

The Functions of Media between the Classical and Digital Models: Towards a Redefinition and the Gratuitousness of Function: A Comparative Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of the functions of classical media in the digital environment, both in terms of definition and role, in the context of rising consumerism and the dominance of market logic over the media sphere. The study is based on the hypothesis that the media no longer perform only their traditional functions of informing, interpreting, educating, guiding, and entertaining. Rather, it has become part of a new digital system that has reshaped the very concept of media function itself. Digital transformation has shifted media from a model based on symbolic mediation and the production of meaning within centralised institutions to an interactive networked model founded on participation, personalisation, the continuous circulation of content, and the linking of audiences to services, platforms, and markets. The study further reveals that the “free” nature of digital media services is not genuinely free. Instead, it forms part of an economic model in which the audience itself becomes a resource, subject to commodification through its behaviour, data, and consumption patterns. The study concludes that the concept of media functions as inherently free, as previously understood, has been reversed and now involves a tangible material cost, according to the researcher's perspective.

Keywords: classical media, media function, consumerism, digital media, material value of media function

Problem Statement

Understanding the growth and development of the communicative and media phenomenon has never been detached from understanding the historical context that produced it and the social change accompanying it. Indeed, it is scarcely possible to discuss the concepts associated with media and communication studies without understanding and analysing the environment in which they are formed. I would go so far as to assert that the studies and scientific research that established this body of knowledge and addressed the problems associated with it did not distance themselves from understanding these variables, beginning

with the media environment and its historical context, and passing through the social change that it produces or conventionally contributes to producing.

Perhaps the most important studies and research that identified the functions of the media during the twentieth century, beginning with Harold Lasswell, followed by Paul Lazarsfeld and Wilbur Schramm, and ending with Charles Wright, were all associated with the development of mass media and the sociological study of the media within the system of the aforementioned variables.

However, the revolution in digital flow at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the present century has led researchers and others to reconsider previous concepts and definitions. From our perspective as researchers in this field, we believe that what is currently taking place is the transition of the process of building societies toward shared material and moral values and symbols. In our present time, there is indeed a shift from the principle of gradual, slow change formerly brought about by mass media to that of rapid change now brought about by digital media. What is particularly striking is that this proposition reinforces the outcomes of what is occurring today in terms of the redefinition of various terms across all scientific and cognitive fields. The most important point to be observed in the field of media is that the functions identified by the early researchers mentioned above over half a century ago must be redefined, their roles specified, and the power of their influence and outputs examined.

In this scientific article, we shed light on the following problem: How have the functions of classical media changed under digital transformation, in terms of definition and role, as a result of consumerism?

Research Objectives

- *- Compare the functions of classical and digital media.
- *-Analyse contemporary trends in redefining the role of the media and the concept of function.
- *-Propose a conceptual framework for understanding changes in the functions of the media.

Research Hypotheses

- *-Digital media has redefined certain traditional media functions.
- *-Some traditional functions have lost their importance in the context of digital platforms.
- *- The classical functions of the media must be redefined to alter the role of the influence of digital media on audiences.

To address this problem, we propose a descriptive-analytical method based on comparative studies.

First: Defining Media Functions and Media

1. Definition of Media

Media are described as the means or channels through which news, information, opinions, images, and symbols are transmitted to a wide audience. Historically, they have included the printed press, radio, television, and cinema, and their meaning later expanded with technological development to include digital platforms and electronic networks. Zuhayr Ihaddaden indicates that, in its technical sense, media refers to the provision of news,

accurate information, and facts to the public. It is also associated with disseminating events and opinions in an appropriate form through words, sounds, images, or other signs understood by the audience (Ihaddaden, 2014, p. 15).

From our perspective, media are those tools, methods, and formats that carry and transmit the news, opinions, ideas, beliefs, symbols, and images that constitute the media process as an intellectual activity, produced for the individual or the public, regardless of the development of these means and media, through the historical context or the technological development that produced it.

1.1 Definition of Classical Media

Chris Barker defines classical media as communicative institutions, such as newspapers, magazines, television, and the film industry, that produce and distribute texts on a wide scale in the context of capitalist modernity. The functions of mass media may be viewed as institutions generating information, entertainment, and education (Barker, 2018, p. 71).

From our perspective, it is intellectual work and effort conveyed through media directed at a wide audience, exerting a slow effect on perception, behaviour, or values.

Classical media is also characterised by the presence of a gatekeeper, such as an editor, editor-in-chief, director, or news manager, who has the authority to select, arrange, and reinterpret content before it reaches the audience. This grants the traditional medium a high degree of professional and institutional control but also limits the audience's freedom of direct participation. Studies have addressed this dimension by examining the link between mass communication and official institutions, the centralisation of media decision-making, and delayed feedback in comparison with direct communication (Issani, 2008, p. 93).

1.2 Definition of Digital Media

Digital media is the media extension that emerged within the environment of computers, networks, the internet, and mobile devices. It is based on converting content into a digital form that can be produced, stored, processed, and distributed with flexibility and speed. A practical definition of new media states that it includes all types of digital media presented in digital and interactive form and that the fundamental difference between it and old media lies in the way content is broadcast and accessed, in addition to its reliance on the integration of text, image, video, and sound, with interactivity as its most prominent feature (Sadek, 2008, p. 33).

Abbas Mustafa Sadek also emphasises that new media should not be reduced to the internet alone, as it encompasses a wide range of communication technologies that developed after the initial phase of electronic publishing. It also integrates old and newly developed media on the platform of computers and networks and is based on digitality, interactivity, hypertextuality, multimedia, individuality, and customisation (Sadek, 2008, pp. 34, 51). Thus, digital media is not merely a new medium but also a complete reconstruction of the communicative model itself.

According to our assessment, we define digital media as those media, channels, and means produced by the connection of communication technology to the internet within the digital communicative environment, producing content and materials capable of distribution, storage, and processing in different ways and targeting the individual as a structure separate

from society in the process of framing and achieving response. This reinforces the principles of interactivity and customisation and, in essence, realises the consumerist tendency of the individual and, subsequently, of society.

2. Functions of Classical Media

The basic functions of classical media include informing, interpreting, socialising, educating, persuading, entertaining, transmitting cultural heritage, and contributing to the formation of public opinion (Ihaddaden, 2014, pp. 72–73). These functions are fundamental in any society because they connect the individual to the world in which he or she lives and provide him or her with knowledge of events and their interpretations. Arabic literature has summarised these functions on the basis of the conceptions of Lasswell and others, referring to the surveillance of the environment or the collection and dissemination of information (Issani, 2008, p. 45), linking the parts of society through the interpretation and analysis of what comes from the environment and then transmitting social heritage from one generation to another.

The media function is defined as the totality of the roles performed by media outlets, media institutions, and communicative actors within society, whether in relation to the production of news, the interpretation of events, the transmission of values and knowledge, the influence on attitudes, or the contribution to the formation of public opinion. In this sense, it is not confined to the technical aspects of message sending and receiving. However, it extends to its social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions because media mediate the relationships between individuals and the world and between society and its own images. In this context, McQuail regards mass communication as a “societal process” concerned with the mediation of social relations and human experience rather than merely a channel for transmitting messages, which highlights the complex nature of the media function within society (McQuail, 2010, p. 82).

What is meant by the functions of classical media are those roles performed by media within society, many of which were identified by researchers such as Harold Lasswell, who referred to the function of surveillance, namely, the transmission of news, and the function of correlation and interpretation, meaning that the media does not merely transmit the news but also interprets it and clarifies its causes and consequences, as well as the function of transmitting cultural heritage, that is, conveying values and customs from one generation to another. Charles Wright added the most important and most serious function of the media, namely, entertainment and amusement, which has not received sufficient analysis and study and requires greater attention because of the seriousness of its role in modern societies. Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld divided these functions into manifest intended functions, such as transmitting news, and latent unintended functions, such as influencing people’s opinions without their awareness.

From our own perspective, we define them as those tasks and services produced by media within society to achieve tangible material or moral effects and to influence perception, behaviour, or values; to fulfil the objectives of the media process; and to address the diverse needs of the audience, whether education, entertainment, socialisation, correlation and interpretation of news; or to influence people’s opinions and the shaping of public opinion.

3. Functions of Digital Media

Digital media has added new functions or reshaped previous functions more dynamically. In addition to informing, interpreting, and entertaining, digital media now performs the functions of immediate interaction, audience participation in content production, customisation on the basis of user interests, the expansion of possibilities for individual and collective expression, and the transcendence of geographical and temporal boundaries in the circulation of messages. The researcher Sadek stated that new media enable the ordinary individual to deliver his message to whomever he wishes, at the time he wishes, and in a manner that is more widely dispersed across directions, rather than according to a one-way top-down model as in traditional communication (Sadek, 2008, p. 34).

Van Dijk also affirms that the network society has reshaped social communication by linking individuals and institutions within interconnected digital structures, which explains changes in the media's role in the digital environment.

The media function may also be understood as a function of social linkage and integration because it not only presents events to people but also helps them understand their place within society and form perceptions of values, identity, and belonging. In his discussion of the relationship between the media and society, McQuail indicates that among the major themes of media theory is the question of “social integration and identity”, meaning that the function of the media does not stop at the limits of informing but is also connected with the construction of shared symbolic bonds among individuals and groups (McQuail, 2010, p. 89). According to my own assessment, the functions of media in the digital environment may be redefined as those reshaped by the digital environment, grounded in the characteristics of modern media and communication channels. It has also reconfigured the ways and patterns of their influence on the individual and society, shifting from influencing collective consciousness to influencing individual behaviour and producing a new symbolic value that is represented in encouraging consumerist tendencies and transforming them into tangible material signification. This applies across all dimensions and elements of the previously known classical media functions, thereby stripping them of the quality of gratuitousness referred to by earlier researchers such as Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, and Robert Merton.

Second: Comparison between the Classical and Digital Models in Terms of Functions

1. Points of Similarity and Difference

Classical media and digital media share a set of essential functions that influence both the social and the cultural structure. Among the most important of these functions are informing, interpreting, educating, socialising, forming public opinion, entertaining, and transmitting events, ideas, values, and meanings into the public sphere.

In this context, McQuail maintains that mass communication is not understood merely as a technical process for transmitting messages but as a general social process that contributes to the construction of shared experience and links media with society and culture (McQuail, 2010). Therefore, the first point of similarity between traditional and digital media lies in the continuity of these basic functions, even if the forms in which they are performed and the speed at which they are exercised have changed.

However, this functional similarity does not negate the profound structural difference between the two models. Classical media historically emerged within the framework of one-way broadcasting from the institution to the audience, in which the newspaper, radio, or television produces the message and determines the timing, form, and content of its dissemination. In contrast, the audience generally assumes the role of recipient. In contrast, digital media has reshaped this structure by making communication more participatory and open to user contributions through commenting, publishing, modifying, and recirculating. Here, Henry Jenkins's conception is particularly significant, as he affirms that the relationship between the “old” and the “new” is not one of cancellation or simple replacement but one of convergence and interaction, in which content moves across multiple platforms. The audience is transformed from a mere recipient into a party that participates in the production of media value itself (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2–3, 6–7) while also reducing the rigidity of the boundaries between media production and consumption.

Jens F. Jensen has also explained that the concept of interactivity acquires its meaning in the digital environment through the user's shift from the position of passive reception to that of choice, response, exchange, and participation to varying degrees, which is not available in classical mass media to the same extent (Jensen, 1998, pp. 188–189, 199). Therefore, digital media not only adds a new channel to the channels of communication but also adds a new logic to the performance of the media function, making the relationship between sender and recipient more dynamic and reciprocal than before.

In our assessment, the fundamental link between the classical and digital models remains embodied in the “content-producing institutions”, whether media platforms or research centers, as the principal source of knowledge material intended for mass marketing. This linkage aims to generalise shared values and symbols and achieve unified responses by remolding the functions of digital media. Despite the structural disparity between them, content producers have moved toward a strategy of individualisation and customisation in the design of media functions, after a traditional orientation based on standardised production directed at broad collective masses.

2. Functions That Have Lost Their Importance and New Functions

Among the most prominent functions whose importance has declined in the classical model is the function of monopoly over information. In the past, access to news generally passed through a central media institution that possessed the means, expertise, and distribution channels. Today, however, the audience can access multiple, simultaneous sources, compare them, and even produce alternative news and content. This multiplicity of sources of information access has weakened the logic of the “single source” and opened the way to a more fluid and competitive media landscape in which platforms, institutions, and users share roles that were previously more centralised.

The function of unilateral control over public opinion has also relatively declined. Traditional media possessed a considerable capacity to set priorities and shape the public agenda almost on its own. In contrast, today, the audience is better able to resist, modify, discuss, and produce counter discourse. This does not mean that institutional influence has come to an end but rather that the process of shaping public opinion has become more negotiable and

interactive and less subject to a one-way, top-down direction. Jenkins's analysis of convergence culture is particularly relevant here, as he points out that consumers are no longer passive individuals but have instead begun to seek information, connect content distributed across media, and contribute to its reproduction within the public sphere (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3, 18).

In contrast, alternative or reshaped functions have emerged. Among the most important of these are the management of digital communities, interactions with audiences in real time, the verification of false news, the production of multimedia content, the analysis of usage data and digital behaviour, and the customisation of content for different audience categories. These functions are not outside the media field; rather, they have become part of its essence in the digital environment because media success is no longer measured solely by the medium's ability to publish but also by its capacity to build an ongoing relationship with the audience across changing digital spaces. Some recent studies comparing traditional and new media also indicate that the criteria of trust and use have become distributed across multiple types of media, reflecting a transformation in how audiences receive media messages and evaluate their sources.

In our assessment, encouraging consumerist tendencies is among the most important functions of recent digital media, raising questions about the values and messages it conveys.

3. Functions that Have Emerged and Changed Previous Definitions

The most important addition that digital media has made to the field of media is the redefinition of the media function itself. The function is no longer understood merely as the transmission of information or the communication of news; rather, it has come to include the management of interaction, the organisation of the continuous flow of content, and the user's involvement in producing, modifying, and circulating the message. This transformation is fundamental because it touches on the very core of the definition of media: from a one-way act in its traditional form to a networked act in its digital form, involving interwoven parties. From this standpoint, the digital environment has not changed the media alone but has also changed the theoretical perspective through which media functions are understood.

Among the functions that have clearly emerged in this context is “interactivity” as an independent function rather than merely a technical characteristic. Digital media does not confine itself to presenting content but provides the user with multiple possibilities for response, choice, customisation, dialogue, and participation. This new function has changed the relationship between the medium and the audience, as the audience is no longer merely the final recipient of the message. However, it has come to participate in shaping its meaning and its sphere of circulation. This interactivity has contributed to expanding the media function to include the creation of the digital experience itself, that is, the way individuals live their relationships with content, the platform, and others through the digital medium (Jensen, 1998, pp. 185–186, 199).

The function of “media convergence” has also emerged. This function involves not only the combination of text, image, and sound on a single platform but also the movement of content across multiple platforms and the simultaneous interaction of media industries and audiences with it. Jenkins explained that convergence is not a purely technical process but rather a

cultural transformation that drives consumers to seek information across different media, establish connections between them, and contribute to their recirculation. Hence, digital media has become a space in which the message moves across multiple channels, and its success is linked to its ability to move from one platform to another and to stimulate participation around it (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 2–4, 6–7).

Among the newly developed functions is “customisation”, or the adaptation of content to the user. In traditional media, the message was usually directed to a broad audience in a general form. In contrast, in the digital environment, it has become possible to deliver different content to specific groups and even to specific individuals on the basis of data, usage patterns, and interests.

Third: Consumerism and the Gratuitousness of the Media Function

1. Concept of Consumerism

The critique of consumer practices in contemporary Western cultures is closely linked to analyses of both capitalism and commodification. It has been argued, whether by Marx in 1850, Adorno in 1940, or Althusser in 1970, that commodities carry embedded ideological meanings that serve the interests of capitalism and are adopted by consumers through the broad and excessive process of consumption (Barker, trans. Jamal Belqasem, 2018, p. 61).

Consumerism is defined as a social and cultural system in which consumption goes beyond the satisfaction of direct needs to the construction of meaning, identity, and social status. The individuals in the consumer society do not consume things solely for their use value but also consume the symbols, signs, and distinguishing significations that they carry. For this reason, Jean Baudrillard linked consumer society to the logic of signs, whereby things become part of a signifying and social system rather than merely useful objects in themselves (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 224).

Consumerism is closely connected to the media because the media not only displays goods and services but also contributes to the production of desires themselves and to the transformation of ways of living and consumption into socially desirable models. From this perspective, the media contributes to the development of a consumer culture that links the social value of individuals to their ability to appear, choose, and acquire. Zygmunt Bauman explained that contemporary society has shifted from a “society of producers” to a “society of consumers” and that its members themselves become objects of commodification, not merely consumers of external goods (Bauman, 2007, pp. 62, 67).

In the digital environment, consumerism has expanded to include content, attention, data, and behaviour itself. Consumption is no longer confined to material goods but now also includes news, platforms, videos, applications, and services that are ostensibly “free”. Here, the value of Shoshana Zuboff’s analysis becomes evident, as she argues that digital capitalism is based on transforming human experience into “free raw material” that is translated into behavioural data and then converted into predictive products tradable in markets (Zuboff, 2019, p. 4).

2. The Media Function from Symbolic Value to Material Signification

In classical conceptions, the media function was primarily associated with symbolic value, that is, with the capacity of the media to produce meaning, shape mental images, consolidate

values, build public opinion, and form a collective identity. Therefore, the media were understood as cultural and social intermediaries that intervene more in the interpretation of reality than in the regulation of direct material behaviour. McQuail affirmed that mass communication should be understood as a “general social process” linked to shared experience, identity, and social integration rather than merely to the transmission of messages and content (McQuail, 2010, pp. 82, 89).

However, the digital environment has expanded this function from the symbolic to the practical-material sphere (Zuboff, 2019, p. 4). Digital media is no longer merely a space for the production of meaning or the transmission of news but has become an intermediary for services, shopping, learning, on-demand entertainment, recommendation, guidance, and the organisation of everyday relations. In this sense, the media now intervene directly in patterns of action, consumption, and daily choice and not only in mental representations. This overlap between the media, service, and market is among the most prominent features of the digital transformation in the function of the media intermediary (Van Dijk, 2012).

Hence, the “gratuitousness” of the media function in the digital environment has appeared as apparent rather than actual gratuitousness. Digital platforms often provide content and services without direct monetary payment; however, they invest time, attention, data, and user interactions. Dallas Smythe advanced this idea early on, demonstrating that commercial media not only sells content to audiences but also produces the “audience commodity” itself and sells it to advertisers. In the commercial media system, the audience becomes an economic product that is purchased and used in the marketing of goods (Smythe, 1977, p. 3).

3. The New Definition of Media Functions in the Digital Environment

In light of these transformations, it is no longer sufficient to define the functions of the media as merely informing, interpretation, education, persuasion, and entertainment because the digital environment has added new functions to them, such as the management of interaction, the customisation of content, the organisation of the flow of attention, and the transformation of participation and data into social and economic value (Zuboff, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, the functions of media in the digital environment may be defined as a system of interactive networked roles that produce information and meanings; manage interaction; customise content; connect users to services, platforms, and markets; and transform data and attention into value capable of circulation and investment (Jensen, 1998, pp. 188–189).

This new definition also reveals that “gratuitousness” in the digital environment does not represent an exit from market logic but rather constitutes one of the most advanced forms of the market. The greater the user's engagement with the platform is, the greater the economic value derived from their data, preferences, and behaviour. Thus, contemporary digital media simultaneously combines symbolic, interactive, and economic functions (Bauman, 2007, p. 67).

However, in our own assessment, what both Baudrillard and Zuboff have proposed regarding the gratuitousness of digital media functions is no longer useful or logical, since these functions have, owing to consumerist tendencies, acquired tangible material value. The functions of news, entertainment, education, and other media functions have now become available through subscription, through the valorisation of the original product in the media,

or through the value of intellectual effort embodied in intellectual property and its rights. Consequently, these functions, which were previously marketed through what researchers had identified in their studies as functions available to and rightfully belonging to the public, have now become paid for in return for material compensation, compelling us to reconsider their definition.

Conclusion

The comparison between classical media and digital media reveals that the media function has not disappeared with technological transformation, but has instead reconstituted itself in a more complex and expansive manner. The media has retained its basic functions of informing, interpreting, socialising, educating, entertaining, and influencing. However, in the digital environment, it has reached a new level through interactivity, participation, customisation, multimedia, and the merging of roles between producers and recipients. Some older functions, such as the monopoly over news or the unilateral control of public opinion, have also lost some of their centrality and been replaced by a more open, circulating model. It may therefore be said that the media function today is no longer merely an institutional function, but has become a complex networked function in which cognitive, cultural, economic, technical, and service dimensions intersect.

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