

The changing roles of media content consumers in the advent of social media, digital spaces and AI

From passive receivers to active creators across social and AI.

By Mzimkhulu Sithetho • February 20, 2026 • Opinion



The changing roles of media content consumers Maseru — The conventional linear communication model placed citizens in the role of passive receivers, waiting for radio, television, or newspapers to deliver content. That model no longer holds. Today, there is no fixed, passive receiver and no single active communicator. Citizens create, process, package, and distribute information. They occupy multiple roles in the information ecosystem.

Users consume information from diverse sources and act on it immediately — deciding to keep, resend, or ignore. This shift has been triggered by several factors, including the influx of information from emails, social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, blogs), and conventional outlets; the widespread availability of digital technologies and smartphones; and a rising demand for immediate access to information, transparency, and accountability. Drivers of the shift Information influx: Citizens now access information from a variety of sources: social media, blogs, and traditional media. The volume challenges old gatekeeping models.

Digital ubiquity: Affordable mobile devices grant instant access and enable processing, packaging, and dissemination by anyone, anywhere.

Transparency demand: Boundless demand for information, accountability, and participation pushes back traditional barriers — geography, rigid channels, and stringent rules.

Trust erosion: Growing skepticism toward conventional media and institutions, especially among youth, drives audiences to alternative digital channels and sources.

Global exposure: Travel and connectedness expand horizons and reshape expectations, skills, and knowledge. Exposure empowers citizens to chart their own destiny. New power dynamics and culture With smartphones, citizens take high-quality photos quickly, contributing visual narratives to the information ecosystem. Norms and values are shifting rapidly. Culture — shared and communal — reflects changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, including how individuals make decisions about the information they consume.

Access to gadgets has transformed power over information access. Parents once decided when children were mature enough for devices; now, the ubiquity of smartphones compels earlier adoption, altering decision-making power structures.

Role of media in promoting global, national governance

Governance today faces myriad challenges disrupting value chains, fragmenting markets, and reshaping the global order. In this climate, the media's role in promoting transparency and effective governance becomes pivotal.

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The danger of social media to society – creation and promotion of 'eco chambers'

Echo chambers, often amplified by social platforms, shape and dominate discourse, undermining equal participation, freedom of expression, and balanced debate.

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Role of media in promoting global, national governance

Agenda-setting, transparency, and the media's transformative role in governance.

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Promoting effective governance Governance today is facing a myriad challenges, which are influencing the landscape of global business, operation of businesses and are continuing to impact the resilience and profitability of enterprises and entrepreneurs. The changes in global governance are also disrupting global value chains and supply chains. Changes in global governance are further causing fragmentation in the business sector and promoting a multipolar world. In the midst of all these global governance challenges is the role of the media in promoting effective global governance.

Governance, be it global, regional, national or institutional refers to a system of how institutions conduct their business, the rules, laws and regulations that govern their operations as well as how they manage their internal affairs. Governance extends to levels and character of cooperation and relations between countries, states, companies, stakeholders and non-state actors. It refers to guidelines and standards about how agreements that are drawn and implemented as well as the maintenance of relations resulting from those agreements. The same characteristics apply to national and institutional levels, what matters being the level and manner in which they are applied. Agenda-setting role of information A basic function of the media is to provide information to members of society on what happens in their immediate and distant environments. It does this by researching and gathering information that citizens do not know about in their immediate and distant environments, but which affect their lives.

The old adage goes that: 'information is power', which denotes the preeminence of information for informed decision-making processes, leading to making choices about their lives. Possession of relevant and up-to-date information is a bedrock for effective decision-making and making right choices about one's life. The inverse is also true about lack of relevant information or ignorance, which impact the process of effective decision-making and choice-making.

Greater emphasis is placed on the relevance and updated information because citizens are living in days where they are exposed to varieties of information, including those that they do not need for their decision-making and making choices. Therefore, the expanded role of the media from information dissemination to society is that of influencing their decision-making processes by setting the agenda for what they need to do and not to do.

Though final choices lie with the citizens, the media provides them with the information to influence their decision-making so that it is accurate, based on verified information.

Citizens need to participate in ongoing policy discourses regarding how they are governed. They need to know the existing policy direction set by those they elected to power. There are discourses for instance, climate change, human rights and freedoms, social justice, economic growth initiatives of their government, state of service delivery and elections. Citizens are likely to participate effectively in the mentioned and other discourses when they are well-informed about them, the state in which they are and also the gray areas in these discourses. This information is provided by the media through news reports, analyses and insights.

The media does not only end at providing information on these discourses, but goes further to shape to set the agenda by prioritizing those issues within these discourses that they need to pay attention to. This the media does after critical assessment and investigation, presenting a variety of options for citizens from which to choose.

As far as governance is concerned, being equipped with relevant information is of essence for citizens to engage meaningfully in ongoing discourses and making their own choices. For example, micro, small and medium entrepreneurs will be able to make informed choices about business ventures or investment options when they have relevant and up-to-date information the global value and supply chains where they get their raw materials when they have the latest versions.

It is when MSMEs are furnished with trends and effects of the import tariffs imposed by the Donald Trump administration that they will make effective decisions about where to focus regarding exporting.

The danger of social media to society – creation and promotion of 'echo chambers'

Echo chambers skew discourse, amplify dominance, and undermine freedoms.

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Echo chambers and influence Echo chambers are narratives, perspectives or lines of thinking that are shared by a group of influential, dominant or powerful people. Echo chambers are transmitted over a variety of media channels, most importantly today, over social media or traditional media. Transmitters of echo chambers do so with the express intent to shape, frame or influence the thinking of others.

Social media like Facebook, X, Reddit and LinkedIn intentionally or inadvertently create 'echo chambers' to promote and dominate a discourse among members of society. They do this by influencing and exerting power of a group of few individuals, hence coercing others to submit to that view.

This may be against their will or for fear of being ridiculed or negatively judged for holding alternative views or perspectives by those who are victims or on the receiving end of an echo chamber.

A threat that echo chambers pose to society is that they undermine the inherent freedoms that citizens have, especially those who have no influence or power on their fellow citizens.

The creation and perpetuation of echo chambers goes against the principle of creating an equal society, where the views of everyone — irrespective of power or influence — are taken along in an open platform of freedom of expression.

Those who peddle misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, fake news, deep-fake and hate speech create these echo chambers to detract society's attention away from truth by using their influence and power.

Power, influence and dominance of any space, be it social media or digital, create a fertile ground for echo chambers to thrive. This flies in the face of the principles of creating equilibrium within society.

There is no doubt that social media like Facebook, X, Reddit and LinkedIn create slanted narratives, perspectives or lines of thinking that are shared by a group of influential, dominant or powerful citizens.

Eco chambers are created for the pursuit of narrow interests by those who communicate them with the thinking that they dominate and control the social media and digital spaces.

An equal society is one that enjoys its freedoms to access, use and respond to content created on the conventional media, social media and digital spaces.

It is a society that is against the use of domination, power and influence of social media and digital spaces by others within society, who feel they need to dominate the space at

the expense of other users. If allowed, echo chambers endeavor to turn others into passive voices.

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