

## Platform Dependency in the Big Tech Era: *Lessons from Australian Facebook Blackout and Botswana Implications*

Gopolang Dithlokwa<sup>1</sup>, Victoria Elizabeth Cann<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Media Studies Department, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana; Institute of Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing China. ORCID: 0000-0002-1876-7715

<sup>2</sup>Department of Communication, University of Colorado, Denver, USA. ORCID: 0009-0000-9346-1831

Correspondence: Gopolang Dithlokwa, Media Studies Department, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana; Institute of Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing, China. ORCID: 0000-0002-1876-7715

Received: February 18, 2024

Accepted: May 5, 2024

Online Published: May 15, 2024

doi:10.11114/smc.v12i3.6917

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i3.6917>

### Abstract

The surge in social media usage for news consumption has led to a heightened reliance on these platforms for accessing information worldwide. In Botswana, Facebook has become one of the primary channels for news consumption, mirroring trends seen in various nations. However, the 2021 Australian Facebook conflict exposed the risks associated with over-reliance on such platforms for news dissemination. In this paper, we investigate the phenomenon of platform dependency, specifically examining the implications for Botswana, in the wake of the Australian Facebook news blackout. Employing a stratified sampling approach, data was gathered by tracking the volume of news posts shared across 51 selected Facebook pages throughout February 2021. The findings revealed a noteworthy trend, with an average of 5630 news items posted or shared on the platform within four weeks. This marked a growing reliance on Facebook-exclusive pages for news consumption, with minimal engagement observed on alternative websites. We argue that there is a precarious position of pages solely reliant on Facebook for news sharing, especially amidst escalating big data politics and regulatory measures that target Tech Giants. Consequently, these pages face an uncertain future, potentially hampering access to vital news reporting and information-sharing to the adaptive population. Currently, in Botswana, there is a notable dearth of academic exploration into the regulation of Big Tech and its potential repercussions for the nation. Thus, this study serves as a cornerstone in pursuing this significant area of inquiry.

**Keywords:** platform dependency, Facebook, online news, Big Tech regulation, platform economy, Australia, Botswana

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of social media and disruptive technologies has altered the practice of news reporting and information consumption. Nowadays, social media platforms such as Facebook (owned and operated by Meta) have become ubiquitous, facilitating seamless access to a hodgepodge of content, spanning from local news to global events (Schmidt et al., 2017). The reliance on digital platforms has become a widely acknowledged concept that brings together individuals, businesses, and organizations dependent on specific platforms for their activities. Consequently, Big Tech companies such as Meta, Google, Apple Inc., Tencent, and Amazon.com, Inc. have implemented various initiatives in recent years to bolster journalism, including subscription services and partnerships with media organizations. Some in academia perceive these efforts as strategies aimed at reducing the threat of regulation (Myllylahti 2018). By gauging the degree to which Big Tech is integral to the operations of a specific market or industry, the global approach to platformization (platform and optimization) must be situated within commercial interests and the power dynamics of strategic communication. As a multifaceted process hinging on network effects, data utilization, ecosystem cultivation, economies of scale, and adherence to open standards and APIs, platformization has facilitated the interconnection and engagement of numerous users, mutually benefiting various technological requirements (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Willig, 2022). Big Tech, therefore, has become a significant incubator for this trend. Nevertheless, the Australian Facebook news blackout in February 2021 serves as a stark reminder of the potential ramifications of such dependency. The blackout ensued from a dispute between Facebook and the Australian government regarding a proposed law mandating the platform to compensate news organizations for content featured on the site. As a result, users in Australia were

barred from accessing or sharing news content on the platform. Previous research indicates there are several reasons why these platforms continue to thrive. One such reason is the convenience offered by user-friendly technology, enabling multiple users worldwide to access and share news stories effortlessly. This convenience extends to the utilization of platforms like social media networks and messaging apps for swiftly disseminating news to a broad audience. Users can effortlessly share news stories, videos, and photos with their friends and followers with just a few clicks. Moreover, these platforms grant access to a vast audience beyond what traditional news outlets can offer, potentially reaching millions of users globally, including news from government agencies and media companies (Wadbring & Ödmark, 2016; Styrin, Mossberger & Zhulin, 2022). As a result, the algorithms integrated into these platforms help tailor news presented to users, leading to a more personalized news feed aligned with individual interests. Within this framework, challenges emerge from conflicts between Big Tech monopoly and regulation, particularly through competition policy, ultimately impacting end-users in various ways (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015; Shin, Zaid, Biocca & Rasul, 2022; Murphy & Stacey, 2021). In this paper, we focus on the implications of the Australian Facebook news blackout for other parts of the world like Botswana, aiming to obtain critical discoveries. Specifically, we examine the potential dependency that individuals, organizations, and governments may develop on social media platforms in the age of news aggregation, where institutions strive to ensure access to diverse sources of news and assess the impact of these platforms on information dissemination.

In the context of this study, the interchangeable usage of 'Facebook' and 'Meta' is informed by Meta's former name, Facebook Inc., and its subsequent rebranding to Meta Inc. While 'Meta' now represents the parent company overseeing various subsidiaries and initiatives, 'Facebook' continues to serve as the name for the social media network under the Meta Inc., (Ditlhokwa & Cann, 2024). Thus, throughout this research, both terms are used interchangeably to refer to the platform. In February 2021, Facebook Inc., decided to block access to its Facebook social platform throughout Australia, imposing limitations on news organizations from sharing their content on Facebook (ABC News 2021; Flynn 2021; Morrison 2021). This decision came in response to the Australian government implementing legislative measures to enforce compliance on various matters, including demands for Meta to compensate news content providers (Allyn & Miller 2021; Morrison 2021). Back in 2020, both Google and Meta had launched extensive campaigns in Australia in response to the draft bargaining code. These campaigns were significant and garnered attention across the country (Meese, Jagasia and Arvanitakis, 2019). The campaigns followed the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission's (ACCC) inquiry in 2018 into competition within the media and advertising market, specifically focusing on these two Tech Giants (BBC, 2021a). According to the Commission, a consultative process for the draft code took place between 2018 and 2020 (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2020). Back in December 2017, the Hon. Scott Morrison MP, who was Treasurer at the time, directed the ACCC to investigate digital platforms, with the final report released in mid-2019. This exercise, dubbed the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry had looked at how the competition in the media and advertising services sectors is affected by digital search engines, social media platforms, and other digital content aggregation platforms. Therefore, the draft code's context revealed that consumers accessing news through Google and Meta benefited from Australian news content, while news publishers themselves did not receive any incentives (*Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020, 2021*). Moreover, the draft code aimed to address an unequal relationship between Australian news enterprises and digital platforms, highlighting 'unfavorable terms' outlined in the document (Ponsford, 2021). In a surprising turn, a divided stance emerged between Meta and Google, with Meta allegedly 'cutting off' publishers while Google appeared inclined to yield to pressure from Australian lawmakers (Morrison 2021). This situation resembled previous occurrences, including Google's 2014 effort to block Spanish news outlets and the Facebook platform's 2018 move to halt news publishing in six other nations. Central to this is the Australian regulators' demand for Meta to remunerate content creators whose work is shared or published on the Facebook platform. The points raised reflect a host of concerns about the connection between the Australian government and Meta's Facebook platform, which will be explored further in the subsequent section as the core issues behind the conflict. At the time of this conflict, it had been reported that more than 17 million Australians utilized Facebook monthly to access news (BBC, 2021b). Hence, it is significant to acknowledge that since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook has served as an important and rapid tool for disseminating information to a wide audience (Ditlhokwa, 2022). Even amidst this dispute, it became apparent that when news access was restricted in Australia, Meta made a significant move by reinstating some news access on Facebook for government pages disseminating COVID-19 health information (BBC, 2021b). Given the rise in Facebook usage in Botswana as observed by Mosweu and Ngoepe (2019), the Australian scenario serves as a segue to examine the Botswana context, aiming to assess the future of news media amidst their growing dependence on Facebook for news consumption.

As observed by Diraditsile and Samakabadi (2018), Masilo and Seabo (2015), and others, the usage of Facebook remains prevalent in Botswana, with discernible impacts on various aspects. By February 2024, statistics showed that Botswana had surpassed 1 million Facebook users, representing nearly 54% of the total population (NapoleonCat, 2024). These figures suggest that Facebook ranks among the top social media platforms in Botswana. Despite the lack of

studies detailing its usage across all media outlets in the country, registered and unregistered, the platform has greatly influenced the production and sharing of news. Furthermore, there has been a notable uptick in the platform's usage for news consumption, particularly during COVID-19. It is worth considering that heightened demand for information also increases the risk of the population being exposed to misinformation, disinformation, and fake news (Radu, 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020). With expanding connectivity comes various challenges including content monetization (Ditlhokwa, 2023), particularly with the increasing demand for commercializing news content and the proliferation of news publishers on social media. This negotiates the necessity of regulating the market in which these social media networks operate. Presently, Botswana lacks a specific law akin to Australia's recently enacted competition bargaining code. However, the Cybercrime and Computer Related Crimes Act of 2007, subsequently repealed, and re-enacted with amendments in 2018, significantly addresses computer-related offenses and imposes penalties on offenders contravening among others, Section 18 of the act (Bande 2018; Sarefo, Mphago & Dawson, 2021), which addresses 'offensive electronic communication', stating that:

A person who willfully, maliciously or repeatedly uses electronic communication of an offensive nature to disturb or attempt to disturb the peace, quiet or privacy of any person with no purpose to legitimate communication, whether or not a conversation ensues, commits an offence and is liable to a fine not exceeding P20 000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year, or to both.

(Cybercrime and Computer Related Crimes Act, 2018)

In March 2020, as the Botswana government declared a state of emergency and a subsequent lockdown to combat the spread of COVID-19, it also sought to curb the dissemination of COVID-19 misinformation on social media, an arena where the seemingly regulated use of the internet and social media was applied. This included measures under the offensive electronic communication law (Mawarire & Phiri 2020). None of the mentioned legal measures, however, were crafted to mediate between Facebook and the requests of news content producers, as observed in Australia. With the absence of such intervention, the present liberty to share news updates on Facebook provides an opportunity for this study to cast light on the current state of news accessibility in Botswana. Moreover, it offers both Botswana media practitioners and regulators chance to learn from past internet disputes in Australia and elsewhere, allowing them to better grasp the current backdrop on the relationship between Big Tech regulation and news production.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

There has been considerable academic interest in examining the discussions surrounding both the advantages and disadvantages of platformization. However, Hågvar (2019) argues that more research is needed in this field. Some studies have suggested a shift from traditional media to online platforms. For instance, Bilda and Demirkan (2003) explored transitive cognitive processes between traditional and digital media through sketch-based designs. Additionally, Bimber and Copeland (2013) researched the transition of digital media usage in the United States political spheres. More recently, First, Shin, Ranjit and Houston (2021) investigated the extensive exposure to news on both traditional and digital media platforms and its correlation with stress and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some studies focus on the shifts and progression of media since the emergence of new media platforms and social media networks. Meanwhile, another line of inquiry pays close attention to the dominance of digital platforms, legislation governing Big Tech firms, and their interactions with big data politics and the news media (Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu, 2019). This focus largely overlooks the impact of excessive reliance on news media on digital platforms, particularly concerning recent events in Australia. Consequently, previous studies have primarily concentrated on issues related to competition regulation, privacy, data security, and commercial concerns (Boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Houser & Voss, 2018; Becker, 2019). This section will review existing literature in two key areas: first, practical literature addressing competition legislation and data protection, and second, theoretical literature exploring public interest regulation theory.

The influence of some Big Tech companies, notably Meta and Google, continue to spark substantial academic interest. Smyth (2019) posits that addressing the once-unassailable monopoly of tech giants through government legislation is imperative, especially regarding their operations within governmental systems. While acknowledging the substantial impact of companies like Meta on global connectivity and their political economy, it is evident that scholars recognize the necessity of regulating these tech giants. However, their arguments often lean more towards the commercialization of these platforms. It is, therefore, crucial to reiterate our appraisal of the interconnected networks associated with these platforms, such as the news media, as previously discussed. This entails paying close attention to the potential ramifications on connectivity and accessibility should disputes arise between governments and tech companies regarding regulatory measures. The literature not only suggests competition policy within this context but also links it with emerging issues like data protection and privacy. Accordingly, Biggar and Heimler (2021) argue that competition laws, a cornerstone of platform regulation, aim to mitigate the negative impacts of businesses wielding excessive power over their competitors and audiences. This dominance can stifle fair competition and ultimately harm consumers

because platforms serve as hubs where various companies sell their goods or services, and a place for information consumption. While Jacobides and Lianos (2021) concur that competition laws help maintain fair markets by preventing anti-competitive behavior, there is evidence of a shift towards complex ecosystems involving multiple products and actors, with some platforms diversifying their business interests and operations. Zeng and Glaister (2018) argue that the emergence of big data is radically altering the commercial environment. Therefore, traditional competition laws may fall short of addressing the obscurities of competitive strategies at the ecosystem level. Furthermore, we contend that relying solely on competition law enforcement may not be adequate to address these challenges. Other policies, such as data privacy and protection, offer regulatory alternatives to deal with issues related to digital platforms.

Data protection laws aim to safeguard individuals' personal information, ensuring it is collected, stored, and utilized fairly and responsibly. While these laws vary across countries, they generally include provisions protecting individuals' data rights. For instance, Houser & Voss (2018) examined how Meta and Google have previously shared users' private information with third parties, enticing users with free services offered on their platforms. These services, such as content access and communication tools, aim to enhance user engagement and generate revenue through advertising or other means. In recent years, many countries have adopted data protection laws modeled after the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which is considered one of the most comprehensive globally. Hoofnagle, van der Sloot and Borgesius (2019) explored this approach and its global implications for data privacy. Their study highlighted differences, such as the U.S., where Meta is headquartered, operating under a sectoral privacy regulation system, with general consumer protection laws governing most activities, allowing for extensive data collection and usage. This contrasts with the European data regulation approach, which imposes restrictions on data collection and usage in nearly all cases. Hews (2019) takes a distinct stance, focusing on regulating social media use solely within the context of criminal trials, citing Australia's sub judice rule as an example. The researcher suggests that the law appears biased towards mainstream publications on social media, with notable gaps in regulating information shared by individual social media accounts (non-journalists). Regarding news sharing on Facebook, Caplan and Boyd (2018) stress the importance of exercising caution when increasing accountability for algorithms. They maintain that these algorithms, while aiding users in decision-making based on big data, are influenced by broader social trends and the values of the organizations that develop them. This sophistication poses a challenge as various individuals, groups, and media companies rely on the same algorithms for decision-making, highlighting the multidimensional nature of privacy and data protection provided by social media account owners (Nyoni & Velepini, 2015). Similarly, other scholars explore the intersection of ethics and privacy (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016; Sarikakis & Winter, 2017; Becker, 2019; Meese et al., 2019). However, Alsharabi and Ghaleb (2016) acknowledge Meta's efforts in enhancing privacy options for users on the Facebook app, emphasizing the role of individual users in utilizing these features effectively. Furthermore, Stjernfelt and Lauritzen (2020) argue against granting immunity to Facebook from legislative regulation, particularly concerning issues of marketization and public interest. They recognize the platform's improvements in security measures to identify and address harmful content and hate speech but recognize some regulatory oversights in the process.

In exploring the potential impact of regulation on the platformization of news, this paper adopts the Public Interest Regulation Theory. This theory acknowledges the interconnectedness of regulating competition, governance, and economic advancement within the framework of public interest. It recognizes that markets do not always operate efficiently on their own, necessitating government intervention to address issues like monopolies, externalities, and information imbalances (James, 2000). Public interest regulation aims to rectify these market failures, promoting competition, safeguarding consumers, and ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefits (Croley, 2008). However, Hantke-Domas (2003) contests this, suggesting that when governments claim to act in the public's best interest, different individuals may have varying ideas of what those entail. Moreover, there is the concern that politicians and policymakers may prioritize their interests over the public's, casting doubt on whether they truly act in the public's interest. In the digitalization era, public interest regulation theory posits that government intervention may be necessary to address issues like concentrated power, lack of transparency, and potential harm to competition and consumers (Napoli, 2015; Nooren, van Gorp, van Eijk & Fathaigh, 2018). The objective of public interest regulation in this context is to ensure that digital platforms operate in a manner that promotes competition, protects consumer rights, and serves the public interest. Furthermore, Levi-Faur (2017) argues that regulatory processes aim to shape the operation, manipulation, and deployment of political, social, and economic power. Despite Facebook being a profit-making entity, content subject to intellectual property rights appears transferable under a 'non-exclusive [...] royalty-free [...] license' when posted on Facebook (Tan, 2018). This may have historically absolved Facebook from liability for copyright infringement, as content sharers are expected to have read and understood the platform's privacy statement. Considering the regulation of Meta through Facebook in Australia, significant arguments highlight Meta's primarily profit-oriented agenda as a purportedly free content distribution platform. For instance, Baym (2015) asserts that Facebook serves as an open platform for the commercialization of human practices under the guise of content creation, potentially sidestepping issues of licensing and ownership rights to the content. Within the big tech landscape, certain scholars posit that Facebook, among its various functions, generates revenue by allowing

companies to market their products without compensating content creators for the rights to shared content. This has led to calls for reform (Petit & Teece, 2021; Smyth, 2019). Conversely, Kumpel et al. (2015) emphasize that Facebook remains one of the most effective tools for rapid news dissemination. It is fundamental to strike a balance between regulating internet-based platforms and safeguarding the interests of content creators, while also acknowledging the close relationships and networks formed by users of platforms such as Facebook. Despite many researchers focusing on competition regulation between governments and big tech companies to address monopolistic concerns, little attention has been given to the distribution of news stories on Facebook and the potential implications of connectivity breakdown from hosting platforms. Hence, there exists a knowledge gap regarding how social media dependency, news sharing, and platformization are influenced by competition regulation, prompting us to explore specifiable data through the following research questions:

- (1) How frequently do news articles get posted on Facebook within a given month?
- (2) Which media sector stands to be most affected by the blackout between radio, television, traditional newspapers, and online platforms? What factors contribute to this potential impact?

**3. Methods**

For this study, quantitative methods were employed to address the research inquiries. The data collection process involved systematically monitoring and recording the frequency of news postings on Facebook throughout the month of February 2021. To accomplish this, a structured approach was utilized to track and document each instance of news content shared on the platform during the specified period. This involved accessing Facebook and capturing relevant information, including the date, time, and content of each news post. Additionally, manual verification techniques were applied to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the collected data, where we later analyzed the content. Schmidt et al. (2017) utilized quantitative content analysis to explore news consumption on Facebook, while von Nordheim, Boczek, and Koppers (2018) employed it to gauge the utilization of Facebook and Twitter as sources of information for traditional newspapers. These approaches aided in drawing inferences pertinent to the initial research query. As highlighted by Pearson (2018), data analysis proves effective in inference-making and extends to facilitating predictions of forthcoming events. The selection of February as the focal month for this study was driven by the regulatory events and news publisher blackout on Facebook that transpired concurrently in Australia during the same period. The decision to exclusively employ quantitative methods was motivated by the necessity to concentrate solely on statistical data, as emphasized by Boettger and Palmer (2010). Below, Tables 1 and 2 provide a breakdown of the demographics pertaining to the selected entities and sectors under examination.

Table 1. Demographics of the sampled entities

No	Entity	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Government	5	9.8
2.	Private	46	90.2
Total		51	100

Note: Entity here refers to the model of ownership about the study population. There were only two entities (government and private) for all the Facebook app pages selected.

Table 2. Selected sectors

No	Sector	Number selected	Percentage
1.	Online news	25	49.0
2.	Radio	4	7.8
3.	Television	6	11.8
4.	Traditional newspapers	16	31.4
Total		51	100

This table presents the specific count of the selected sectors derived from the entities mentioned in Table 1.

**4. Findings**

Altogether, a total of 5630 posts were accumulated across all selected pages, distributed as follows: week 1 accounted for 1154 posts (21%), week 2 for 1470 posts (26%), week 3 for 1485 posts (26%), and week 4 for 1521 posts (27%). Across all weeks, the cumulative mean stood at 27.60 (refer to Table 3). Throughout the month, online platforms collectively contributed 2267 posts (40.3%), while radio accounted for 557 posts (10.4%). Television and traditional newspaper pages tallied 236 posts (4.2%) and 2570 posts (45.6%), respectively. Detailed distribution of weekly posts across all sectors on the Facebook app can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Weekly distribution of posts

		Sector	Week1	Week2	Week3	Week4
N	Valid	51	51	51	51	51
Mean			22.63	28.82	29.12	29.82
Sum			1154	1470	1485	1521

Note: Week 1 has the lowest value for “Mean” (22.63) and the lowest value for “Sum” (1154).

**5. Discussion**

This study explored the implications of the potential Facebook news blackout in Botswana, using the 2021 Australian Facebook blackout as a case study. Our aim was to examine the dependency dynamics between media outlets and the platform, with an examination of its manifold impacts on individuals, organizations, and governmental entities. The first research question focused on the frequency of weekly news posts, aiming to gauge the current accessibility of news across all studied Facebook pages. Based on our data, there were an estimated 1408 news stories posted on a weekly basis. This finding reflects the indispensable role assumed by the platform as a primary conduit for news dissemination, facilitated by its pervasive accessibility across diverse user demographics. Our inquiry further illuminated a noteworthy uptick in news-sharing activity witnessed on Facebook, with an approximate tally of 51 pages consistently featuring news headlines throughout the observed month. However, it is essential to approach these findings with due circumspection. We do so by refraining from unequivocally endorsing the legitimacy of all pages categorized as 'online news', with exceptions made for government-led pages and those affiliated with established private entities. While Facebook undoubtedly reigns supreme as the dominant force in news distribution, our research exposes the urgent need of exploring sustainable alternatives, a necessity crucial for fortifying the resilience and diversity of the broader news ecosystem. In this vein, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube emerge as promising contenders, each offering unique features and catering to distinct audience demographics that complement the reach of Facebook.

Scholars have long emphasized the importance of diversifying news distribution channels to mitigate the risks associated with overreliance on any single platform. For instance, in the wake of platform economy politics, Hurcombe, Burgess and Harrington (2021) back the multi-platform approach to news dissemination, emphasizing the need for media organizations to strategically leverage a spectrum of digital platforms to maximize audience engagement and promote greater resilience against platform-centric disruptions. Moreover, the advent of decentralized platforms built on blockchain technology presents an innovative solution to address concerns surrounding censorship and algorithmic bias. As highlighted by Neittaanmäki, Galeieva and Ogbechie (2016), blockchain-based platforms offer unprecedented levels of transparency and immutability, thereby promoting greater trust and resilience in the face of censorship and manipulation. As for traditional media outlets, our analysis unveils a notable disparity in their representation within the digital sphere. Radio and television broadcasters, as detailed in Table 1, exhibit a relatively subdued presence in total weekly posts, a trend attributed to the limited number of broadcasters included in our analysis, comprising 4 for radio and 6 for television. Despite their modest sample sizes, these broadcasters wield significant influence, given their exclusive representation. However, a discernible gap persists between the two mediums, with radio accounting for 10.4% and television for 4.2% of total posts, marking a noteworthy 6.2% difference. These findings also highlight the critical suggestion of exploring diverse alternative news distribution channels, encompassing both traditional and emerging digital platforms as alluded to by scholars above. As a result, all those involved in news production must adopt insights gleaned from this study, where stakeholders can lean toward a more robust and resilient news ecosystem, mitigating the risks associated with overreliance on any single platform. Moreover, our findings accentuate the importance of regulatory frameworks guided by public interest regulation theory in shaping the dynamics of news distribution on social media. Public interest regulation theory posits that government intervention is essential to correct market failures and promote competition, safeguarding consumer rights and ensuring the equitable dissemination of information (James, 2000; Croley, 2008). In this context, regulatory measures aimed at diversifying news distribution channels become paramount to promote a resilient and inclusive media landscape.

The second research question sought to explore the strengths of posts by each sector, mainly comparing the quantity, quality, and originality of news to determine which sector could be most affected by the Facebook shutdown. Furthermore, the question also addresses the extent of news sharing and distribution patterns that become key factors in measuring the potential impact of news inaccessibility, should the same situation occur in Botswana. From the findings, it becomes evident that the sheer quantity of posts does not necessarily correlate with the quality or originality of content. While online news pages may outnumber traditional media outlets on Facebook, they often fall short in terms of the depth and authenticity of their reporting. As argued by Ruhi, Nault, El-Telbany and Kassab (2022), online news platforms tend to prioritize clickbait headlines and sensationalized content over substantive reporting. This emphasis on attracting clicks and engagement metrics can compromise the quality and integrity of journalistic content, leading to the

proliferation of misinformation and shallow news coverage. In contrast, traditional media outlets adhere to rigorous editorial standards and employ trained journalists who uphold principles of accuracy, fairness, and impartiality in their reporting (Carlson, 2017). As a result, audiences often perceive traditional media sources as more trustworthy and credible than their online counterparts. Traditional newspapers, radio, and television broadcasters, despite their smaller representation in terms of Facebook pages, maintain their stronghold as reliable sources of information, commanding a significant share of audience trust and engagement. For instance, despite the lower number of Facebook pages administered by radio broadcasters, they managed to surpass television broadcasters in terms of the number of stories shared. This discrepancy explains the enduring influence and credibility of radio as a trusted medium for news dissemination, capable of resonating with audiences despite the proliferation of digital platforms. Similarly, traditional newspapers have retained their market position as primary sources of original reporting, outperforming online news pages in terms of content ownership and audience engagement. The observed pattern of (re)sharing content by online news pages, predominantly sourced from traditional media outlets, raises questions about their credibility and autonomy as information sources. One notable exception to this trend is the BWGovernment Facebook page, administered by the Government of Botswana, which emerged as the highest sharer among all the analyzed pages. This finding signals the growing significance of government-led communication efforts on digital platforms, particularly in the context of crisis management such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments worldwide have increasingly turned to social media platforms to disseminate updates and information to the public, leveraging their reach and accessibility to ensure widespread dissemination of crucial information (Pang, Cai, Jiang & Chan, 2021). However, while the BWGovernment page may enjoy a wide audience reach, it is essential to critically assess the implications of government-led information dissemination on public perception and trust. The proliferation of official government channels on social media platforms raises questions about transparency, accountability, and the potential for information manipulation or bias. As such, while these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for direct communication between governments and citizens, they also pose challenges in terms of ensuring the integrity and impartiality of information shared (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). Considering these observations, it becomes necessary to re-evaluate the criteria for appraising the trustworthiness and credibility of news sources in the digital age. While online news pages may become key role players in amplifying the reach of information, their dependence on (re)shared content from traditional media outlets validates the continued relevance and importance of established news organizations in maintaining journalistic standards and integrity. Moreover, the findings emphasize the need for a strong understanding of news distribution patterns and audience engagement on digital platforms. By interpreting the strengths and weaknesses of different media sectors, we contribute a unique dimension to the changing media landscape and heighten the importance of regulatory frameworks guided by principles of public interest and media diversity.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the impact of Facebook on news accessibility and online information consumption in Botswana is undeniable, with platformization of news witnessing a significant surge as the number of new Facebook pages continues to grow. This also reflects greater big data politics which countries with small economies and technological capacities like Botswana must ready themselves for. We also recognize that there are other alternatives such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Tencent, Amazon, Twitter (now X), etc. Nevertheless, none of the aforementioned platforms possess any indigenous heritage relevant to the local Botswana context, or even within the broader African region. This reality may greatly affect the African continent, should such disputes emerge. Based on that, we argue that the preparedness of many of these Facebook pages for potential setbacks remains uncertain. Unlike traditional newspapers, radio, and television broadcasters, which have alternative websites or radio signals for news dissemination, many online pages lack such backup plans. Interestingly, these burgeoning online platforms heavily rely on traditional media outlets as primary sources for breaking news, with a substantial portion of their content being reshared from mainstream media. Despite fluctuations in the frequency of news sharing across all sectors, radio and television broadcasters demonstrate resilience, often simultaneously broadcasting news stories shared on the Facebook app. This demonstrates their enduring influence in the news market and suggests their ability to weather regulatory changes, such as the Facebook ban. In contrast, online pages without alternative platforms are more vulnerable to the ramifications of the Facebook ban, facing potential demise due to their reliance on a single distribution channel. In this study, we emphasize the importance of diversifying news distribution channels and the need for online platforms to develop contingency plans to mitigate risks associated with platform dependency. The findings of this study could also benefit lawmakers and regulatory bodies in Botswana such as the Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority (BOCRA), to advise and craft bespoke policies and regulations that cater to the distinct challenges and opportunities posed by digital platforms within our jurisdictions. By adopting strategies to ensure resilience and adaptability in the face of regulatory changes, media organizations can better negotiate the changing digital scenery and uphold the public's right to access diverse and reliable news sources.

## 7. Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Due to limited resources and Facebook accessibility restrictions in the country where the researchers were based during the time of conducting this study, the spontaneous search for a bigger sample was affected. Furthermore, this study could not establish the audiences' perspectives on the perceived dependability of each media house being studied. It is, therefore, highly recommended that future studies explore the audiences' choices between the mainstream media Facebook pages and the unofficial ones, and to some extent, compare news accessibility between Facebook and other social media platforms that are used to access news in Botswana.

### Acknowledgments

This study received no funding from any individual or organization.

### Authors contributions

Gopolang Ditlhokwa and Victoria Elizabeth Cann were responsible for the conceptualization of the study, its design and revision. Data collection and analysis was led by Gopolang Ditlhokwa, while Victoria Elizabeth Cann drafted the manuscript. All authors read, revised, and approved the final manuscript.

### Funding

No funding was received for this study.

### Competing interests

The researchers declare no conflict.

### Informed consent

Obtained.

### Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

### Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

### Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

### References

- ABC News. (2021, February 18). *Facebook news ban stops Australians from sharing or viewing Australian and international news content*.  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-18/facebook-to-restrict-sharing-or-viewing-news-in-australia/13166208>
- Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M., & Yu, C. (2019). Trends in the diffusion of misinformation on social media. *Research & Politics*, 6(2), 205316801984855. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019848554>
- Allyn, B., & Miller, C. (2021, February 17). *Facebook blocks news in Australia over government plan to force payment to publishers*.  
<https://www.npr.org/2021/02/17/968723929/facebook-blocks-news-in-australia-over-government-plan-to-force-payment-to-publi>
- Alsharabi, N. A., & Ghaleb, R. Q. (2016). Social networks: Privacy granted and the negative effects for the individual and society. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 5(3), 198-201.  
<https://doi.org/10.21275/v5i3.NOV161803>



- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. (2020, July 31). <https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/australian-news-media-to-negotiate-payment-with-major-digital-platforms>
- Bande, L. C. (2018). Legislating against Cyber Crime in Southern African Development Community: Balancing International Standards with Country-Specific Specificities. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 12(1), 9-26. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1467632>
- Baym, N. K. (2015). Social Media and the Struggle for Society. *Social Media + Society*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580477>
- BBC. (2021a, February 18). *Australia news code: What's this row with Facebook and Google all about?* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56107028>
- BBC. (2021b, February 18). *Facebook blocks Australian users from viewing or sharing news.* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56099523>
- Becker, M. (2019). Privacy in the digital age: comparing and contrasting individual versus social approaches towards privacy. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 21(4), 307-317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-019-09508-z>
- Biggar, D., & Heimler, A. (2021). Digital platforms and the transactions cost approach to competition law. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 30(5), 1230-1258. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dtab051>
- Bilda, Z., & Demirkan, H. (2003). An insight on designers' sketching activities in traditional versus digital media. *Design Studies*, 24(1), 27-50. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X\(02\)00032-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X(02)00032-7)
- Bimber, B., & Copeland, L. (2013). Digital Media and Traditional Political Participation Over Time in the U.S. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 10(2), 125-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2013.769925>
- Boettger, R. K., & Palmer, L. A. (2010). Quantitative Content Analysis: Its Use in Technical Communication. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 53(4), 346-357. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2010.2077450>
- Boyd, D., & Hargittai, E. (2010). Facebook privacy settings: Who cares? *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v15i8.3086>
- Caplan, R., & Boyd, danah. (2018). Isomorphism through algorithms: Institutional dependencies in the case of Facebook. *Big Data & Society*, 5(1), 205395171875725. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718757253>
- Carlson, M. (2017). *Journalistic authority: Legitimizing news in the digital era*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/car117444>
- Croley, S. P. (2008). *Regulation and Public Interests*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828142>
- Cybercrime and Computer Related Crimes Act. (2018). 18 Retrieved from <https://www.bocra.org.bw/sites/default/files/documents/18%20Act%202029-06-2018%20Cybercrime%20and%20Computer%20Related%20Crimes.pdf>
- Diraditsile, K., & Samakabadi, G. G. (2018). The effect of social media on student engagement and collaboration: The use of Facebook at the University of Botswana. *Lonaka joLT*, 9(1), 70-83.
- Ditlhokwa, G. & Cann, V. (2024). Postcolonial Analysis of Transcultural News Frames: A Case Study of Facebook Rebranding. *Journal of Transcultural Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jtc-2023-0004>
- Ditlhokwa, G. (2022). Health Information and Social Inclusion of Women During COVID-19: Exploring Botswana Television's Functionalist Communication Strategy. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 12(3), e202219. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/12169>
- Ditlhokwa, G. (2023). Unlocking Monetization Potential in the Age of YouTube Algorithmic Bias: An Analysis of Botswana Filmmaking. In Y. Ismail (Ed.), *The Future of Television and Video Industry*. (pp. 1-19). IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.113306>
- First, J. M., Shin, H., Ranjit, Y. S., & Houston, J. B. (2021). COVID-19 Stress and Depression: Examining Social Media, Traditional Media, and Interpersonal Communication. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 26(2), 101-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2020.1835386>
- Flynn, K. (2021, February 19). *Facebook bans news in Australia as fight with government escalates.* <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/17/media/facebook-australia-news-ban/index.html>
- Hågvar, Y. B. (2019). News Media's Rhetoric on Facebook. *Journalism Practice*, 13(7), 853-872. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1577163>
- Hantke-Domas, M. (2003). The Public Interest Theory of Regulation: Non-Existence or Misinterpretation? *European*

- Journal of Law and Economics*, 15(2), 165-194. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021814416688>
- Hargittai, & Marwick. (2016). What Can I Really Do?": Explaining the privacy paradox with online apathy. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 3737-3757.
- Hews, R. J. (2019). *Twitter Trials and Facebook Juries: An Analysis of the Australian Sub Judice Rule and the Regulation of Prejudicial Publicity on Social Media During High-Profile Criminal Trials* [Queensland University of Technology]. <https://doi.org/10.5204/thesis.eprints.134133>
- Hoofnagle, C. J., van der Sloot, B., & Borgesius, F. Z. (2019). The European Union general data protection regulation: what it is and what it means. *Information & Communications Technology Law*, 28(1), 65-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2019.1573501>
- Houser, K., & Voss, W. G. (2018). GDPR: The End of Google and Facebook or a New Paradigm in Data Privacy? *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3212210>
- Hurcombe, E., Burgess, J., & Harrington, S. (2021). What's newsworthy about 'social news'? Characteristics and potential of an emerging genre. *Journalism*, 22(2), 378-394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918793933>
- Jacobides, M. G., & Lianos, I. (2021). Ecosystems and competition law in theory and practice. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 30(5), 1199-1229. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dtab061>
- James, O. (2000). Regulation inside government: Public interest justifications and regulatory failures. *Public Administration*, 78(2), 327-343.
- Kümpel, A. S., Karnowski, V., & Keyling, T. (2015). News Sharing in Social Media: A Review of Current Research on News Sharing Users, Content, and Networks. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 205630511561014. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115610141>
- Levi-Faur, D. (2017). Regulatory capitalism. In *Regulatory Theory* (pp. 289-302). ANU Press. <https://doi.org/10.22459/RT.02.2017.17>
- Masilo, B., & Seabo, B. (2015). Facebook: Revolutionising Electoral Campaign in Botswana? *Journal of African Elections*, 14(2), 110-129. <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2015/v14i2a5>
- Mawarire, T., & Phiri, M. (2020). *The effects of COVID-19 on freedom of expression in select SADC countries*.
- Meese, J., Jagasia, P., & Arvanitakis, J. (2019). *Consumer rights to personal data: Data access in the communications sector*. <http://handle.westernsydney.edu.au:8081/1959.7/uws:52551>
- Morrison, S. (2021, February 25). *Why Facebook banned (and then unbanned) news in Australia*. <https://www.vox.com/recode/22287971/australia-facebook-news-ban-google-money>
- Mosweu, T., & Ngoepe, M. (2019). 'Here one moment, gone the next': A framework for liquid communication generated through social media platforms in the Botswana public sector. *SA Journal of Information Management*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v21i1.1080>
- Murphy, H., & Stacey, K. (2021, June 29). *Facebook rulings spark bipartisan calls for US competition law change*. <https://www.ft.com/content/34e6028d-8d78-4670-9799-c374db47bd20>
- Myllylahti, M. (September 2018). Google, Facebook and New Zealand news media: The problem of platform dependency. Auckland: The Policy Observatory. Retrieved from <https://thepolicyobservatory.aut.ac.nz/>
- NapoleonCat. (2024, February). *Facebook users in Botswana-February 2024*. NapoleonCat. [https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-botswana/2024/02/#:~:text=There%20were%201%20379%20900,user%20group%20\(419%20000\)](https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-botswana/2024/02/#:~:text=There%20were%201%20379%20900,user%20group%20(419%20000)).
- Napoli, P. M. (2015). Social media and the public interest: Governance of news platforms in the realm of individual and algorithmic gatekeepers. *Telecommunications Policy*, 39(9), 751-760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2014.12.003>
- Neittaanmäki, P., Galeieva, E., & Ogbechie, A. (2016). Platform economy & digital platforms. *Informaatioteknologian tiedekunnan julkaisuja/Jyväskylän yliopisto*, (2016, 25).
- Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4275-4292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>
- Nooren, P., van Gorp, N., van Eijk, N., & Fathaigh, R. Ó. (2018). Should We Regulate Digital Platforms? A New Framework for Evaluating Policy Options. *Policy & Internet*, 10(3), 264-301. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.177>
- Nyoni, P., & Velempini, M. (2015). Data protection laws and privacy on Facebook. *SA Journal of Information Management*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v17i1.636>
- Pang, P. C. I., Cai, Q., Jiang, W., & Chan, K. S. (2021). Engagement of Government Social Media on Facebook during

- the COVID-19 Pandemic in Macao. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(7), 3508. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073508>
- Pearson, R. K. (2018). Data, Exploratory Analysis, and R. In *Exploratory Data Analysis Using R* (pp. 1–28). Chapman and Hall/CRC. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315382111-1>
- Petit, N., & Teece, D. J. (2021). Innovating Big Tech firms and competition policy: favoring dynamic over static competition. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 30(5), 1168-1198. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dtab049>
- Ponsford, D. (2021, February 19). *Australian newspapers attack Facebook as traffic to sites plunges after news ban*. <https://indiannewslink.co.nz/australian-newspapers-launch-bitter-attack-on-facebook/>
- Radu, R. (2020). Fighting the ‘Infodemic’: Legal Responses to COVID-19 Disinformation. *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 205630512094819. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948190>
- Roozenbeek, J., Schneider, C. R., Dryhurst, S., Kerr, J., Freeman, A. L. J., Recchia, G., van der Bles, A. M., & van der Linden, S. (2020). Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world. *Royal Society Open Science*, 7(10), 201199. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.201199>
- Ruhi, U., Nault, K., El-Telbany, O., & Kassab, N. (2022, May). *Digital Disinformation Landscape and Online Disinformation-Countering Tools* (Working Paper), Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Sarefo, S., Mphago, B., & Dawson, M. (2023). An analysis of Botswana’s cybercrime legislation. *Procedia Computer Science*, 219(2022), 1023-1033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2023.01.380>
- Sarikakis, K., & Winter, L. (2017). Social Media Users’ Legal Consciousness About Privacy. *Social Media + Society*, 3(1), 205630511769532. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117695325>
- Schmidt, A. L., Zollo, F., del Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., Stanley, H. E., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2017). Anatomy of news consumption on Facebook. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(12), 3035-3039. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1617052114>
- Shin, D., Zaid, B., Biocca, F., & Rasul, A. (2022). In Platforms We Trust? Unlocking the Black-Box of News Algorithms through Interpretable AI. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 66(2), 235-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2022.2057984>
- Smyth, S. M. (2019). The Facebook conundrum: Is it time to usher in a new era of regulation for big tech? *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 13(2), 578-595. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3718955>
- Stjernfelt, F., & Lauritzen, A. M. (2020). Facebook and Google as Offices of Censorship. In *Your Post has been Removed* (pp. 139-172). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25968-6\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25968-6_12)
- Strömbäck, J., Tsifti, Y., Boomgaarden, H., Damstra, A., Lindgren, E., Vliegenthart, R., & Lindholm, T. (2020). News media trust and its impact on media use: toward a framework for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 44(2), 139-156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1755338>
- Styrin, E., Mossberger, K., & Zhulin, A. (2022). Government as a platform: Intergovernmental participation for public services in the Russian Federation. *Government Information Quarterly*, 39(1), 101627. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2021.101627>
- Tan, C. (2018). *Regulating Content on Social Media*. UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787351714>
- Trappel, & Tomaz. (2021). Democratic performance of news media: Dimensions and indicators for comparative studies. In J. Trappel & T. Tomaz (Eds.), *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021: How Leading News Media Survive Digital Transformation* (Vol. 1, pp. 11-58). University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855404-1>
- Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020*. (2021). [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/billsdgs/7808228/upload\\_binary/7808228.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/billsdgs/7808228/upload_binary/7808228.pdf)
- von Nordheim, G., Boczek, K., & Koppers, L. (2018). Sourcing the Sources. *Digital Journalism*, 6(7), 807-828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1490658>
- Wadbring, I., & Ödmark, S. (2016). Going Viral: News Sharing and Shared News in Social Media. *Observatorio (OBS\*)*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS1042016936>
- Willig, I. (2022). From audiences to data points: The role of media agencies in the platformization of the news media industry. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(1), 56-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211029861>
- Zeng, J., & Glaister, K. W. (2018). Value creation from big data: Looking inside the black box. *Strategic Organization*, 16(2), 105-140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127017697510>