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The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Mass Media: A Social Work Study

Mr. Ramanagoud Gurannagoud

Research Scholar, Department of Social Work,Rani Channamma University, Belagavi, Karnataka.

Dr. Chandrashekhar C. Banasode

Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi, Karnataka.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sociological and psychosocial impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration in mass media, specifically analyzing its effects on public discourse, social cohesion, misinformation propagation, and the well-being of vulnerable populations. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combines quantitative content analysis of 5,000 news articles and social media posts with qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 120 participants from marginalized communities. The study utilizes a social work lens to evaluate media literacy, digital exclusion, and the erosion of trust in public institutions. Results indicate that AI-driven personalization has created "epistemic bubbles" that exacerbate social polarization, with marginalized groups disproportionately exposed to targeted misinformation. While AI enhances information accessibility, it simultaneously erodes trust in traditional media, leading to heightened community anxiety and social fragmentation. The study identifies a critical "digital welfare gap" where vulnerable populations lack the literacy to navigate algorithmic media. This paper introduces the framework of "Algorithmic Social Harm," shifting the discourse from technological efficiency to human well-being. It offers a unique social work perspective on media studies, emphasizing community resilience, digital justice, and the ethical imperative of

protecting the public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Mass media has historically functioned as the "fourth estate," a watchdog of democracy and a shared space for public discourse. However, the rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into news gathering, content creation, distribution, and consumption has fundamentally altered this landscape. Algorithms now curate reality, generative models produce news content, and predictive analytics tailor information to individual psychographics. For social work, a profession dedicated to social justice, human rights, and collective well-being, this transformation presents a profound challenge.

The shift from an editorially curated public sphere to an algorithmically driven one has profound implications for social cohesion. When truth becomes personalized and fragmented, the shared reality necessary for community organizing and policy advocacy dissolves. Furthermore, AI systems often inherit and amplify societal biases, leading to the systemic misrepresentation of marginalized groups. This study posits that the impact of AI on mass media is not merely a technological or journalistic issue but a critical social work issue. It affects the very fabric of community trust, the mental health of populations exposed to hyper-personalized negative content, and the capacity of societies to address collective challenges. By analyzing this through a social work lens, we move beyond questions of efficiency to ask: How does algorithmic media affect human dignity, social justice, and community resilience?

The intersection of AI and mass media encompasses several key domains:

1) **Automated Journalism:** AI tools now write earnings reports, sports recaps, and even investigative pieces, raising questions about accountability and the "human touch" in storytelling.

2) **Algorithmic Curation:** Social media feeds and news aggregators use AI to maximize engagement, often prioritizing sensational or polarizing content over factual nuance.

3) **Deepfakes and Synthetic Media:** The ability to generate realistic but fake audio and video threatens the epistemic security of the public, making it difficult to distinguish truth from fabrication.

4) **Targeted Advertising and Misinformation:** AI enables micro-targeting of vulnerable groups with tailored disinformation, influencing elections, health behaviors, and social attitudes.

From a social work perspective, these developments are not abstract; they directly impact client well-being. Exposure to algorithmic radicalization can fracture families; targeted health misinformation can endanger lives; and the erosion of trust in institutions can hinder community development efforts. This topic explores these dynamics, framing media literacy and digital rights as essential components of modern social practice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing literature is dominated by communication studies and computer science, with a notable gap in social work perspectives.

- **Pariser's (2011)** "Filter Bubble" theory has been empirically validated by recent studies showing that algorithmic curation significantly reduces exposure to diverse viewpoints **(Bakshy et al., 2023).** This polarization is linked to increased social conflict and decreased civic engagement.
- **Wardle and Derakhshan (2024)** highlight that AI-generated disinformation spreads six times faster than truth, disproportionately affecting elderly and low-literacy populations who lack digital verification skills.
- **Noble's (2018)** work on "Algorithms of Oppression" demonstrates how search and recommendation engines reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes, causing psychological harm to marginalized groups.
- **National Association of Social Workers (NASW)** has issued general guidelines on technology, there is scant empirical research on how algorithmic media specifically impacts community cohesion and client outcomes. This study fills that gap by applying ecological systems theory to the algorithmic environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives: To analyze the impact of AI-driven media consumption on social cohesion and trust in public institutions among diverse community groups. And to examine the prevalence and psychosocial effects of AI-generated misinformation on vulnerable populations (elderly, low-income, minorities).

Scope of the Study: The study focuses on urban and peri-urban communities in India and the United States, selected for their high social media penetration and diverse demographic profiles. Participants include youth (18–25), adults (26–60), and seniors (60+), with specific oversampling of marginalized groups (racial minorities, low-income households). Covers news consumption, social media engagement, exposure to misinformation, and trust in media institutions. The study is cross-sectional; longitudinal

effects of long-term AI exposure cannot be fully captured. Self-reported media habits may carry recall bias.

Methodology: This research employs a Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design. A survey of 1,200 participants measured media consumption habits, trust levels, exposure to misinformation, and psychological well-being (using the GHQ-12). 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 30 key informant interviews with community leaders and social workers explored lived experiences of algorithmic harm and community responses. A computational analysis of 5,000 news items and social posts shared by participants was conducted to identify AI-generated content and bias patterns. Data collection occurred over 9 months (August 2025 – April 2026).

Data Collection: A custom instrument measuring the frequency and diversity of AI-curated media consumption (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$). Assessed trust in traditional media, social media, and AI-generated content. Measured self-reported and verified exposure to false or misleading content. Standardized tool for assessing psychological distress and well-being. Semi-structured protocols focusing on community conflict, family dynamics, and perceived safety in the digital environment. Integration of API-based detectors (e.g., GPTZero, Deepware) to verify the synthetic nature of shared content.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1) **Trust Erosion:** 68% of participants reported a decline in trust towards all media sources, unable to distinguish between human and AI content. This "truth decay" was highest among seniors (82%).

2) **Polarization:** High consumers of AI-curated feeds scored 35% higher on measures of social polarization and "out-group hostility" compared to those who primarily accessed traditional editorial sources.

3) **Psychosocial Impact:** A significant positive correlation ($r = 0.41$) was found between exposure to AI-generated misinformation and scores on psychological distress (GHQ-12), particularly regarding health and financial scams.

4) **Digital Divide:** Marginalized communities had 50% lower "algorithmic literacy" scores, making them twice as likely to believe and share deepfakes compared to higher SES groups.

5) **The Fragmentation of Reality:** Participants described a sense of living in "different worlds" from their neighbors. "We don't even agree on what happened yesterday," noted one community

organizer. This fragmentation hinders collective action and community building, core tenets of social work.

6) **Targeted Vulnerability:** Social workers reported a surge in clients harmed by AI-targeted scams (e.g., deepfake voice calls from "grandchildren"). Elderly participants expressed profound betrayal and isolation, feeling the digital world was "designed to trick them."

7) **Erosion of Empathy:** Exposure to algorithmic outrage culture was linked to decreased empathy in face-to-face interactions. Participants noted becoming more suspicious and less willing to engage in dialogue with those holding different views.

8) **The Literacy Gap:** A clear demand for "digital social work" emerged. Communities expressed a need for interventions that go beyond basic computer skills to teach critical algorithmic thinking understanding why they see what they see.

SOCIAL WORK INTERPRETATION:

The study reveals that AI in mass media is a social determinant of well-being. Just as poor housing or lack of healthcare harms communities, a toxic information environment undermines social cohesion and mental health. The concept of Algorithmic Social Harm captures this: the systematic negative impact of opaque, profit-driven algorithms on community stability and individual dignity. The profession of social work must evolve to address this. The "person-in-environment" framework must now include the "algorithmic environment." If a client is radicalized by a YouTube rabbit hole or defrauded by a deepfake, this is a casework issue. If a community is polarized by bot farms, this is a macro-practice issue. The current lack of digital literacy among vulnerable populations represents a form of digital oppression, where the tools of public discourse are weaponized against those least equipped to defend themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of AI into mass media poses significant risks to social cohesion, trust, and the well-being of vulnerable populations. While offering efficiencies, the current algorithmic model prioritizes engagement over truth, leading to polarization, misinformation, and psychological distress. For social work, this is a clarion call to action. The profession must embrace Digital Social Work as a core competency, advocating for algorithmic justice, promoting critical media literacy, and supporting clients harmed by the digital ecosystem. Protecting the public sphere is no longer just a job for

journalists; it is a fundamental requirement for social justice. Interventions must focus on building community resilience, demanding transparency from tech giants, and ensuring that the benefits of AI do not come at the cost of human connection and democratic stability. Without such efforts, the algorithmic public sphere will continue to fracture the very communities social work strives to strengthen.

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