

Confiança e consumo de conteúdos de comunicação. A dependência dos meios digitais e de comunicação social

Trust and consumption of communication contents. Dependence on digital and social media.

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Resumo: *A teoria da dependência dos media sugere que as pessoas usam os meios de comunicação para tomarem decisões quotidianas, sobretudo em tempos de incerteza (BALL-ROKEACH; DEFLEUR, 1976). Este estudo avalia a relação entre a confiança e a frequência do uso dos meios de comunicação social por comparação com o uso dos meios digitais. Os dados foram recolhidos antes da pandemia através de um questionário, numa amostra de conveniência (n = 223). Os resultados sugerem a existência de diferenças significativas das medidas de confiança e da frequência no uso dos diferentes tipos de meios de comunicação em função de algumas variáveis sociodemográficas. No final, apresentam-se conclusões e sugestões para a eventual replicação do estudo num momento posterior ao da declaração do fim do estado de pandemia.*

Palavras-chave: *Teoria da dependência do sistema dos media; frequência do uso dos meios de comunicação; confiança; comunicação social; social media;*

Abstract: *Media dependency theory suggests that people use the media to make decisions in everyday life, especially in times of uncertainty (BALL-ROKEACH; DeFLEUR, 1976). This study assesses the relationship between trust and frequency of use of social media compared to the use of digital media.*

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Data were collected before pandemic state, through a questionnaire, with a convenience sample (n=223). The results suggest the existence of significant differences in trust and frequency measures in the use of different types of media due to some sociodemographic variables. At the end, conclusions and suggestions are presented for the possible replication of the study at a time after the declaration of the end of the pandemic state.

Key-words: *Theory of dependence on the media system; Frequency of use of the media; Trust; digital media;*

Introduction

There are many theories to think about the relationship between news consumers – in Couto's (2015) broad sense – and social communication media (newspapers, radio, television), which distinguish themselves by the amount given to different variables in the modeling of the communication process and by the weight attributed to the determinants and consequences of information consumption. However, since information and communication technologies created more opportunities for communicating (with more flexible instruments and new potentialities), understanding how digital media compete for the attention of citizens and how they assess their trust in so-called traditional and social media is crucial. This issue is relevant because the quality of everyday decisions and the quality of citizens' participation in the public (democratic) space can vary according to the trust they deposit in different production means of communication content (LUHMANN, 2000), especially in moments of instability and crisis (BALL-ROKEACH; DEFLEUR, 1976).

This study aims to assess the relationship between trust in different media and the frequency with which people use them, starting from the overall hypothesis that people tend to prefer using those they trust the most (FLETCHER; PARK, 2017), especially when they need to make decisions about important life matters (BALL-ROKEACH, 2008; JAKOB 2010). To do so, we used two theoretical framings: on the one hand, studies on trust in social communication developed under the perspective of trust in social institutions (TSFATI; ARIELY, 2013) or trust in news producing organizations (KALOGEROPOULOS et al., 2019); on the other, the media dependency theory, above all with respect to the micro-level of analysis centered on the individual.

Trust in media

Every behavior is future-oriented because every person is motivated to reach goals, which they meet through the mobilization of contingent

resources. That means that people need references to lead their actions in the direction they desire, and that requires trustworthy information. However, results may come from intentional or chance actions, be immediate or not, be contingent on the person's action or strangers' actions or fortuitous events, and even derive from the intervention of social institutions, for what they are associated with some degree of unpredictability. Such relations of dependency results in excessive complexity for people who need reliable references to make decisions.

In the case of new contexts where change is predominant or events depend on multiple uncertain factors, achieving desired results or fulfilling goals can vary according to the mobilization of resources not always understandable to the regular citizen. For that reason, people need to trust strangers and organizations or institutions in situations of complex interpretation. Without trust, they are unable to face adversities, nor are they able to acquire the necessary knowledge and skill to carry out their objectives through their means and resources (SZTOMPKA, 1999).

In this sense, trust reduces the complexity of social life, being indispensable for community life itself (LUHMANN, 2020). When people trust a stranger or organization, they relieve themselves from scrutinizing the less comprehensible side of reality or even surveilling potential threats related to others' actions. Trust allows people to save their efforts and enables them to focus their resources toward fulfilling more pressing goals and obtaining more relevant gains (HARDIN, 2004). Correlatedly, the absence of trust shrinks initiative and the appetite for taking risks, reduces the rationality of decisions, generates alienation, stimulates people's isolation in small family groups, and decreases interactions among strangers, making more selfish, cynical, and conservative attitudes emerge because people do not believe in the possibility of having their efforts reciprocated (LUHMANN, 2000).

From another perspective, trust also influences the quality of decision-making processes in risk situations, especially when there is a possibility of significant losses, which makes it more important the greater the risk

or the perception of risk (MAYER et al., 1995). Trust is essential when people are part of networks of interdependence or when they are in positions of vulnerability relative to strangers (WILIAMS, 2001). When people trust others, they feel more confident about themselves, calmer, and better prepared to face complex situations, so they take more risks. Hence, they need to be adequately informed, and they need to trust the information they access.

In this process, the media play a fundamental role, as they are often the instrument that provides information for the construction of a perception of reality. If news consumers perceive the media as trustworthy, they tend to accept its content as correct and use it to support individual and collective decision-making processes.

However, despite the recognition of this instrumental value, studies continue to suggest the gradual erosion of trust in the media (CARDOSO et al., 2019), which follows the erosion of trust in other social institutions, such as parliaments, governments, the health system, etc. (HARDIN, 2004). This erosion encourages consumers of conventional media news (newspapers, radio, and television) to look for information in alternative but not necessarily reliable media available (STERRET et al., 2019; PARK et al., 2020; STUBENVOLL et al., 2021), creating delicate problems that deserve to be studied.

The media system dependency theory

According to the media dependency theory (BALL-ROKEACH; DEFLEUR, 1976), people use social communication when they must decide on relevant matters for their lives (KATZ et al., 1973), tending to use media with more frequency in moments of crisis, anxiety, or uncertainty (LOWREY, 2004). The intensity of use can vary according to sociodemographic and circumstantial factors and psychosocial variables associated, for example, with group norms and the perception of threats or needs and related, for instance, to the understanding of social phenomena, the orientation toward action, decisions, entertainment, etc. (BALL-ROKEACH, 1985, 1998). More specifically,

the theory establishes two different levels for the analysis of dependency regarding media: a macro and micro level. The macrolevel analyzes the relationship between information access enabled by the media system and the dynamics of industrial societies from the overall premise that the media system has the functions of promoting the integration of other social systems, constructing social cohesion, and socializing citizens in the practices of community life. Institutions and citizens depend on the media system for these reasons. And this dependency intensifies when institutions are unstable or go through periods of change, especially because media information allows citizens to understand the dynamics at play and their possibilities to participate (BALL-ROKEACH; DEFLEUR, 1976).

On the microlevel, the theory of individual media dependency considers dependency relative to specific media and the creation of dependency patterns related to how much the news satisfies individual needs (CARILLO; SCORNAVACCA; ZA, 2017). From people's point of view, media dependency can produce different kinds of effects: a) Cognitive effects, for example, in acquiring values and beliefs, capturing attention, and the way people build a vision of reality. b) Affective effects in inciting states of anxiety and fear or expressing feelings of alienation, or in desensitization related to prolonged exposure to certain phenomena. c) Behavioral effects in activating or deactivating dispositions to act in specific ways and relative to a determined event (BALL-ROKEACH, 1998; KATZ et al., 1973).

The theory also suggests the degree of dependency in relation to media can be doubly determined, on the one hand, by the social system's global need to make decisions in ambiguous and broad situations with strong social implications and, on the other hand, by the individual need to make decisions related to, for example, managing everyday actions, which usually have low individual and social impact (BALL-ROKEACH, 2008). In this framing, Ball-Rokeach suggests two general hypotheses for the investigation: a) The greater the number of functions performed by the media, the greater the dependency of people on

the media; that is, the greater the instrumentality of communication content for the achievement of people's goals (or for the functions of institutions), the greater the dependency on the media. b) The greater the social instability, the greater the impact of media and dependency on them; that is, the media's function becomes more important for organizing people's relationship with social institutions in contexts of complexity, ambiguity, and change (BALL-ROKEACH, 2008).

Media consumption frequency

Media's influence becomes effective through the power to publicize information in the form of news in conventional media or content in social media formats, such as podcasts or social networking services. However, consumers of communication content are not always aware of how much the exposure to structured information, whether in news form or others, influences the production of judgments, the acquisition of values and norms of conduct, or the alteration of beliefs, which can also determine attitudes, behaviors, and decisions (LEVY, 2021).

To this extent, the media dependency theory provides a good heuristic framework to understand consumers' relationship with the various media and the determinants of the frequency of their use (ZHANG; GEARHART, 2015). Studies identify several patterns (or repertoires) for information consumption on platforms, which can increase the frequency of consumption (and, eventually, induce greater dependence) in specific contexts (for example, working on the computer, watching television, and accessing online content on smartphones), strengthening the media's influence power depending on the consumption pattern (TANEJA et al., 2012).

Since people use media to understand the world, fulfill their goals, and entertain themselves, frequent consumption of communication content can influence decisions and individual and collective choices (YANG; HA; WANG; ABULJADAIL, 2015), besides stimulating addiction to social media or specific applications (KIRCABURUN; KUSS; GRIFFITHS, 2017; YOUNG, 1999). For example, in the case

of entertainment needs, the excessive use of certain media has been associated with Facebook addictions, translated by degrees of individual dependency on one or multiple specific media, distortions in the cognitive perception of reality, social isolation, anxiety, stress, feelings of alienation, and emotional distress of various orders (CARILLO; SCORNAVACCA; ZA, 2017; FIRTH et al., 2019; HERRERO et al., 2019).

For all those reasons, trust has a fundamental role in the moment of media use, and there are multiple factors capable of determining it, like age, sex, civil status, academic qualifications, etc. We should note that some studies suggest trust varies according to the type of media. More traditional media tend to generate higher trust than media associated with new formats, especially online ones (FERNANDEZ-PLANELLAS, 2015). Nevertheless, people also tend to resort to alternative means of information during periods of change or social conflicts (JACKOB, 2010).

Aim

As this is an exploratory study based on a survey, the essential purpose was to characterize the time spent using the most usual media and to assess whether the frequency of use of different media may or may not be associated with greater or lesser trust in a particular media depending, for example, on the need to gather information to make a relevant decision.

Sample

The study used a convenience sample (Table 1) consisting of 223 higher education students from Coimbra – 180 of them are enrolled in undergraduate courses (80.7%) and 43 in master's programs (19.3%). One hundred and seventy students attend the daytime regime (76.2%) and 53 the after-workhour regime (23.8%). Most of them are female (127, 57.0% of the sample) and single (190, 85.2%). Ages range from 18 to 51 years old, with a mean of 22.27 (SD 3.27).

Table 1: Sample characterization (N = 223)

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	96	43.0
Female	127	57.0
Marital status		
Single	190	85.2
Couple	33	14.8
Higher education		
Undergraduate	180	80.7
Master	43	19.3
Study regime		
Daytime	170	76.2
After work	53	23.8

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Procedures

We gathered data between April and May 2019 through a Google Forms online survey. Invitations to participants were sent over email, including a reference to the study's aim, a request for voluntary collaboration, and a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality.

We divided the questionnaire into two parts. The first part included sociodemographic questions (gender, age, marital status) and the characterization of students' relationship with the higher education institution (study cycle – undergraduate or master's course, frequency regime – daytime or after-workhour). The second part contained 20 questions, 10 of them concerning time spent (in the previous seven days) in different types of media (print newspapers, radio, public TV channels, private TV channels, cable TV channels, online newspapers, websites, blogs, etc.), including social networking services, especially the most used ones: Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The other ten questions assess participants' degree of trust in each media through their answers to the following question: "When you need to seek information to make a relevant person decision, indicate the degree of trust you have in each of the following media...". They had to mark their answers on a scale from one to seven, in which (1) corresponds to "I don't trust it at all" and (7) corresponds to "I trust it completely."

After putting the answers in an Excel spreadsheet, we eliminated six respondents for leaving questions unanswered (2.6%). We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program to perform data analysis.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the number of hours spent using different types of media seven days prior to the questionnaire administration. The four most used media were Facebook with a weekly mean of 18.09 hours (SD = 12.79), followed by WhatsApp (M = 6.82, SD = 7.88), webpages (M = 5.70, SD = 7.19), and finally Twitter (M = 5.22, SD = 7.90). Considering that the values of several standard deviations are higher than the respective means, it appears that the frequency distribution of the duration of use of these new media does not follow a normal distribution, meaning that there are users who use Facebook, WhatsApp, webpages, and Twitter and others that don't even use them, which the minimum and maximum usage values also prove.

Table 2: Values for the means and standard deviations of hours of media consumption (last 7 days) (n = 223)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Hours_printed newspapers	0	20	1.46	3.00
Hours_radio	0	56	4.57	8.18
Hours_public TV channel	0	30	2.45	4.18
Hours_private TV channel	0	45	3.58	5.43
Hours_cable TV channel	0	50	4.62	6.49
Hours_online newspapers	0	32	2.54	3.92
Hours_web pages (<i>blogs, websites, etc</i>)	0	40	5.70	7.19
Hours_Twitter	0	40	5.22	7.90
Hours_Facebook	0	60	18.09	12.79
Hours_WhatsApp	0	40	6.82	7.88

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the remaining media, cable TV channels were the most used ($M = 4.62$ hours per week, $SD = 6.49$) and radio ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 8.18$). Print newspapers were used for 1.46 hours ($SD = 3.00$), with the online editions of newspapers having a slightly higher average value of weekly use ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 3.92$), although clearly below the usage values of any of the social media.

Again, we found high standard deviation values, higher than the mean, suggesting very different consumption habits. The mean value of weekly hours on Facebook ($M = 18.09$, $SD = 12.79$) is far higher than the average value of hours spent in the most used conventional media, TV cable channels ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 6.49$).

Table 3 shows the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values of the answers to the question: "When you need to seek information to make a relevant person decision, indicate the degree of trust you have in each of the following media...". On the 7-point Likert scale, the highest average was recorded in the evaluation of trust in conventional media, namely: radio ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.33$), print newspapers ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.26$), cable TV channels ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.26$), and public TV channels ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.51$). Trust in private TV channels is a little lower compared to public channels or cable channels but higher compared to trust values in any of the social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, websites).

Table 3: Values of means and standard deviations for the assessment of trust in media ($n = 223$)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Trust in printed newspapers	1	7	5.04	1.26
Trust in radio	1	7	5.10	1.33
Trust in public TV channel	1	7	4.77	1.51
Trust in private TV channel	1	7	4.36	1.56
Trust in cable TV channel	1	7	4.88	1.26
Trust in online newspapers	1	7	4.70	1.30
Trust in webpages (<i>blogs, websites, etc</i>)	1	7	3.97	1.40
Trust in Twitter	1	7	3.17	1.46
Trust in Facebook	1	7	3.52	1.39
Trust in WhatsApp	1	7	3.37	1.64

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

It is worth noting that the mean value of trust in online newspaper editions ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.30$) ranks higher than the trust in private TV channels and the trust in all social media. We should also note that standard deviation values are below the respective average values in all cases, which indicates that answers are less dispersed around the mean and the frequency curve is closer to a normal distribution.

Statistical analysis of the meaning of differences between means and standard deviations

To assess the statistical meaning of differences between means and standard deviations as a function of criteria variables (sex, civil status, study cycle, frequency regime), we used the Student's *t* test for independent samples.

As we can see on Table 4, significant differences were identified in the consumption of different media, for example, in the sense that females spend more hours on Facebook ($t(221) = -4.102$, $p < .01$) and on WhatsApp ($t(221) = -7.198$, $p < .01$), after-work students spend more hours on cable TV channels ($t(221) = -2.175$, $p < .05$), while daytime students spend more time on Facebook ($t(221) = 1.992$, $p < .05$), as do undergraduate students compared to master's students ($t(221) = 2.099$, $p < .05$). Print newspapers are read more by married subjects compared to single subjects ($t(221) = -1.984$, $p < .05$), although the difference is slim (the associated probability value approaches the critical limit).

Table 5 presents the results of the evaluation of the statistical meaning of differences between the means and the standard deviations associated with the evaluation of the degree of trust in each media when it comes to obtaining information to make relevant decisions.

Table 4: Comparison of the values of means and standard deviations in answers related to the number of hours spent on the media according to the criterion of different variables (n = 223)

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Hours_Facebook	Male	96	14.19	11.91	-4.102	.000*
	Female	127	21.04	12.69		
Hours_WhatsApp	Male	96	2.88	3.70	-7.198	.000*
	Female	127	9.80	8.85		
Marital Status						
Hours_printed newspapers	Single	190	1.29	2.66	-1.984	.049**
	Couple	33	2.41	4.41		
Study Regime						
Hours_cable TV channel	Daytime	170	4.10	5.01	-2.175	.031**
	After-work	53	6.30	9.73		
Hours_Facebook	Daytime	170	19.04	12.45	1.992	.048**
	After-work	53	15.06	13.50		
Higher education						
Hours_Facebook	Undergraduate	180	18.96	12.40	2.099	.037**
	Master	43	14.44	13.87		

*p < .01, **p < .05

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 5: Comparison of means and standard deviations in answers to the assessment of trust in media as a function of different variables (n = 223)

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Trust in radio	Male	96	4.48	1.41	-2.514	.013*
	Female	127	5.29	1.24		
Trust in private TV channels	Male	96	4.10	1.65	-2.176	.031*
	Female	127	4.56	1.46		
Marital status						
Trust in private TV channels	Single	190	4.45	1.55	2.070	.040*
	Couple	33	3.85	1.56		
Study Regime						
Trust in Twitter	Daytime	170	3.05	1.40	-2.090	.038*
	After-work	53	3.53	1.58		
Higher education						
Trust in Twitter	Undergraduate	180	3.07	1.44	-2.098	.037*
	Master	43	3.58	1.45		

*p < .05

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Female subjects trust radios ($t(221) = -2.514, p < .05$) and private TV channels ($t(221) = -2.176, p < .05$) more than males, as do single subjects regarding trust in private television communication companies ($t(221) = 2.070, p < .05$).

Concerning trust in the so-called new media, Twitter is the depositary of a higher trust from the subjects of the after-work education regime ($t(221) = -2,090, p < .05$) and students of the master’s degree study cycle ($t(221) = -2.098, p < .05$) compared to, respectively, students from daytime courses and undergraduate courses.

Correlations

To assess eventual correlations between different media consumption measures and trust measures or between both types of measures and age, we did a bivariate Pearson correlation analysis (Table 6). The analysis identified only statistically significant correlation values between age and the measure of the number of hours spent in the last seven days on Twitter ($r = -.15, p < .05$) and Facebook ($r = -.20, p < .01$), which suggests the existence of negative associations between the pairs of variables in the sense that older age is associated with a lower number of hours on Twitter and Facebook. All other correlations between pairs of measures of consumption time and trust assessment for each of the different types of media proved to be non-significant; that is, the analysis found no significant co-variation between the pairs of variables.

Table 6 - Pearson correlations between age and consumption and trust measures for Twitter and Facebook (n = 223)

	1	2	3	4	5
1) Age					
2) Twitter hours	-.15*				
3) Facebook hours	-.20**	.42**			
4) Trust in Twitter	-.01	.08	.08		
5) Trust in Facebook	.07	-.04	-.03	.49**	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Conclusions

Taking a broad understanding of the concept of information consumer (COUTO, 2015), the individual media dependency theory suggests that regular citizens' need to acquire a comprehensive view of reality to guide their decision-making constrains them to the development of a relationship of dependency with the media, which can be situated on the individual and group levels but also on the organizational and social levels or on all four simultaneously. The theory also suggests dependency may be greater or smaller in function of the degree of asymmetry in the control of (information) resources, the perception of the communication contents' usefulness, the type of needs the relationship with the media satisfies (understanding reality – personal and social –, orientation towards participation – action and interaction –, and entertainment), and references used, which can be a set of repertoires (TANEJA et al., 2012) or the diversity of media used (BALL-ROKEACH, 1998).

Thus, considering the complexity of relationships with the media, trust is a fundamental variable feeding the dynamics of dependence and dictating the type of use of communication content in decision-making processes, particularly in new, unknown, and ambiguous situations where the risk may be significant. From a psychological point of view, this means trust reduces perceived complexity (LUHMANN, 2000), allowing regular citizens to manage relationships of dependency with different media better when they need to make decisions on relevant matters based on reliable information (LOWREY, 2004).

Given the above, this study aimed to assess a possible relationship between trust in the media (including social communication media and social media) and the intensity of frequency of use, especially when consumers need information to make important decisions. Considering the results, we suggest the following conclusions.

First, in convergence with other studies that indicate this trend (KUSS; GRIFFITHS, 2017; SIDDIQ; SCHERER, 2019; TWENGE et al., 2019), social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, webpages, and Twitter) are the most used by youths and younger adults, especially women – in

the case of Facebook and WhatsApp – and undergraduate students in daytime courses – specifically in the case of Facebook. Overall, the social network Facebook continues to have a higher weekly average hour of consumption, around 18 hours per week in this study.

Second, the frequency of consumption of more conventional media (print newspapers, radio, television) did not reveal any significant association with the variables (for example, sex, age, academic qualifications), although, in general, average consumption values were significantly lower than social media's average values. We must note that married consumers spend more time with print newspapers and that after-work students are the ones who spend more hours consuming content broadcast by cable TV channels, agreeing with the conclusions of other studies (LADD, 2011; TWENGE et al., 2019).

Third, regarding the two types of media consumption profiles, the frequency distributions of consumption do not follow a normal distribution, which indicates considerably disparate consumption variations. Therefore, it will be worth exploring other dimensions of the individual media dependency theory in future studies on the relationship of these profiles with other relevant variables, for example, types of needs or types of repertoires or contexts of information consumption (MOURÃO et al., 2018).

Fourth, in general, trust in conventional media tends to be greater than in social media, which the conclusions of other authors reaffirm (FLETCHER; PARK, 2017; KALOGEROPOULOS et al., 2019), varying significantly as a function of some of the variables in this study. Specifically, females tend to trust radio and private TV channels more (as do single participants – in this latter case). Regarding social media, it is the students in After-work and master's courses who trust Twitter the most. Regarding the remaining media, we identified no significant differences between the values of the means and standard deviations.

Fifth, no significant association was found between the frequency of use of any of the media and the trust in them, which means this study did not find empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that more

frequent use of a media is associated with trust in that media, particularly when making a relevant personal decision.

Sixth, in light of this last conclusion (which is relative because it was drawn from a study with a small sample), we may suggest that it will be worthwhile to carry out further studies focused on the relationship between the intensity and frequency of media consumption and the satisfaction of needs through consumption, as consumers can use some media to satisfy entertainment needs and others as instruments for building a more comprehensive view of the world (CABRERA et al., 2018), which, thus, support their decision-making processes based on trust (LOGES; BALL-ROKEACH, 1993; STRÖMBÄCK ET AL., 2020). In other words, the heuristic interest of the individual media dependency theory for understanding the phenomenon of information consumption is justified, although in a more specific study context for decision-making processes. For example, it is necessary to include motivational and consumption repertoire variables in the analysis of the problem (CRISTÓBAL et al., 2017).

Finally, considering we collected data from a relatively small ($n=223$) and young ($M=22.27$ years, $SD=3.27$) convenience sample, considering the responses are from April and May 2019 in the early days of confinement at home (Covid-19 pandemic), we must admit this contextual constraint may limit the conclusions drawn.

In other words, it may be interesting to replicate this study with a broader sample, higher age averages, and after confinement has ended to assess how much of the trust in different types of media during this two-year period served entertainment needs, especially for younger people accessing social media, and the need to understand reality through safe information for decision-making, particularly for adults accessing traditional media. Probably the data and conclusions would be different...

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