the distinction between publisher and platform and removes the click-through link that previously connected audiences to sources. Reuters Institute (2026) reports that chatbot users are markedly less likely to click through to original sources than conventional search users, and that only 20 per cent trust news obtained through chatbots. The second is the political response: Ventura and colleagues (2026) studied Brazil's 2024 national ban on a major platform and found that it segmented the digital public sphere along partisan lines, with effects persisting after restrictions were lifted. Interventions in intermediation can therefore produce effects very different from those intended.

2.7 Media Systems and Comparative Context

A final strand insists that media effects are conditioned by the media system in which they occur, and that most of what the field knows derives from a small number of wealthy, mostly Anglophone democracies. Comparative work on information disorder has emphasised that the same content produces different effects depending on whether the environment is characterised by state control, commercial polarisation, or weak professional infrastructure (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The point is not that effects differ in magnitude but that the mechanism differs: where the state dominates the information environment, influence operates through censorship and agenda control; where commercial competition dominates, it operates through selection and framing; and where infrastructure is weak, it operates through rumour and interpersonal transmission in ways that research designed around feed-based platforms systematically misses.

Two contrasts make the point concrete. In the United States, partisan identity now structures the information environment almost completely: survey work finds almost no overlap between partisan groups in their most trusted news sources and marked divergence in platform preference, so that influence operates within rather than between audiences (Pew Research Center, 2025). In several Middle Eastern societies, by contrast, publics combine high engagement with media and strong national attachments with deep dissatisfaction with institutions, producing an environment in which abundance of information coexists with distrust of its producers (Arab Barometer, 2025). A theory of media influence that cannot account for both cases is a theory of one media system, not of media influence. The comparative limitation is the most serious constraint on the evidence reviewed in Section 4.

Three gaps structure the present study. First, the effects traditions and the platform literature remain largely separate: agenda-setting and framing research rarely models algorithmic selection explicitly. Second, comparative evidence about access and trust exists at scale but is rarely integrated with experimental evidence about effects, so that large claims about influence rest on one kind of evidence while careful effect estimates rest on another. Third, the field lacks a vocabulary for describing influence as a property of a system rather than of a message. The study reported below addresses the first and second directly and proposes a framework for the third.

3. Method

3.1 Design

The study is a comparative secondary analysis with an embedded evidence synthesis. Because the phenomena of interest - who reaches audiences, what audiences trust, and what interventions change belief - are measured by different instruments in different populations, a single dataset cannot address all three; a secondary design was therefore chosen in preference to a primary survey or a single experiment. The design has three components: (a) reconstruction of access and trust patterns from the largest available cross-national survey of news consumption; (b) structured synthesis of recent experimental and quasi-experimental evidence on misinformation and intermediation; and (c) integration of both within a systems model of influence.

The design is explanatory rather than confirmatory. No hypotheses were pre-registered and no causal estimates are claimed beyond those reported by the primary studies. The purpose is to establish whether the large-scale observational pattern - declining trust, rising platform dependence - is consistent with the small-scale experimental pattern - bounded, conditional effects - and to specify what follows if both are true.

3.2 Evidence Base

Sources were eligible if they (i) reported original data or original empirical analysis of media use, media trust or media effects; (ii) were published in 2021 or later, with priority to 2023-2026; (iii) documented sampling and instrumentation; and (iv) were available in English. Eighteen sources met the criteria. Table 1 summarises the principal ones. Two features of the corpus shape the interpretation. The survey evidence is exceptionally broad - forty-eight markets and approximately one hundred thousand respondents in the principal source - but relies on self-reported behaviour and cannot establish causal direction. The experimental evidence is causally credible but necessarily narrow in population, platform and duration.

Table 1. Principal evidence base

Source	Year	Design and coverage	Contribution
Reuters Institute, Digital News Report	2026	Online survey, approximately 100,000 respondents, 48 markets	Access, trust, avoidance, video, creators, AI chatbots (Sections 4.1-4.3)
Eurobarometer (analysed by Mishchuk et al.)	2025	Face-to-face survey, n = 26,114, EU	Self-reported exposure to and confidence about disinformation (Section 4.4)
Ventura, Majumdar, Nagler and Tucker	2025	Multimedia deactivation experiment, Brazil, 2022 election	Causal evidence on reducing misinformation exposure (Section 4.4)
Ventura, Barrie, Roberts, Schwarz and Tucker	2026	Event-study of a national platform ban, Brazil 2024	Effects of intervening in intermediation (Section 5.3)
Pfänder and Altay	2025	Systematic review and meta-analysis of news judgements	Pooled estimates of true/false discrimination (Section 4.4)
Altay, Hoes and Wojcieszak	2025	Observational and experimental evidence on social media news use	Counter-evidence to degradation assumptions (Section 4.4)
Altay, Lyons and Modirrousta-Galian	2024	Survey and experimental evidence on false-news exposure	Effects of exposure on trust and overconfidence (Section 4.2)
Oktavianus and Meng	2024	Survey, n = 2,589, Taiwan	Presumed influence and corrective behaviour (Section 4.5)
Štětka et al.	2026	Cross-country survey, N = 5,000, four countries	Populism, expert trust and misinformation belief (Section 4.4)
Pew Research Center	2025	US adults; platform use and trusted news sources	Partisan divergence in information environments (Section 5.3)

3.3 Analytic Procedures

Three procedures were applied. For the access and trust reconstruction, published marginals were assembled by indicator and plotted at the level of aggregation reported by the source; no attempt was made to re-weight country data or to construct a single composite index, because the markets differ in internet penetration, media system and political context in ways that make such aggregation misleading. Differences are reported as percentage-point gaps and their robustness is assessed by whether the same direction appears in an independent source.

For the evidence synthesis, each study was coded for design, population, intervention or exposure measure, outcome, effect size and stated limitations, and coded again for whether its findings support strong, minimal or conditional effects. Coding was applied to published findings rather than to raw data, which is a recognised limitation of synthesis-level work. For the integration step, the mechanisms identified in the theoretical literature were matched against the empirical evidence available for each, and the result is reported as Table 3 with an explicit confidence rating.

3.4 Limitations

Four limits should be stated plainly. First, the principal survey evidence is self-reported, and self-reports of media use are known to be imprecise. Second, platform data on actual exposure are not available to researchers, so the study can describe what people say they use but not what they actually encounter. Third, the experimental evidence is concentrated in a small number of countries and platforms, and its generalisation to generative

intermediaries is inference rather than observation. Fourth, the analysis cannot distinguish cohort from period effects in the trend data, since the same respondents are not followed over time. These limits are revisited in the Discussion.

4. Findings

4.1 The Platformisation of Access

The first finding is a structural change in who reaches audiences. Averaging across forty-eight markets, 54 per cent of respondents now use social media and video networks as a source of online news each week, against 51 per cent who use news organisations' own websites and applications (Reuters Institute, 2026). This is the first time that intermediated access has exceeded direct access at the aggregate level. The shift is not confined to young cohorts; it is occurring across age groups. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents watch online news video weekly, and in forty-five of the forty-eight markets more people watch online news video than watch broadcast television news. Figure 1 presents the pattern, including the platform composition of video news - Facebook 43 per cent, YouTube 34 per cent, Instagram 26 per cent and TikTok 20 per cent.

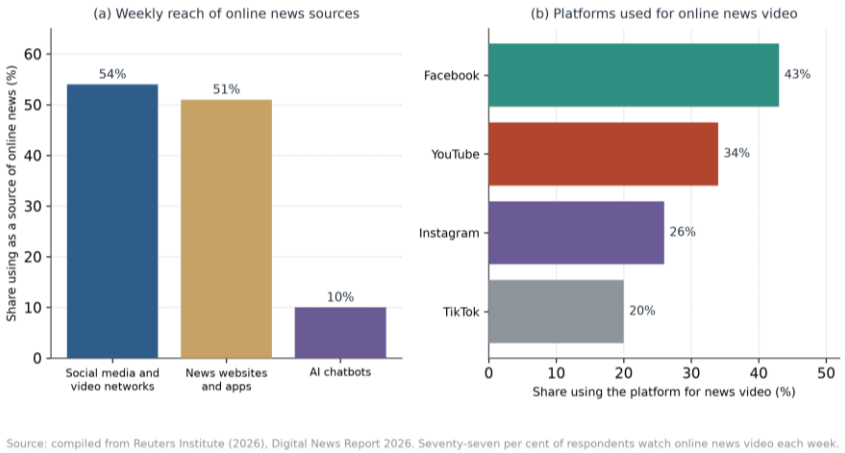


Figure 1. The platformisation of news access, 2026 (48 markets)

Two consequences follow. The first is economic: mainstream news organisations have seen video consumption on their own sites and applications decline by five percentage points in a single year, while all growth occurs on third-party platforms. Publishers therefore lose the direct relationship with audiences on which subscription and advertising revenue depend, and with it the ability to signal provenance and accountability. The second is editorial: the selection of what an audience encounters is performed by systems optimising for engagement, which is not the same as optimising for accuracy, importance or civic value. The shift from editorial to algorithmic gatekeeping is the single most consequential change in the architecture of media influence since the arrival of broadcasting.

4.2 Intermediation and Trust Move in Opposite Directions

The second finding is that dependence on intermediaries has risen while trust in them has fallen. Overall trust in news stands at 37 per cent across the forty-eight markets, down three percentage points on the previous year and the lowest level since the series began in 2015; trust declined in twenty-nine of the forty-eight markets, with the largest falls recorded where political instability and divisive elections coincided with fragmented information environments (Reuters Institute, 2026). Trust is higher for the news a person uses - 44 per cent - which is the familiar finding that people trust their own sources more than the institution in general.

The channel gradient is steep and consistent. Trust in news encountered through search engines is 32 per cent; through social media, 22 per cent; and through AI chatbots, 20 per cent (Reuters Institute, 2026). Figure 2 displays the gradient. Two interpretations are available. One is that audiences are right - that intermediated news is genuinely less reliable because provenance is weaker and correction is rarer. The other is that low trust is a disposition towards the channel rather than a judgement about content, since the same item is trusted more when encountered directly than when encountered through an intermediary. The evidence cannot separate these, and

the distinction matters: the first calls for content standards, the second for transparency about provenance.

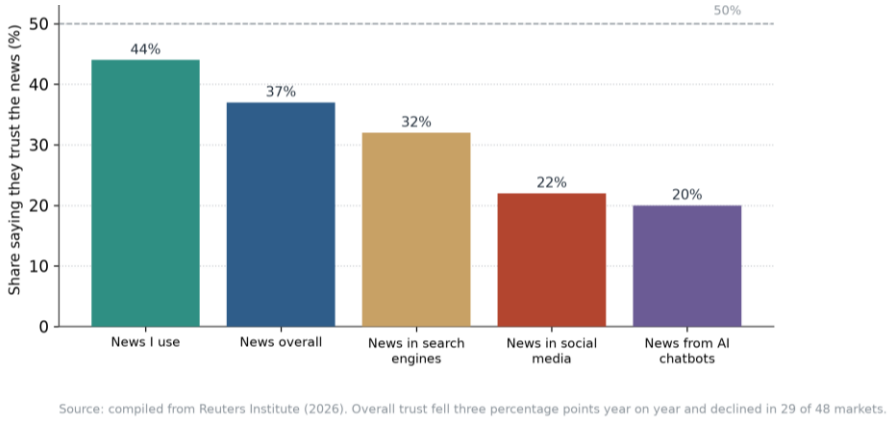


Figure 2. Trust in news by channel, 2026 (48 markets)

A third possibility deserves attention because recent work supports it. Altay, Lyons and Modirrousta-Galian (2024) found that exposure to higher rates of false news erodes media trust and increases overconfidence in one's own judgements, which implies that low trust in intermediated channels may be partly produced by the volume of low-quality material those channels carry rather than by the channel as such. If so, trust is not a fixed attitude towards institutions but a running assessment of informational quality - which would make it responsive to intervention in ways that institutional trust campaigns have not been.

4.3 Attention, Interest and Avoidance

The third finding concerns the demand side: while supply has fragmented, attention has become more selective and more reluctant. Twenty-five per cent of respondents now describe themselves as casual or passive news consumers, engaging about once a week with little interest, up from sixteen per cent in 2021 (Reuters Institute, 2026). Forty-two per cent say they often or sometimes avoid the news. The United Kingdom illustrates the speed of the change: the share describing themselves as very or extremely interested in news fell from 70 per cent to 37 per cent over five years. Figure 3 presents the two clearest trend indicators.

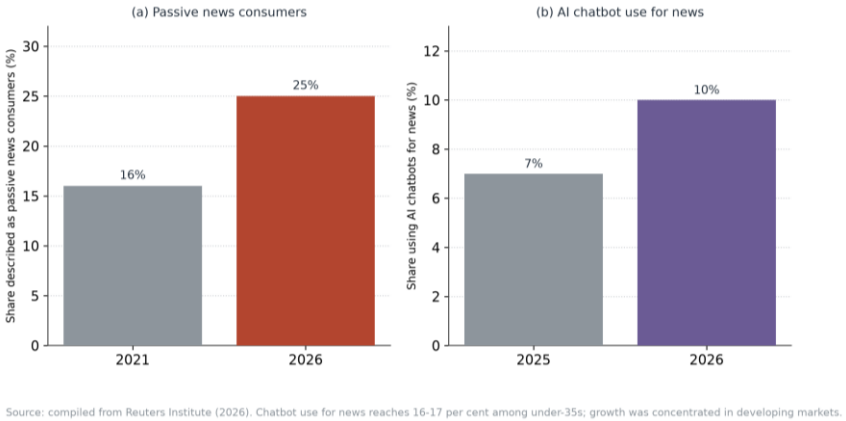


Figure 3. Two indicators of changing audience orientation

Avoidance is not simply disengagement. Respondents who avoid news commonly cite the volume of news, its repetitiveness, its negative effect on mood and their sense of powerlessness to act on it - a pattern that suggests overload and efficacy problems rather than indifference. The practical implication is that the classic model in which a single broadcast bulletin reached a captive, heterogeneous audience no longer describes the situation.

Audiences now sort themselves into the highly engaged, who use more sources and more formats than ever, and the loosely attached, who encounter news incidentally through platforms they visit for other reasons. Media influence in the second group operates through exposure that is incidental rather than chosen, which is precisely the condition under which agenda-setting and cultivation effects - both of which work without deliberate attention - should be strongest.

The composition of the loosely attached group deserves emphasis because it is where influence is least studied and potentially greatest. People who encounter news incidentally typically do so through feeds visited for social or entertainment reasons, which means they are exposed to news without the motivated processing that accompanies deliberate news use. Motivated processing is protective: it brings prior knowledge, source awareness and cross-checking to bear on the material. Incidental exposure removes that protection while leaving the ordinary mechanisms of salience and repetition intact. If any population is vulnerable to media influence in the strong sense, it is this one - and it is the population least likely to appear in experiments, which recruit participants who are willing to think about news.

4.4 What the Experimental Record Actually Shows

The fourth finding is the most important for theory, and it is restraining. The strongest available causal evidence does not support the strongest public claims about media influence. In a multimedia deactivation experiment conducted during the weeks before Brazil's 2022 presidential election, reducing exposure to a major misinformation vector significantly reduced participants' recall of false rumours circulating during the campaign - but produced no significant change in belief accuracy, political polarisation or wellbeing (Ventura et al., 2025). The authors interpret the result through the logic of minimal effects: a short-term change in the information environment altered what people could recall without altering what they believed.

Three further results point the same way. Pfänder and Altay (2025), reviewing the literature on news judgements, find that audiences discriminate true from false news considerably better than commonly assumed, and that the larger practical problem may be unwarranted scepticism towards true news. Altay, Hoes and Wojcieszak (2025) report that following news on social media is associated with greater knowledge, better belief accuracy and higher trust - the opposite of the degradation hypothesis. And Štětka and colleagues (2026), surveying five thousand respondents across four countries, find that pre-existing attitudes - affinity to populism and mistrust of experts - predict belief in misinformation more strongly than news consumption patterns do, though specific media brands and messaging applications retain independent associations.

None of this implies that misinformation is harmless. It implies that the mechanism attributed to it in public debate - exposure produces belief, belief produces behaviour - is not the mechanism the evidence supports. What the evidence supports is a weaker and more conditional chain in which exposure interacts with predisposition, and in which the effect of additional exposure is smallest exactly where predisposition is strongest. That is a conclusion the two-step flow tradition would have predicted, and it has direct implications for intervention design.

4.5 Mechanisms and Their Evidence Base

The four traditions reviewed in Section 2 can be compared directly, and the comparison clarifies why they reach different conclusions. Table 2 sets them out against their assumed mechanism, the outcome they measure and the condition under which they expect effects. The traditions are less contradictory than is often supposed: each is measuring a different dependent variable at a different timescale, and together they describe a single system in which media set salience, shape interpretation and signal the climate of opinion, while conversion of attitudes remains rare and conditional.

Table 2. Four traditions of media effects research compared

Tradition	Assumed mechanism	Outcome measured	Condition for effects
Strong effects	Direct transmission of meaning to a susceptible audience (Lippmann, 1922; Herman & Chomsky, 1988)	Belief and behaviour change	Low plurality of sources; high dependence on a single channel
Minimal effects	Reinforcement via interpersonal networks (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)	Vote choice and attitude stability	High plurality; strong predispositions; cross-pressures
Conditional and cumulative effects	Salience, framing, repetition and perceived climate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Gerbner & Gross, 1976)	Issue priorities, interpretation, perceived reality, expression	Sustained exposure; low direct experience; salient climate cues
Algorithmic and networked effects	Ranking, recommendation and synthesis allocating exposure (Gillespie, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018)	Composition and volume of exposure; secondary effects on belief	Engagement-optimised ranking; limited editorial accountability

Table 3 assembles the mechanisms identified in the theoretical literature alongside the state of the evidence for each. Three patterns are visible. Mechanisms operating on salience and interpretation have the strongest support. Mechanisms operating on expression and perceived climate have moderate support and are highly context-dependent. And mechanisms attributed to algorithmic and generative intermediation are theoretically compelling but empirically the least established, because platform data remain inaccessible to researchers.

Table 3. Mechanisms of media influence and the state of the evidence

Mechanism	What it changes	State of evidence	Principal moderators
Agenda setting	Salience of issues in public perception	Strong; replicated across countries and media systems (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)	Issue obtrusiveness; audience need for orientation
Framing	Interpretation and attribution of responsibility	Strong in experimental settings; weaker in naturalistic ones (Entman, 1993)	Prior knowledge; competing frames; source credibility
Cultivation	Perceptions of social reality over long exposure	Moderate; contested methodologically (Gerbner & Gross, 1976)	Amount and consistency of exposure; direct experience
Priming	Standards applied in evaluating actors	Moderate; strongest for evaluations of political leaders	Time between exposure and judgement; motivation
Two-step flow	Diffusion through interpersonal networks	Foundational but harder to detect at scale (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)	Network density; homophily; platform affordances
Spiral of silence	Willingness to express minority views	Moderate and highly context-dependent (Noelle-Neumann, 1974)	Perceived media climate; fear of isolation; anonymity
Presumed influence	Behaviour following beliefs about others' exposure	Emerging; predicts verification and correction behaviour (Oktavianus & Meng, 2024)	Perceived prevalence; platform type
Algorithmic curation	Composition and volume of exposure	Plausible and widely assumed; direct evidence limited by data access	Platform optimisation objective; user behaviour
Generative synthesis	Provenance, completeness and framing of answers	Very limited; adoption is recent and measurable only self-reportedly (Reuters Institute, 2026)	Model design; disclosure; user verification habits

Figure 4 arranges the same mechanisms along two dimensions: the site at which the effect operates, from individual cognition to collective and systemic outcomes, and the degree to which the audience is aware of it. The arrangement makes visible what the literature review implies - that the mechanisms with the strongest evidence are those operating without audience awareness, and those with the weakest evidence are the ones about which public concern is greatest.

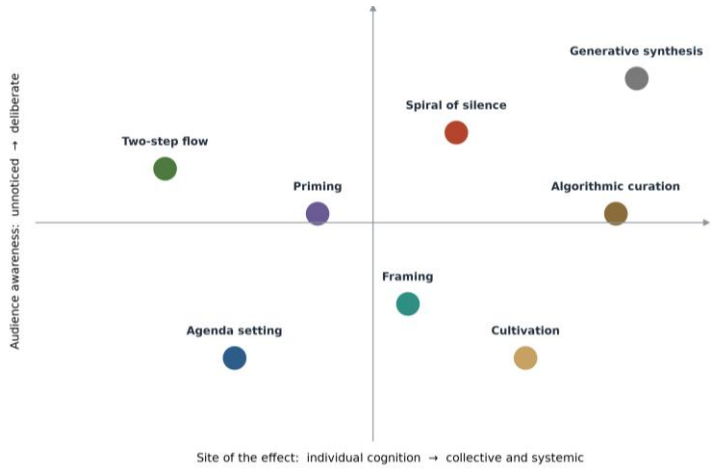


Figure 4. Mechanisms of media influence arranged by site and visibility

One mechanism deserves separate comment because it reverses the usual direction of the causal story. The influence of presumed influence holds that people respond not only to what media tell them but to what they believe media are telling other people. Survey evidence from Taiwan indicates that perceived prevalence of misinformation predicts presumed influence, which in turn predicts both information authentication and social correction, and that the relationship differs by channel: using social networking sites and video platforms for political news raises perceived prevalence, whereas instant messaging applications lower it (Oktavianus & Meng, 2024). The practical significance is that beliefs about the information environment are themselves an object of media influence, and that they drive behaviour - checking, correcting, disengaging - independently of what any particular person has actually seen. A population that believes misinformation to be rampant may disengage for that reason alone, which is a mechanism that content-focused remedies do not address at all.

4.6 Creators, Authority and the Reconfiguration of Intermediation

A fifth finding concerns who is trusted to interpret events. Twenty-seven per cent of respondents across the forty-eight markets report getting news from individual creators or influencers, and around 46 per cent from creators of any type; however, only about 3 per cent rely on creators as their sole source, which suggests complementarity rather than substitution (Reuters Institute, 2026). Creators are rated highly for ease of understanding, entertainment value and relatability, and much lower on trustworthiness and impartiality - a profile that mirrors the two-step flow almost exactly: the interpreter is valued for making sense of events, not for certifying them.

The theoretical significance is that authority has been re-personalised. For most of the twentieth century, credibility attached to organisations - the newspaper masthead, the broadcasting brand - because organisations had reputational capital at stake and could be held accountable for error. Personal authority is cheaper to acquire and harder to sanction: a creator can build a large audience without any of the verification infrastructure that makes an organisation's claims checkable, and can lose credibility without losing reach. This is not a defect of individuals but a structural feature of an environment in which distribution is decoupled from production. It also explains a finding that otherwise looks paradoxical - that audiences can simultaneously report low trust in news overall and high satisfaction with the particular sources they use.

4.7 Synthesis: Influence as an Allocation Problem

Table 4 summarises the findings against the questions the study began with. The synthesis they support is that media influence should be analysed as a property of an allocation system rather than as a property of messages.

What platforms and generative systems determine is not primarily what people think; it is which sources, frames and voices reach which audiences, with what frequency, and in what company. The effects that follow are the ordinary conditional effects documented in Section 2.3, operating at greater volume and with less editorial filtering than in the broadcasting era.

Table 4. Summary of findings by research question

Research question	Finding	Principal evidence	Confidence
Who reaches audiences now?	Intermediated access has overtaken direct access: 54 per cent versus 51 per cent across 48 markets	Reuters Institute (2026)	High
Is trust in news falling?	Yes: 37 per cent overall, the lowest recorded; trust is lower for every intermediated channel	Reuters Institute (2026); Altay et al. (2024)	High
Are audiences disengaging?	Yes: passive consumers rose from 16 to 25 per cent since 2021; 42 per cent avoid news at least sometimes	Reuters Institute (2026)	High
Does exposure to misinformation change belief?	Partly: reducing exposure changed recall but not belief accuracy or polarisation	Ventura et al. (2025); Pfänder & Altay (2025)	Moderate
Does platform news use degrade the environment?	Not necessarily: associations with knowledge and accuracy are positive in recent work	Altay et al. (2025); Štětka et al. (2026)	Moderate
Do interventions in intermediation work as intended?	Often not: a platform ban segmented the public sphere along partisan lines, persisting after repeal	Ventura et al. (2026)	Moderate
Which mechanisms are best supported?	Salience and framing; weakest support concerns algorithmic and generative intermediation	McCombs & Shaw (1972); Entman (1993); see Table 3	High

5. Discussion

5.1 Reframing the Question

The findings support a reformulation. The classical question - how powerful are the media? - presupposes a sender, a message and a receiver. The contemporary environment contains all three, but the variable that determines outcomes is a fourth: the intermediary that allocates attention between them. Where allocation was formerly performed by editors accountable to professional standards and, indirectly, to regulators, it is now performed by ranking systems accountable to engagement metrics and, in a growing share of cases, by generative systems that produce rather than select content. Asking how powerful media are thus mislocates the question. The better question is who allocates attention, under what incentives, and with what distributional consequences.

This reframing resolves an apparent contradiction in the findings. Large-scale survey evidence shows deep anxiety: 62 per cent of respondents report being concerned about online misinformation, and concern exceeds 75 per cent in several markets including Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, correlating strongly with use of social media and video networks for news (Reuters Institute, 2026). Experimental evidence shows modest effects. Both can be true: an environment can be genuinely degraded in quality while the marginal effect of any given piece of content on any given person remains small. Public anxiety responds to the first, researchers measure the second, and the discrepancy is not evidence that either is wrong.

A second apparent contradiction resolves the same way. Audiences report declining trust while continuing to use the same channels, and declining interest while spending more time with devices. Both are intelligible once trust is understood as an assessment of environmental quality rather than of institutional reputation, and once interest is understood as a statement about the deliberate activity of following news rather than about total exposure. The practical consequence is that measures of trust and interest, taken alone, are poor indicators of how much media influence an audience is actually subject to - a person who reports no interest in news and low trust in it may nonetheless encounter a great deal of news incidentally, and be influenced by it through precisely the mechanisms that require no attention.

5.2 What the Evidence Supports Practically

If effects are conditional rather than direct, intervention design should change. Three implications follow. First, accuracy prompts - shifting attention from the question of whether to share to whether a claim is accurate - have replicated effects on sharing behaviour (Pennycook et al., 2021) and represent a rare case in which a cheap intervention has survived replication. Second, provenance interventions should be prioritised over content takedowns, because the evidence on recall versus belief (Ventura et al., 2025) suggests that what persists is not the falsehood but the absence of a competing account. Third, interventions should be evaluated against system-level outcomes - the composition of what audiences encounter - rather than against individual belief change, which the evidence suggests is the least responsive dependent variable available.

Media literacy programmes deserve a specific caution. Eurobarometer data for 2025 indicate that 65.9 per cent of respondents express high confidence in their ability to recognise fake news while 34.1 per cent do not, and that self-reported exposure to disinformation is slightly higher among women (23.8 per cent) than men (21.1 per cent), varying significantly by age and years of education (Mishchuk et al., 2026). High self-confidence is not the same as high competence, and Altay, Lyons and Modirrousta-Galian (2024) found that exposure to false news increases overconfidence. Programmes that raise confidence without raising accuracy may therefore worsen the problem they address.

5.3 The Risks of Intervening in Intermediation

The Brazil case is the most instructive available. When a democracy banned a major platform nationally in 2024, the effect was not the restoration of a healthier public sphere but partisan sorting: users not aligned with the government were more likely to circumvent the ban, right-leaning news domains became more prevalent on the platform, and the segmentation persisted after restrictions were lifted - a pattern the authors term a 'sorting ratchet' (Ventura et al., 2026). The general lesson is that interventions in intermediation are themselves subject to the same dynamics as the content they target: people sort, adapt and circumvent, and the composition of the resulting environment may be worse than before.

The same caution applies to the generative layer. Because chatbot users are markedly less likely to click through to original sources than search users, and because trust in chatbot-delivered news stands at 20 per cent, the introduction of synthesised answers threatens the economic basis of the organisations that produce verified reporting while offering audiences less provenance than they had before. Policy responses focused solely on the accuracy of model outputs would miss the more consequential issue, which is the removal of the link between audience and source.

5.4 What a Strong Claim Would Require

It is worth stating explicitly what evidence would justify the strongest claims about media influence, because the absence of that evidence is itself a finding. A strong claim requires three things: measurement of actual rather than self-reported exposure; variation in exposure that is not chosen by the recipient; and outcomes measured over a period long enough for cumulative mechanisms to operate. Almost no study satisfies all three. The deactivation experiment in Brazil satisfies the second and, partially, the first, but ran for weeks rather than years (Ventura et al., 2025). The cross-national surveys satisfy none of the three but cover the largest populations (Reuters Institute, 2026). The platform-ban study exploits a genuine exogenous shock but measures a political rather than a media outcome (Ventura et al., 2026). The result is a literature in which the strongest designs have the narrowest scope, and the broadest evidence supports only the weakest inferences.

This is not a counsel of despair. It is a specification of what progress would look like, and it has a direct bearing on how confidently findings should be communicated. Researchers who report that a manipulation changed recall but not belief are not understating the power of media; they are reporting the only estimate their design can support. Public discourse routinely converts such estimates into claims about belief change, and the conversion is where the strongest and least defensible assertions enter circulation.

5.5 Normative and Distributional Questions

Two normative issues follow from treating influence as allocation. The first is accountability: ranking systems exercise editorial power without editorial responsibility, and the difficulty researchers face in obtaining exposure data means that the most consequential editorial decisions in the information environment are also the least scrutinised. The second is distribution: if effects are conditional on predisposition, then the same information environment produces different outcomes for different groups, and interventions designed for the median user may systematically fail the most vulnerable. Comparative evidence from other regions underlines the point - publics in several Middle Eastern societies combine high media engagement with deep dissatisfaction with institutions and declining confidence in governance, a combination in which information abundance does not translate into trust (Arab Barometer, 2025).

5.6 Practical Implications

For practitioners and regulators, five implications follow.

- Regulate allocation, not only content: transparency over ranking, labelling of synthetic material, and preservation of linkage to sources address the mechanism the evidence implicates.
- Prioritise accuracy prompts and provenance cues, which have replicated effects, over belief-corrective campaigns, which do not.
- Evaluate interventions on system-level outcomes - exposure composition, source diversity, click-through to origin - rather than on individual belief change.
- Treat media literacy as a competence intervention with measured outcomes, since confidence gains without accuracy gains are plausibly harmful.
- Anticipate circumvention: because interventions in intermediation produce sorting effects, they should be piloted with the same scepticism applied to content interventions.

5.7 Measuring Influence in an Unobserved Environment

A final implication is methodological and should constrain how strongly any of the above is stated. The field's central empirical object - what people actually encounter - is not observed. Survey research measures self-reported use, which is known to be imprecise; experimental research measures the effect of manipulated exposures, which are not the exposures people experience; and platform research measures behaviour on systems whose data are not available for independent audit. Each method therefore measures a different quantity, and the field's most confident claims rest on the triangulation of quantities that are not strictly comparable.

Three responses would improve the position. Data access legislation that permits independent, privacy-preserving audit of exposure-level data would make the central object observable for the first time. Harmonised measurement of media use across national surveys would make comparative claims possible rather than merely plausible. And preregistered, multi-site experiments with common outcome measures would allow effect sizes to be pooled across the media systems that Section 2.7 shows to matter so much. None of these is technically out of reach; all require institutional decisions that the research community cannot make alone.

6. Conclusions

Media influence remains real, but it is not the phenomenon that either its critics or its defenders usually describe. The evidence assembled here supports four conclusions. Access has been platformised: for the first time, more people reach news through social media and video networks than through the websites and applications of news organisations, and the shift is occurring across all age groups. Trust has declined to its lowest recorded level while dependence on intermediaries has risen, producing the paradox of an audience that relies on channels it does not trust. Experimental evidence does not support the strongest claims: removing a misinformation vector changes recall but not belief, and social media news use is not straightforwardly degrading. And the mechanisms that demonstrably operate - salience, framing, repetition, perceived norms - are cumulative and conditional rather than direct.

The article's central argument is that these findings are coherent once media influence is understood as a property of an allocation system rather than of a message. Platforms and generative systems do not primarily change minds; they determine which sources and frames reach which audiences, and they do so under incentives that reward engagement rather than accuracy. The effects that follow are the ordinary conditional effects of communication, operating at greater volume and with less editorial mediation than at any previous point.

Both the synthesis and the reformulation are offered with the limitations stated in Section 3.4. The principal

survey evidence is self-reported; platform exposure data remain inaccessible; the experimental evidence is concentrated in a few countries and platforms; and the generative layer is too new to have generated a causal literature at all. The most important of these is the second: researchers can describe what audiences say they use but not what they actually encounter, which means the field's central empirical object remains largely unobserved.

Two priorities follow. The first is data access: independent, auditable access to exposure-level platform data is the precondition for any settled answer about algorithmic influence, and its absence is the single greatest obstacle to progress. The second is a shift in evaluation practice toward system-level outcomes. As long as interventions are assessed on whether individuals change their beliefs - the least responsive dependent variable available - the field will continue to conclude that nothing works, while the environment it is trying to improve continues to change around it.

The question with which this article opened - whether media influence people - therefore has an answer, though not the one usually expected. Media do influence people, reliably and measurably, on salience, interpretation and the perceived climate of opinion, and much less reliably on belief, attitude and behaviour. What has changed is not the size of those effects but the scale and opacity of the system through which they are delivered, and the fact that the institutions responsible for delivering them are not the institutions that can be held accountable for them. Restoring the connection between the power to allocate attention and the responsibility to answer for it is the central governance task of the coming decade.

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