



## DIGITAL MEDIA AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AS TOOLS FOR EXPLORING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

This study, "Digital Media and Corporate Communication as Tools for Exploring Freedom of Expression in Public Relations Practices," is a theoretical paper that examines how digital media platforms have reshaped corporate communication and public relations, particularly in relation to freedom of expression. It explores the role of social media in facilitating public discourse, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication while also addressing challenges such as content moderation, misinformation, and corporate reputation management. By analysing global and regional regulatory frameworks, the study highlights the ethical considerations surrounding digital media use in corporate communication. As a non-empirical study, it synthesises existing literature to provide insights into how organisations can promote the complexities of digital communication while upholding transparency and accountability. The findings highlight the dual role of social media as both an enabler of free speech and a space governed by opaque content regulation practices. It further investigates the influence of digital technologies on corporate communication strategies, emphasising the role of social media in crisis management and stakeholder engagement. The research integrates insights from international regulatory policies, particularly European Union content governance frameworks, and emerging digital communication trends in corporate environments. By synthesising literature from public relations, strategic communication, and digital governance, this study contributes to the discourse on balancing digital rights, corporate accountability, and public interest in an evolving media ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Digital media, corporate communication, public relations, freedom of expression, strategic communication, content moderation, stakeholder engagement.

### Introduction

The advent of digital media has profoundly transformed corporate communication, providing public relations (PR) professionals with innovative platforms to engage with diverse audiences. Social media channels, blogs, podcasts, and other digital tools enable organisations to disseminate information rapidly and interactively, fostering more dynamic relationships with stakeholders. This shift from traditional media to digital platforms has expanded the reach and immediacy of corporate messages, allowing for real-time engagement and feedback (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2020).

In the context of public relations, digital media serve as crucial instruments for exploring and exercising freedom of expression. They empower organisations to share their narratives without the traditional gatekeeping of mainstream media, thereby democratising information dissemination. However, this increased freedom also comes with the responsibility of managing the accuracy and ethical implications of the content shared. The balance between open expression and the potential spread of misinformation presents a complex challenge for PR practitioners (Council of Europe, 2022).

The Nigerian public relations landscape exemplifies the integration of digital media into corporate communication strategies. The evolution of the Lagos Digital Public Relations Summit into the Nigeria

Digital Public Relations Summit in 2025 underscores the nation's commitment to embracing digital PR excellence. This transition reflects a broader recognition of digital media's role in shaping effective communication practices and highlights the importance of continuous adaptation to technological advancements (Lagos Digital PR Summit, 2025).

Despite its advantages, the digitalisation of corporate communication also poses significant challenges. The rapid dissemination of information can lead to the spread of misinformation, impacting public perception and organisational credibility. Moreover, the private governance of freedom of expression on social media platforms raises concerns about censorship and the equitable enforcement of content policies. These issues necessitate a careful examination of digital media's impact on freedom of expression within PR practices (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2020).

### **Statement of Problem**

The rapid integration of digital media into corporate communication has significantly reshaped the practice of public relations, enabling greater engagement and freedom of expression. However, this transformation has also introduced challenges, particularly concerning the regulation of online discourse, misinformation, and ethical considerations in content dissemination.

Public relations professionals are now required to navigate a complex digital environment where the boundaries of free speech are increasingly contested. The proliferation of social media platforms has blurred the lines between professional and user-generated content, making it difficult to ensure the credibility and accuracy of information shared by organisations (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2020). As a result, corporate entities must balance their communication strategies with responsible messaging while mitigating reputational risks associated with the misuse of digital platforms.

Additionally, the governance of digital spaces by private technology companies raises concerns about censorship and unequal enforcement of content policies. While these platforms offer opportunities for organisations to engage with diverse audiences, they also serve as gatekeepers of public discourse, often applying opaque moderation policies that can limit freedom of expression (Council of Europe, 2022).

In Nigeria and other developing economies, the lack of clear regulatory frameworks for digital communication further complicates the ethical and legal implications of corporate messaging. As public relations practitioners increasingly rely on digital media for strategic communication, there is a pressing need for research that examines how digital tools can be effectively leveraged while safeguarding free expression and ethical communication practices.

### **Objectives of the Study**

**The specific objectives of this study are to:**

1. Examine the role of digital media in public relations practice.
2. Assess the importance of freedom of expression in digital media within public relations practice.
3. Ascertain the role of social media in corporate communication practices.
4. Identify the limitations of digital media in public relations practice.

## Literature Review

### Corporate Relations and Digital Media

The evolution of digital media has significantly transformed corporate relations, reshaping how organisations interact with stakeholders, manage reputation, and convey strategic messages. Digital communication tools such as social media platforms, corporate websites, and instant messaging applications have facilitated real-time engagement, allowing organisations to communicate directly with their publics (Grunig, 2020). Unlike traditional media, which relied on one-way communication, digital media foster two-way interactions, enhancing transparency and trust between corporations and their stakeholders (Macnamara, 2021).

Social media has emerged as a key component of corporate relations, offering organisations a platform to build and maintain relationships with various audiences. Platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook enable corporations to engage with customers, investors, and the general public in real time, responding to inquiries and managing crises efficiently (Duhé, 2021; Matyek et al., 2022).

Studies indicate that companies that actively engage with their audiences on social media tend to experience stronger brand loyalty and improved corporate reputation (Men & Bowen, 2019). However, while digital platforms provide opportunities for brand enhancement, they also present challenges, including misinformation and reputational risks that require strategic management.

Another critical aspect of corporate relations in the digital era is corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. Digital media has enabled organisations to promote their CSR initiatives more effectively, allowing them to showcase sustainability efforts, ethical business practices, and community engagement activities (Arenas et al., 2020). Research suggests that corporations that leverage digital channels to communicate CSR initiatives experience increased stakeholder trust and consumer loyalty (Etter et al., 2019). However, authenticity remains crucial, as stakeholders are more likely to criticise organisations that engage in "greenwashing" or fail to align their online messaging with real-world actions.

Crisis communication has also been revolutionised by digital media, as organisations now face heightened scrutiny due to the speed at which information spreads online. In the age of viral content, a single crisis can escalate rapidly, necessitating swift and strategic digital responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). Scholars have emphasised the importance of proactive crisis management strategies that include monitoring online conversations, engaging with affected stakeholders, and providing timely, transparent updates (Liu & Fraustino, 2021). Digital platforms not only serve as crisis communication tools but also allow organisations to rebuild trust through continuous dialogue and engagement.

Additionally, digital media has enhanced internal corporate communication, improving employee engagement and organisational transparency. Platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and internal social networks have revolutionised how corporations communicate with employees, fostering collaboration and information sharing (Cardon & Marshall, 2019).

Studies indicate that companies that implement digital communication tools internally experience increased employee satisfaction, productivity, and alignment with corporate values (Leonardi et al., 2020). However, digital fatigue and information overload remain concerns, necessitating a balanced approach to corporate digital communication strategies.

In conclusion, digital media has become an integral part of corporate relations, influencing stakeholder engagement, brand reputation, CSR communication, crisis management, and internal communication. While these tools offer numerous advantages, they also require strategic management to mitigate risks associated with misinformation, crisis escalation, and digital overload. As digital platforms continue to evolve, organisations must adopt adaptive and ethical communication strategies to maximise the benefits of digital media while maintaining trust and credibility among stakeholders.

## Digital Media and Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age

The advent of digital media has significantly transformed the landscape of freedom of expression, providing individuals and organisations with unprecedented platforms to share ideas, opinions, and information globally. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have become powerful tools for public discourse, allowing users to engage in political debates, advocacy, and activism (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2020). The digital space has amplified marginalised voices, fostered democratic participation and enabled real-time discussions on social, economic, and political issues (Napoli, 2019). However, this expansion of expression has also raised concerns about the regulation of online content and the balance between free speech and responsible communication.

While digital media has democratised communication, it has also exposed the complexities surrounding the governance of online speech. Governments and regulatory bodies have struggled to establish policies that protect freedom of expression while addressing issues such as hate speech, misinformation, and cyber harassment (Flew et al., 2021).

The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and similar regulations seek to hold digital platforms accountable for harmful content, yet debates persist on whether such policies undermine free speech rights (Kaye, 2022). The challenge lies in ensuring that regulations do not lead to censorship or the suppression of dissenting opinions, particularly in authoritarian regimes that exploit digital governance laws to silence opposition.

The role of technology companies in moderating online content has further complicated the discourse on digital freedom of expression. Major platforms use artificial intelligence (AI) and content moderation policies to remove harmful or offensive material, but these systems often lack transparency and consistency (Gillespie, 2020). Critics argue that corporate control over digital speech has resulted in biased content removal practices, disproportionately affecting political activists, journalists, and minority groups (Suzor, 2019). As digital platforms assume quasi-governmental roles in regulating speech, there is an increasing call for clearer accountability mechanisms and human rights-based approaches to content governance.

Misinformation and disinformation in digital media have emerged as significant threats to both freedom of expression and democratic stability. The rapid spread of false information during political elections, public health crises, and social movements has led to calls for stricter regulation of online content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018).

However, imposing restrictions on content dissemination poses the risk of infringing on legitimate free speech, especially in politically sensitive contexts (Tandoc et al., 2021). This underscores the need for media literacy programmes and public awareness campaigns to empower users with the skills to critically evaluate digital content while preserving their right to express diverse opinions.

In conclusion, digital media has redefined freedom of expression, offering both opportunities and challenges in the digital age. While online platforms enable greater inclusivity in public discourse, they also present complex regulatory dilemmas regarding censorship, misinformation, and platform governance. Striking a balance between protecting free speech and mitigating online harm remains a critical issue for policymakers, technology companies, and civil society. Moving forward, an approach that upholds digital rights, promotes media literacy, and ensures transparent governance will be essential in safeguarding freedom of expression in the evolving digital landscape.

## The Role of Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right that underpins democratic governance, enabling individuals to voice their opinions, access information, and participate in public discourse. Recognised under international frameworks such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2019), this right is essential for holding governments accountable and fostering societal progress.

In the digital era, online platforms have expanded opportunities for free expression, allowing diverse perspectives to be shared across borders in real time (Kaye, 2022). Social media, blogs, and digital news outlets have become key instruments for activism, journalism, and political engagement, demonstrating the transformative power of free speech in shaping public opinion and policy decisions (Napoli, 2019; Obayi et al., 2020).

However, the exercise of free expression is not without challenges, particularly in the face of censorship, misinformation, and hate speech. Governments in both democratic and authoritarian regimes have implemented restrictive laws that suppress dissenting voices under the guise of maintaining national security or public order (Flew et al., 2021).

Additionally, digital platforms have introduced content moderation policies that, while intended to curb harmful speech, often result in the overregulation or removal of legitimate expressions (Gillespie, 2020). The debate over content moderation highlights the tension between protecting users from harmful speech and preserving an open digital space where diverse viewpoints can thrive (Suzor, 2019).

Despite these challenges, the role of freedom of expression remains crucial in ensuring an informed and participatory society. A balanced approach that safeguards this right while addressing concerns over misinformation and harmful speech is necessary for democratic stability (Tandoc et al., 2021).

Policies that promote media literacy, transparent content moderation, and independent regulatory frameworks can help uphold the integrity of free speech in the digital age. Ultimately, maintaining a society where individuals can express their views without fear of censorship or persecution is key to fostering innovation, accountability, and social cohesion (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2020).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Two-Step Flow Theory in Digital Media and Corporate Communication**

The Two-Step Flow Theory, originally proposed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in their 1948 study on media influence, suggests that information flows from mass media to opinion leaders, who then disseminate it to a wider audience (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). This model challenges the earlier hypodermic needle theory by asserting that audiences are not passive recipients of media messages but are influenced by interpersonal communication with trusted figures. In the contemporary digital age, this theory remains highly relevant as opinion leaders such as influencers, journalists, and corporate executives play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and corporate communication strategies (Katz, 2020).

In the context of digital media and corporate communication, the Two-Step Flow Theory explains how brands and organisations leverage influential figures to enhance message dissemination and engagement. Social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram facilitate direct interactions between opinion leaders and their audiences, allowing corporations to strategically position their narratives through key stakeholders (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2022).

Opinion leaders in the digital space include influencers, bloggers, and industry experts who act as intermediaries, filtering and interpreting corporate messages for their followers. This has proven effective in crisis communication, brand reputation management, and public relations, as audiences are more likely to trust and engage with content shared by credible sources rather than direct corporate messaging (Westerman et al., 2021).

The continued relevance of the Two-Step Flow Theory in digital communication highlights the importance of relationship-building and credibility in corporate messaging. Unlike traditional media, where communication was largely one-directional, digital platforms encourage interactivity, reinforcing the need for corporations to identify and collaborate with influential figures to ensure message penetration and audience trust (Camaj & Santana, 2021). This theory provides a strong foundation for understanding how corporate organisations navigate the complexities of modern media environments, emphasising the role of digital opinion leaders in amplifying messages and shaping public perception.

## Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical research approach, synthesising existing literature, theories, and conceptual frameworks to examine the role of digital media and corporate communication in shaping freedom of expression within public relations practices. By drawing on established theories such as the Two-Step Flow Theory, it critically analyses how digital platforms influence corporate messaging and public discourse.

A systematic review of contemporary academic sources published from 2016 to date ensures relevance to modern communication dynamics, relying on peer-reviewed journals, books, and institutional reports (Babbie, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Employing qualitative content analysis, the study interprets scholarly arguments, identifying key themes and regulatory considerations in digital communication.

This theoretical approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of corporate strategies, ethical concerns, and policy implications without the constraints of field data collection, offering insights that contribute to the broader academic discourse on digital governance and public relations (Silverman, 2020).

## Discussion

The evolution of digital media has significantly transformed corporate communication, particularly in the context of freedom of expression in public relations practices. The theoretical underpinning of this study is rooted in the Two-Step Flow Theory, which explains how media messages are disseminated through opinion leaders before reaching the broader public (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948).

In the digital age, this theory remains highly relevant as corporate organisations and public relations professionals strategically engage with influencers, journalists, and digital content creators to shape public discourse (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2022). Digital platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube have redefined corporate communication by enabling real-time interaction and fostering a participatory media culture (Westerman et al., 2021).

Scholars have argued that digital media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for organisations to engage with their audiences while simultaneously presenting challenges regarding content regulation and misinformation (Camaj & Santana, 2021). The proliferation of digital platforms has amplified corporate narratives, allowing brands to connect directly with their stakeholders.

However, the issue of misinformation and unverified content has raised ethical concerns, compelling public relations practitioners to adopt fact-checking mechanisms and strategic communication approaches to maintain credibility (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This aligns with the notion that while digital communication facilitates democratic discourse, it also necessitates responsible information-sharing practices to prevent reputational risks and corporate crises (Tandoc et al., 2021).

From a freedom of expression perspective, digital media has expanded the space for public dialogue and corporate transparency. The European Convention on Human Rights (Article 10) recognises freedom of expression as a fundamental right, yet it also acknowledges the necessity of regulations to prevent harm and misinformation (Chidiac & Chidiac, 2019).

Public relations professionals operate within this framework, balancing the need for open communication with ethical responsibilities and corporate interests. Scholars argue that the unrestricted nature of social media allows for brand advocacy and crisis communication but also exposes organisations to public scrutiny and digital activism (Dahlberg, 2020). Consequently, companies must develop robust digital communication policies to navigate the complexities of freedom of expression while upholding corporate reputation and stakeholder trust (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Moreover, corporate communication strategies have evolved to include digital storytelling, interactive content, and influencer partnerships to enhance message engagement. Research highlights that digital opinion leaders—ranging from social media influencers to industry experts—play a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions, reinforcing the core premise of the Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz, 2020).

This shift signifies a departure from the traditional one-way communication model, positioning organisations as active participants in digital dialogues (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). However, as scholars note, the increasing reliance on digital platforms requires a critical approach to audience segmentation, algorithmic influence, and information accessibility to ensure ethical communication practices (Napoli, 2019).

In light of these theoretical perspectives, this study underscores the dynamic relationship between digital media, corporate communication, and freedom of expression. While digital platforms empower organisations to amplify their messages and engage stakeholders, they also pose risks related to misinformation, ethical dilemmas, and regulatory compliance.

The theoretical foundation provided by the Two-Step Flow Theory illustrates the centrality of opinion leaders in mediating corporate narratives, reaffirming the importance of strategic digital communication (Westerman et al., 2021). Ultimately, this discussion contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on digital media governance, ethical corporate communication, and the evolving role of public relations in a technologically driven society.

### **The Role of Digital Media in Public Relations Practice**

Digital media has revolutionised public relations (PR) practice by transforming how organisations engage with their stakeholders. The shift from traditional one-way communication to interactive, multi-directional engagement has redefined relationship-building and reputation management in the digital age (Duhé, 2018). Social media platforms, corporate blogs, and multimedia content have enabled PR professionals to reach global audiences in real time, fostering dialogue and brand advocacy (Macnamara, 2020).

Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics has enhanced message personalisation and audience targeting, allowing organisations to craft strategic, data-driven communication campaigns (Wang & Yang, 2022). However, the increased reliance on digital media presents challenges, such as misinformation, crisis communication risks, and the need for ethical content moderation (Tandoc et al., 2021).

Furthermore, digital media has empowered audiences by decentralising information dissemination and amplifying public discourse. This shift has made transparency and authenticity critical components of effective PR strategies, as stakeholders demand greater accountability from organisations (Zerfass et al., 2018). Crisis management has also evolved, with social media becoming a key battleground where public perception is shaped instantly (Coombs & Holladay, 2022).

PR practitioners must now proactively monitor online conversations, engage in real-time reputation management, and implement strategies that align with corporate social responsibility (Kim & Krishna, 2017). As digital media continues to evolve, PR professionals must adapt by embracing emerging technologies, ethical communication practices, and participatory engagement models to maintain relevance in an increasingly digitalised communication landscape.

### **The Role of Social Media in Corporate Communication Practices**

Social media has transformed corporate communication by enabling organisations to engage with stakeholders in real time, enhance brand visibility, and foster relationships through interactive platforms (Dijkmans et al., 2019).

Unlike traditional media, which relied on one-way messaging, social media facilitates two-way communication, allowing companies to receive feedback, address concerns, and strengthen consumer trust (Macnamara, 2020). Platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram serve as strategic tools for reputation management, crisis communication, and brand advocacy (Wang & Yang, 2022). Through social listening and data analytics, businesses can monitor public sentiment, tailor messaging, and improve engagement strategies to align with audience expectations (Supa, 2021).

However, while social media presents significant advantages, it also introduces challenges such as misinformation, reputational risks, and the rapid spread of negative publicity (Gruber et al., 2022). Organisations must navigate these complexities by developing comprehensive digital communication strategies that prioritise transparency, authenticity, and ethical engagement (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Moreover, the increasing role of artificial intelligence in social media management requires PR practitioners to adapt to evolving technologies and regulatory frameworks governing online interactions (Wang & Yang, 2022). Ultimately, leveraging social media effectively in corporate communication necessitates a strategic approach that balances promotional efforts with genuine audience interaction and corporate responsibility.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study highlight the transformative role of digital media in corporate communication and public relations practices. Digital platforms have significantly enhanced the way organisations engage with stakeholders, allowing for more interactive, immediate, and personalised communication (Macnamara, 2021). Unlike traditional media, digital channels such as social media, corporate websites, and online forums enable real-time engagement, fostering a two-way communication model that strengthens corporate transparency and brand trust (Kim & Rhee, 2022). This aligns with the evolving expectations of audiences who demand accessibility, responsiveness, and authenticity from organisations (Duhé, 2018).

However, the study also finds that while digital media provides opportunities for strategic communication, it presents challenges such as misinformation, audience fragmentation, and ethical concerns regarding data privacy and content regulation (Tench & Moreno, 2021).

Another key finding is the role of freedom of expression in shaping digital corporate communication. While digital platforms offer spaces for open dialogue and public engagement, they also introduce complexities regarding regulatory frameworks and content moderation (Gillespie, 2018). Scholars argue that balancing free expression with responsible communication remains a challenge for organisations, particularly in an era where online discourse can influence corporate reputation and public perception (Flew, 2021).

Additionally, corporate communication in the digital age is shaped by technological advancements, requiring organisations to be proactive in managing their digital presence and engaging with stakeholders in an ethical and strategic manner (Kent, 2023). The study further supports the notion that effective corporate communication strategies must integrate digital literacy, ethical considerations, and audience engagement to maximise the benefits of digital platforms while mitigating risks associated with misinformation and reputational damage (Johansen & Ihlen, 2022).

Ultimately, the findings suggest that organisations must adopt a proactive approach to digital communication, incorporating transparency, adaptability, and corporate responsibility to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of digital media in transforming public relations practices, enhancing direct engagement, and fostering two-way communication between organisations and stakeholders. It emphasises the importance of freedom of expression in enabling authentic and responsive communication, while also acknowledging the ethical responsibility PR practitioners face in ensuring accurate and credible information.

The role of social media in corporate communication has been shown to strengthen brand reputation and manage crises effectively, though challenges like misinformation, content saturation, and privacy concerns remain. Ultimately, while digital media offers valuable tools for PR, it requires practitioners to



remain vigilant, ethical, and adaptable in a rapidly changing environment, fostering meaningful relationships and contributing to a more informed society.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are therefore suggested

1. **Enhance Digital Media Engagement:** Given the pivotal role digital media plays in transforming public relations, organisations should focus on creating and executing comprehensive digital media strategies. These strategies should incorporate multiple platforms like websites, blogs, and social media to ensure broader reach and deeper engagement with stakeholders. This will help organisations to respond more effectively and maintain an ongoing connection with their audience.
2. **Foster Open and Ethical Communication:** As freedom of expression is essential for transparency and trust-building, organisations should create platforms for stakeholders to voice opinions, concerns, and feedback. These open communication channels will foster trust and improve the authenticity of the organisation's public relations efforts. At the same time, organisations should promote ethical communication practices to prevent the spread of misinformation or harmful content.
3. **Leverage Social Media for Crisis Management and Engagement:** Considering the significant role of social media in corporate communication, organisations should leverage social media to enhance crisis management, engage with audiences, and build strong brand relationships. Social media platforms can be used to address negative feedback promptly, manage reputational risks, and foster community engagement in a transparent and participatory manner.
4. **Address Misinformation and Content Saturation:** Due to the prevalence of misinformation and content saturation, organisations should develop strategies to filter and manage content effectively. They should invest in tools that track and monitor digital content and feedback to ensure that PR messages stand out in an increasingly crowded digital space.
5. **Strengthen Privacy and Data Security Measures:** With growing concerns around privacy and data security, organisations should ensure that their digital media practices respect users' privacy rights. They must adopt data protection policies and communicate transparently about how audience data is collected and used to maintain credibility and protect their reputation.

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