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Article

The Maze of Misunderstanding: A Qualitative Study on Sociopolitical Implications of Ambiguous Media in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The rise of digital media has radically changed the landscape of information consumption, creating new media with ambiguous content, which complicates the public discourse and sociopolitical understanding. This qualitative study explored the impact of ambiguous content on media consumers in the era of digital communication. Through qualitative content analysis of selected media artifacts and semi-structured interviews with media consumers and media professionals, the study examined how ambiguous messages are constructed, perceived, and interpreted. The study discussed the key thematic characteristics of ambiguous content, explored the impact of ambiguity on audience trust and engagement, and investigated the interpretive repertoires of ambiguous content that informed and constructed the sociopolitical dispositions of audiences. Data analysis demonstrated how intentionally ambiguous content promotes a fragmented public understanding of the world, increased affective polarization, and decreases trust in the media. Additionally, audiences' interpretation of ambiguous content is further mediated by prior belief systems, social identity, and digital media literacy experiences. By incorporating the perspectives and theories of framing, critical media studies, and decentering of dominant narratives, the study illuminated the power relations within the design and enjoyment of ambiguous media. This research sheds light on the urgent need for media literacy education and responsible editorial practices that address the consequences of ambiguous yet influential content on the sociopolitical landscape. The study adds value to the field of media studies by providing a qualitative study of an underexamined but prevalent aspect of the contemporary information landscape.

Keywords: ambiguous media; qualitative content analysis; sociopolitical effects; digital media; framing theory; media trust; audience interpretation; media literacy; critical media studies; decolonial approaches

1. Introduction

We are living in a time of unprecedented media transformation, primarily brought by the rapid, far-reaching dissemination of information across all kinds of platforms. While the democratization of content creation and dissemination provides exciting opportunities for civic engagement and knowledge sharing, there are also complexities, if not risks, associated with the overall information environment. The main complexity we address here is one of many forms of ambiguous media content, which is defined as messages, narratives, and images that can be interpreted or are open to multiple interpretations, whether contextualized intentionally or unintentionally, or with clarity or ambiguity (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). This ambiguity can present itself in various ways, from biased news reporting, ambiguous political statements, influencer marketing, and algorithmically curated content streams with no context or authorship (Eisenberg, 1984). What seems particularly consequential is the powerful use of ambiguity as a communications strategy, particularly in public

relations and political contexts, as this allows communicators to appeal to varying audiences simultaneously, while deflecting accountability (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

The challenge is not solely one of clarity; it is sociopolitical and has implications. The challenge audiences face in passing through this maze of information is to form reasonable judgments, trust institutional sources, engage in productive public discourse, and participate meaningfully in democratic life. These challenges were easy to pull apart, as ambiguous messages commonly promote differences in opinion and allow for different social groups to project their beliefs, concerns, hopes, or fears onto the same context therefore reinforcing prior biases and contributing to political polarization (Zasiekina et al., 2023). Even more, continued exposure to uncertainty and the perpetual hassle of trying to discern fact from fiction or an absence of reliability leads to cynicism, disengagement, or greater acceptance of disinformation and conspiracy theories that assign absent or false certainties. Without getting too abstract, the social bonds that are a hallmark of a democratic society rely on a well-informed population, and a media ecosystem saturated with media content that obscures rather than clarifies reality represents a serious threat to the very tenets of democracy (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

This paper engages in a scholarly discussion of the recognition of the power of media to construct social and political realities. Whereas there has been considerable attention given to the literature that explores explicit forms of media bias and mis- and disinformation, there is comparatively less literature that has paid focused attention to the more subtle yet prevalent ambiguity, especially through qualitative research inquiry (Vallejo et al., 2023). Published literature predominately engages media effects through quantitative lenses as they simply employ evaluative standards around variables like engagement metrics or polling data, which do not capture the important processes of interpretation and meaning-making an audience engages in when experiencing ambiguity (Deacon et al., 2021). This consideration of how meaning is ascribed to ambiguous media content addresses a significant gap in literature, and by focusing on a qualitative methodology, it will address the lived experience of the media consumer, as well as the considerations of the media producer. By focusing on how and why ambiguity matters, this project will contribute unique knowledge around the conditions of ambiguity, including the contemporary socio-political implications, to the disciplinary areas of media studies, political communication, and digital sociology.

2. Research Problem

The significant research problem this study is addressing is a profound gap in literature regarding the nuanced sociopolitical effects of ambiguous media content in the digital era. While attention has been given to the proliferation of misinformation or "fake news" specifically (Vogler & Meissner, 2024), the particular and pernicious effects of content that is not overtly false but ambiguous by virtue of production or meaning making remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped, with significant limitations in qualitative perspectives. The research hierarchy that is inherent to current literature often evaluates ambiguity as misinformation, or as a significant context of study, like political campaigns (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017), and ignores the broader effects it could have on public trust, civic engagement, and social cohesion across the expansive digital media ecosystem.

There are a few interconnected issues at play. First, this lack of deep qualitative understanding leaves a void for our understanding of how audiences make sense of a media landscape in which clarity is the exception rather than the rule. While quantitative studies are useful to encompass various scopes, they often do not address the highly contextual process of sense-making individuals employ when they confront purposely vague or contextually deficient information (Bertrand & Hughes, 2017). Second, existing political and media scholarship does not interrogate the social power and privilege of certain media producers, audiences, and platforms. For example, the power of media producers, influencers, and/or political actor(s) to manipulate, distract, or disempower public opinion, distract from mis- or disinformation, or simply provide plausible deniability may be

obscured by alternate interpretations. The existing research does not systematically evaluate the ethical dimensions of ambiguity, while providing opportunities for action; therefore, they do not hold traditional journalism accountable for limited coverage or objectivity (Singer, 2018).

Third, much of the existing media scholarship is steeped in Western bias; therefore, it may miss heavily culturally contextualized interpretations and how ambiguity is understood and/or practiced in different geopolitical and sociopolitical contexts (Chakravartty et al., 2018). The established dominance of Western influence on media scholarship and disposition may create theories and methodologies that are not generalizable (Neyazi, 2023). Thus, the gap is twofold: existing scholarships lack a deep qualitative understanding of ambiguous media effects, and from a methodological and theoretical perspective, ambiguity's effects family of research is largely all focused on one political context (Western), which serves to limit generalizability and value of existing research (Vallejo et al., 2023). Given this stark lack of inquiry into ambiguous media content, the ability of scholars, educators, and policymakers to develop the necessary tools to enact appropriate interventions, like implementing advanced critical media literacy programs or creating ethical creator guidelines, is severely impeded and creates distinct vulnerability for the power of pervasive ambiguity in media to erode and divide societies.

Table 1. Key Gaps in Existing Literature on Ambiguous Media.

Gap Area	Description	Implications for Research
Qualitative Depth	Limited focus on interpretive processes beyond quantitative metrics	Underexplores audience sense-making in ambiguous contexts
Ethical Dimensions	Insufficient evaluation of power dynamics and accountability in ambiguity	Fails to address manipulation by media producers
Cultural Context	Predominantly Western-centric, ignoring global variations	Reduces generalizability and inclusivity of findings
Sociopolitical Effects	Overemphasis on misinformation, neglecting subtle ambiguity	Misses broader impacts on trust, polarization, and engagement

Source: Author's synthesis based on literature review (Vallejo et al., 2023; Neyazi, 2023; Bertrand & Hughes, 2017).

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this manuscript will allow for a systematic approach to studying the sociopolitical effects of ambiguous media content. The overall goal of the study is to look beyond high-level or surface analysis of content; however, in order to understand how ambiguity operates in the contemporary digital media ecosystem and study its functions, the following objectives were created:

1. **Identify and Characterize Ambiguous Content in Media:** The first objective is to develop a typology of ambiguity in media more broadly (digital media specifically). This will require us to qualitatively examine a selection of media artifacts and systematically and thematically identify the common rhetorical, linguistic, and visual strategies used to produce ambiguity such as strategic vagueness, equivocation, irony, decontextualization, etc.
2. **Analyze Audience Interpretative and Sense-Making Processes:** The second objective is to investigate how different audiences make sense of, interpret, and emotionally respond to ambiguous media content. By conducting in-depth interviews, the research aims to make sense of what cognitive and affective processes individuals utilize to navigate uncertainty and meaning making, and how pre-existing beliefs, cultural background, and media literacy affect interpretations.
3. **Examine Effects on Trust and Engagement with the Media and Information Literacy:** The third goal is to analyze the relationship between exposure to media ambiguity and audience trust in

media sources, journalists, and public institutions. A particular goal is to understand how sustained contact with ambiguity affects media consumption patterns, information-seeking behavior, and public engagement, such as sharing, commenting, and other participatory forms of discourse.

4. **Theorize Sociopolitical Outcomes of Media Ambiguity:** The last, more overarching, objective is to synthesize findings to develop a strong theoretical account of sociopolitical implications of media ambiguity in a flattened media landscape. This requires linking observations about content and audience reception to a wider social phenomenon about political polarization, the demise of public discourse, and the changing power structure between media producers and consumers in a digital age.

Table 2. Mapping Research Objectives to Methods.

Objective Number	Objective Description	Associated Methods
1	Identify and characterize ambiguous content	Qualitative content analysis of media artifacts
2	Analyze audience interpretative processes	Semi-structured interviews with consumers
3	Examine effects on trust and engagement	Thematic analysis of interview data and engagement metrics
4	Theorize sociopolitical outcomes	Synthesis of findings with theoretical frameworks

Source: Research design developed for this study (2024).

4. Research Questions

The above objectives will be investigated through a central research question and a series of sub-questions that can provide focused, yet comprehensive, inquiry into the issue. Each question below is worded with the intention of eventually producing an in-depth qualitative exploration of the subject matter.

Central Research Question: How does ambiguous media content in the digital age create audience interpretation that shapes trust and affects sociopolitical dynamics?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the main characteristics and the common types of ambiguous content circulating through today's digital media?
2. How do individuals from varied backgrounds make sense of and emotionally engage with media that is intentionally or structurally ambiguous?
3. How does repeated exposure to ambiguous content affect levels of trust in media institutions, patterns of media consumption, and online public engagement?
4. What do media consumers and practitioners perceive the sociopolitical implications of an ambiguous media environment to be?

5. Significance of Research

In summary, this research is important in three ways, bringing important contributions to academia, media practice, and public education. By focusing on the still understudied phenomenon of ambiguity, we aim to build scholarly knowledge, produce knowledge in the form of practice that can be enacted by professionals in the industry, and empower citizens in a convoluted media landscape.

Academic Significance: The study has contributed notably to media and communication studies by examining ambiguity, a topic that is often overlooked next to more sensational topics such as "fake news" and disinformation. The study moves academic conversation forward by qualitatively building a theoretical framework that utilizes framing theory, critical media studies, and a decolonial framework, providing a nuanced understanding of a less recognized but powerful form of media influence. The study directly addresses a gap in literature by centering the interpretive processes of audiences and providing an ethnographic account of how meaning is made in the face of ambiguity. Furthermore, by openly addressing the limitations of Western academic scholarship (Neyazi, 2023), the study will contribute to a more global and inclusive understanding of media effects, resisting epistemological and methodological hegemony (Chakravartty et al., 2018). The study will offer a starting place for future research on the challenges of digital media communication and its impact on society.

Practical Significance: The study's findings offer important practical implications for media professionals. Journalists, editors, and other content creators can identify visible techniques of harmful ambiguity, and the negative impact ambiguity has on audience trust with the study's contextual knowledge. By articulating how ambiguity happens through the presentation of certain topics in media, the analysis can inform the development of academic and professional guidelines and codes of ethics. The study will inform the creation of professional development working groups around communication practices that are clear, transparent, and socially responsible. The analysis will also provide social media companies and tech companies with content moderation policies and algorithms that account for ambiguity as a social harm, rather than a narrowly defined falsehood.

Social and Educational Significance: In a society burdened by more information than its citizens know what to do with, a decline in trust in institutions, and profound societal challenges, the study holds applicability of immediate societal and educational importance. The study prompts a social response in educators to better equip students in media literacy and civic engagement by revealing the ways ambiguity has the potential to be weaponized within advertising, manipulate public sentiment, and create divisions within communities, which can be used as foundational knowledge by educators developing curriculum. Understanding the ability to identify, analyze, and critically engage with ambiguous messages should be included in the toolkit for understanding the nature of citizenship in the 21st century. In this way, the research will allow adults and children to consume media in a more critical manner, contributing to a resilient and informed public sphere with enhanced skills to relate to the complexities of the digital maze of information and more meaningfully participate in democratic life.

6. Thesis Statement

The study argues that ambiguous media content within the digital age is neither neutral nor harmless, but a powerful sociopolitical force that shapes public discourse, undermines institutional trust, and fractures society by exploiting the hermeneutic space of communication gaps. Through a qualitative approach of content analysis of digital media and in-depth interviews with audiences, the study concludes that the method and structure of ambiguity produce interpretive communities that are polarized by pre-existing ideological states and create semantic realities that eliminate the possibilities for shared understanding and forms of democratic deliberation. By revealing the systematic power dynamics in the production and consumption of ambiguity, this study highlights the need for a heightened form of media literacy to help navigate the media maze and think critically about ambiguity and its influence as a mechanism of power generation in contemporary society.

7. Theoretical Framework

This research has a multi-layered theoretical framework that draws on Framing Theory, Critical Media Studies, and Decolonial Approaches. Building off one another, these theoretical approaches create a strong base for examining the social and political consequences behind ambiguous media.

Framing theory allows us to analyze the production and interpretation of media. Critical Media Studies helps identify the power associated with these social constructions. Decolonial perspectives speak to the inherent biases associated with the Western lens, which is often inherent in literature. When used together, these frameworks offer a robust approach to examining how ambiguous digital content creates public discourse, shapes perceptions, and reinforces or contests power relations.

Table 3. Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks.

Framework	Key Focus	Application to Ambiguous Media	Strengths
Framing Theory	How information is presented and interpreted	Analyzes production and audience frames in digital content	Explains meaning construction and polarization
Critical Media Studies	Power relations and ideological forces in media	Interrogates who benefits from ambiguity	Highlights systemic inequalities and manipulation
Decolonial Approaches	Challenging Western biases and centering global contexts	Promotes inclusive interpretations across cultures	Resists epistemological hegemony and universalization

Source: Author's compilation from theoretical literature (Entman, 1993; Bertrand & Hughes, 2017; Chakravartty et al., 2018).

7.1. Framing Theory in Digital Media

Framing theory asserts that the way something is presented (or framed) determines how an audience will process it. Frames are organizing principles that bring meaning to events and issues by selecting, highlighting, and omitting aspects of a reality (Entman, 1993). Frames work on two levels within a media context: media frames (created by journalists or content creators) and audience frames (the interpretative schema they use to process information). The interaction between these two frames produces public opinion and political attitudes.

The digital era has significantly complicated traditional framing processes. Whereas legacy media operates on a top-down model, the digital space is characterized by decentralized and multi-directional information flow where users are simultaneously content creators and content consumers (Bertrand & Hughes, 2017).

This participatory nature of the environment encourages rapid co-creation, contestation, and re-framing of narratives. Social media accelerates this process, with frames emerging organically from users' interactions with other users, distributed through algorithmic pathways, and challenged by counter-frames in real-time. Ambiguous content flourishes in this environment, as its ambiguous nature allows it to be easily integrated into multiple and potentially conflicting frames. By way of illustration, a vaguely written news headline or a selectively edited video can be framed by one group as evidence of a conspiracy while another group may frame the same headline or video as an innocent news report. Both frames circulate simultaneously. The examination of these framing contests is important to understand how ambiguous content contributes to social polarization and political fragmentation (Brennen, 2021).

7.2. Critical Media Studies and Power Relations

While framing theory explains the workings of how meaning is constructed, Critical Media Studies provides the framework and means to interrogate who is doing the framing and whose interests are being served. Critical Media Studies is based in critical theory and examines media not as a neutral pathway for information, but rather as a site for social and political struggle (Bertrand & Hughes, 2017). For example, Critical Media Studies interrogates institutional structures, economic imperatives, and ideological forces which shape media production and media consumption. A key consideration in Critical Media Studies is how media texts and practices can reproduce the dominance of some groups while disadvantaging others. This literature's use in studying ambiguous

media content is important because ambiguity is generally not a coincidence, but rather a tactic employed to obscure power, manage the public, and maintain order and stability.

In today's digital context, power relations are complicating. Although digital platforms have democratized the very act of creating content, they have simultaneously aggregated immense power in the professionalized (corporate) context of only a few accountability structures that govern algorithms for the purposes of uptake and circulation of information. Algorithmic systems, which are often opaque, create "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" that can boost a certain set of frames but diminish others, thus impacting the discourses in the public interest, traversing commercial and political interests (Deacon et al., 2021). Critical Media Studies encourages a perspective that can critically analyze the "socio-cultural artificial intelligence" of these platforms and consider how the coded technological infrastructures can simultaneously inscribe bias and reproduce cultures of the societies in which they operate. In applying this Critical Media Studies analysis, this study advances research beyond the content to consider the relations of power that award and weaponize ambiguity in the digital public sphere, inquiring how frames and ambiguities are constructed and how voices and frames are amplified or muted, and how ambiguity is produced to dissociate accountability, especially around systemic inequalities.

7.3. Decolonial Perspectives in Media Studies

In considering the composite of global digital media, it is important to consider, particularly with framing and critical theories, a decolonization perspective. Generally speaking, much of mainstream media scholarship has developed out of and centered the Global North, often universalizing the hegemonic ways of the West in all spaces, thus nullifying unique contextual relationships (Barbour, 2013). A decolonization perspective challenges the coloniality of knowledge projected in media forms, structures, and trajectories. Decolonization is also supportive of specific framework analysis that allows for the reception, consumption, and interpretation in relation to the Global South and marginalized communities, doing so through their respective cultural, historical, and political contexts.

A decolonial perspective can be used in the study of ambiguous media content by doing and knowing a few important considerations. First, the researcher will need to critically self-reflect on their positionality and biases based on the methodology used (Lichtman, 2023). Secondly, a decolonizing perspective prioritizes media content and audience interpretations by local context and does not evoke universalization theories. For example, the ambiguity of political messaging content will be different depending on a postcolonial context of an understanding of a state-driven media system versus one of the West. Thirdly, a decolonizing lens helps promote subaltern voices—voices that are often muted in the mainstream of university scholarship—and subaltern frameworks, or subaltern focus areas of scholarship (such as, but not limited to, Pakistani media) that are uniquely extracted from scholarly tradition about digital media phenomena (Barbour, 2013). By considering and putting forth decolonial initiatives, this study not only aims for rigorous methodology and method but also contributes to a more equitable and globally contextualized media studies research to be included.

8. Literature Review

The expansion of digital media has dramatically changed the landscape for sharing information, creating a complex ecosystem in which content is created, received, and interpreted in new ways. This literature review organizes scholarly work in four significant areas of scholarship to provide context to the study of sociopolitical consequences of ambiguous media content. First, this section will discuss the prominence of ambiguity within digital content and implications for engagement. Second, this section will explore the broad sociopolitical implications of digital and social media platforms and the impact on public opinion formation and political actions. Third, this section will summarize methodological trends within qualitative media research, establishing what types of methods are frequently used and what methods may be emerging. Last, this section aims to drive

serious considerations about the prevalent Western bias of many pieces of media scholarship and ultimately encourage decolonial and culturally situated analytical lenses.

Table 4. Summary of Key Studies on Ambiguous Media Effects.

Study	Year	Focus	Key Findings
Eisenberg	1984	Strategic ambiguity in communication	Ambiguity allows multiple interpretations to appeal to diverse audiences
Zasiekina et al.	2023	Ambiguous loss and content analysis	Need for clear definitions in uncertain environments
Vogler & Meissner	2024	Crisis labels in headlines	Ambiguous framing increases engagement but erodes trust
Vallejo et al.	2023	Media bias and framing	Calls for cross-disciplinary surveys to address subtle ambiguities

Source: Literature review compilation (Eisenberg, 1984; Zasiekina et al., 2023; Vogler & Meissner, 2024; Vallejo et al., 2023).

8.1. Emerging Patterns of Engagement with Ambiguous Content

The digital age has allowed for a vast and rapid amount of information, which has made ambiguous content an ever-present reality. Ambiguous content in media can be lexical content (i.e., use of words which can have multiple meanings) or structural (i.e., grammatical complications in utilizing the content) (Sahira et al., 2023). However, when we consider ambiguous content in the digital landscape, we are often pointing to strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity can be the result of intentionally designing the content to be open (or lead) to multiple interpretations. It is often utilized in political communication in order to cast a wider net or deflect evaluation of the content (Eisenberg, 1984). Content analysis has been a useful tool for research into government communications and social media posts, inclusive of the Finnish government's strategy for COVID-19 communications (Tiidenberg et al., 2020). Unclear or foggy communication serves to support political needs of obscuring situations by creating a communication environment ripe for varied or conflicting audience interpretations (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

This introduces the question of why scholars have a strong desire to study ambiguous content prior to evaluating the ambiguous processes and outcomes of the audience. Engagement with ideas of what qualifies as ambiguous content, a consistent area of inquiry, is fruitful for audience interpretations. The digital ecology designs the architecture of social media for engagement; one of the metrics built into social media is vision, likes, shares, and commentary. Social media supports content that shows up strongly on engagement, and ambiguous content is useful for achieving that end (Bastos et al., 2021). Creative or unclear content can achieve higher engagement rates while audiences attempt to decipher, debate, or create something from the information they themselves constructed or assigned meaning in the message (Steensen et al., 2020). This is an advantageous area of inquiry due to social media marketing and influence on the economy. In the creator economy, content that is strategically playing with ambiguity generates curiosity and, as a result, drives interaction and engagement that shapes public opinion in more impactful ways than we may realize, or research would suggest (Dahlgren & Hill, 2022). The real challenge for researchers is the level of engagement that was procedurally measured and attribution for engagement to content characteristics, which proves to be complex due to the multitude of possibilities and meanings of online interactions. There have been some approaches, including probabilistic models, to further investigate the ambiguous engagement patterns, yet the qualitative approach has not been as extensively researched in asking how audiences make meaning (Gajardo & Meijer, 2023).

Additionally, the idea of unambiguous content itself, has been studied. One study sought to conduct a systematic review and stated they were attempting to use content analysis to formulate an unambiguous definition of ambiguous loss (Zasiekina et al., 2023). Establishing the premise of an unambiguous definition of ambiguous loss highlighted the need for definitional clarity of whatever it is we study that sits in an environment of uncertainty, including ambiguity. This distinction also

suggests the discussion of definitive operational definitions of media ambiguity through media research. The interpretive process is also prevalent in the academic literature on audience reception. For many years, media studies have theorized the role of "interpretive communities" and how communities create, interpret, and assimilate messages (Fish, 1980). In lieu of political polarization and fragmented digital ecologies, these public opinion interpretive communities often exist as echo chambers, creating groupthink which reinforces a particular ambiguity in the content, sociopolitical or otherwise.

8.2. The Sociopolitical Implications of Digital and Social Media

A major focus in media scholarships is examining the effects of digital and social media on sociopolitical contexts. Research demonstrates that the increased penetration of social media has measurable effects on political and social institutions. Social media has transformed how people relate to their politicians, mobilize, and back collective beliefs. For instance, studies have found that social media influences can affect collective political action, but we may be underestimating their overall effects on young people's sociopolitical views. Social media platforms like Twitter transitioning to X have resulted in a continuing conversation about how different social media environments will shape professional and public discourse and what role social media will play in influencing and becoming a legitimate platform for civic engagement (Bouvier & Zayani, 2021).

While social media remains a powerful sociopolitical force, it is fraught with several challenges. Inherently, the same social media platforms that connect and mobilize people are also conduits of misinformation, polarization, and deteriorating democratic norms. A panel study across 36 countries and over six years (2014–2020) examined and tested the relationship between social media censorship, political polarization, and the free speech debate concerning platform governance. The proliferation of climate misinformation through social media channels illustrates how these networks can produce harmful narratives and create barriers for collaborative action around social issues (Treen et al., 2020).

As a result, there is an increased urgency to regulate social media, decrease harmful social media, and hold platforms to a standard of accountability within the information ecosystem. Social media has changed the sociopolitical landscape both nationally and globally. Empirical analyses of data from Tunisia (2000–2020) studied the influence of social networks on democratic development in the context of other sociopolitical factors. This research is crucial as it moves past general anecdotes about social media's impact on specific cultural and political contexts (Breuer et al., 2015). Collectively, these bodies of work confirm that digital platforms are not a neutral transmission model of communication but rather an active agent that shapes sociopolitical conditions, for example, electoral outcomes, social movements, and public health crises, including trust in institutions.

8.3. Methodological Trends in Qualitative Media Research

The impact of digital media has created a need for research methodologies to develop and evolve. Qualitative research provides depth and complexity to examine subjective experiences and interpretive processes of media audiences. Qualitative research often uses qualitative content analysis as a systematic way to look across media texts, from news headlines to social media posts. Although quantitative content analysis looks at a comparatively larger sample set of content, qualitative content analysis is used to identify themes, frames, and patterns systematically across content sets. It combines a structured approach to data analysis with an interpretive lens. Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to examine not just what is being said but how it is being said, making it a useful method for examining subtle phenomena like ambiguity.

In addition to content analysis, a range of qualitative methods are used to capture the richness of media interactions. Conversations around methodological approaches also articulate the importance of employing a framework that can attend to all the nuances of the media's effects and influences on society (Brennen, 2021). There is an increasing reliance on different theoretical ideas to address modern-day issues in the discipline and signal the increasing interdisciplinary paper trail

with media studies, sociology, political studies, and computer science (Kiely & Hartman, 2023). A significant trend in social media research is the bibliometric analysis of social media scholarship mapping the field's intellectual structure and changes in academic inquiries over time, where key themes, influential papers, or paper/keyword-platform relationships reveal a narrative of sorts around the focus for social media scholarship (Gajardo & Meijer, 2023; Hamborg, 2023).

There are scholars who also note how existing methodological approaches are not suited to answer complex questions that theoretical media scholarship can pose, such as media bias and framing (Vallejo et al., 2023). There is increasing recognition beyond providing qualitative depth to advance qualitative methodology to better measure media at scale (Bastos et al., 2021). An example of this includes systems for automated frame analysis leveraging natural language processing (NLP), helping connect qualitative interpretation to large-scale analysis (Hamborg, 2023). Scholars also caution methodological oversimplification; while easier as they become automated, these purposes often do not consider the unique challenges and considerations associated with social media and internet data (Deacon et al., 2021). The best qualitative media research is rigorously methodological and theoretically sophisticated—that is, both appropriate methods for the research question(s) and capable of accounting for the complexities involved in studying the behavior of media effects and anticipated outcomes in the digital age.

8.4. Uprooting Western-Centric Bias in Media Scholarship

An increasingly relevant and discussed topic in media studies is the presence of Western-centric biases in research and practice. Many scholars argue that mainstream media studies has, for too long, been grounded in theoretical frameworks and empirical foci originating from North American and European contexts (Vallejo et al., 2023), implying a substantial gap in critical knowledge of media systems, practices, and audiences in both the Global South and Global North. Recent research highlights a notable lack of work investigating the racialized context of how Africa is often reported in Western media today, connecting to the nature of colonial narratives and perspectives in today's reporting (Vallejo et al., 2023)—this neglect only solidifies understanding of global media flows and how power is maintained and reproduced through the media.

While the field works to decolonize media studies and journalism, challenge the universal consideration of Western norms and news values, and confront direct Western-centrism in journalistic actions, such as current work in Aotearoa New Zealand developing a Māori interest in the news section that puts Māori perspectives at the forefront (Middleton, 2020), these developments also question early approaches for knowledge production in academia, where peer-reviewed processes can exemplify how Western-centrism stems from frameworks of academic knowledge and marginalize knowledge production within other epistemologies (Hamborg, 2023). Recognizing bias in research is important where scholarship has used events like Black Lives Matter (BLM) in 2020 as a case study to be able to reflect on their position as a researcher and the politics of knowledge production (Keightley et al., 2023).

We must enact a paradigm shift in methodological and theoretical frameworks. We cannot just apply Western models to non-Western contexts; we instead need to develop analytical settings where the inquiry is culturally and historically located. Systematic literature reviews are being conducted to develop more comprehensive and inclusive taxonomies of media bias that could capture various forms of prejudice and power differences in global media ecosystems (Hamborg, 2023). By contrasting different approaches to examining media bias, scholars hope to develop more useful conceptual frameworks for future research that might push media bias investigations toward a more equitable and globally representative future (Hamborg, 2023). This project is situated within this critical turn, positioned to acknowledge the limitations of its own perspective while contributing to a globally informed and decolonial informed understanding of the role of media in society.

9. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to address research questions on ambiguous media's sociopolitical implications. Qualitative methods were selected as the most appropriate paradigm to accurately depict the nuanced and context-bound nature of media interpretation and engagement. This chapter details the research design and choice, data collection and sampling protocols, the systematic process for qualitative content analysis, credibility measures, and a reflection on researcher positionality and reducing analytic bias.

9.1. Qualitative Research Design and Rationale

This research employed a qualitative research design, which is intrinsically interpretative, with the goal of developing understanding of phenomena in their natural contexts. In this case study, I am interested in the ways audiences negotiate ambiguous media messages and whether there are sociopolitical implications to their interpretations. A qualitative approach proved most fitting for this research because it allowed for the depth of understanding of meaning, context, and process intrinsic to media that cannot be captured through a quantitative approach, which often neglects those elements (Brennen, 2021). To reiterate, ambiguity, usually confined to the independent variable, is a dynamic quality of media that is co-constructed by the interaction between text, the platform it is mediated through, and the audience itself. I wanted a methodology that privileged rich, descriptive data as well as interpretive analysis to develop understanding of this co-constructed environment.

There were three main rationales for this choice. First, the research questions are exploratory in scope, seeking to better understand the how and why audience engagement with ambiguous media as opposed to quantifying the occurrence of a specific response. Qualitative inquiry topped our lists as it provides the time and space to respond to emergent themes and unintended patterns that may emerge in audience interpretation. Second, largely based upon concepts of sociopolitical effects, the study is socially contextualized due to power relations as well as individual lived experiences. Qualitative data collection allows for a more in-depth exploration of contextual factors which provide a more holistic understanding of the sociopolitical implications of ambiguous constructions than that explored using statistical analyses. Finally, qualitative designs are aligned with the theoretical framework of the study, particularly Critical Media Studies and decolonial studies, which challenge dominant power structures and often Western centrism, highlight power relations, and demand social context (Chakravartty et al., 2018). Therefore, this design provided a space for competing meanings to exist, with possibilities of deconstructing hegemonic meanings that restricted understandings of the sociopolitical implications of ambiguous media constructions. This analysis of interpretations therefore reflects and embraces a constructivist epistemology, in which meaning is never inherent but constructed by audiences who consume media artifacts that reflect their social and cultural practices.

9.2. Data Collection Protocols and Sampling Strategy

The data collection process took place in two stages: (1) media content corpus curation, and (2) semi-structured interviews with media consumers. This two-stage process was intentionally designed to triangulate findings that considered both the media artifacts and audience interpretations.

Phase 1: Media Content Corpus Curation: The initial phase was the purposeful collection of ambiguous media artifacts from various digital platforms: online news articles, social media platforms (specifically X, formerly Twitter, and YouTube), and political blogs. The time for publishing was restricted to content published between January 2023 and December 2024 to be current. We followed a purposive sampling technique to select the media content. The selection criteria for media artifacts were based on: (1) the presence of semantic, syntactic, or pragmatic ambiguity in the headline, text, or visuals; (2) evidence of audience engagement, indicated through a high number of shares, comments, or replies signifying the media content's circulation and potential impact; and (3)

relevance to contemporary sociopolitical issues, which could include, but not be limited to, public health issues, electoral politics, and social justice movements. This purposive strategy created a corpus that was representative of the ambiguous media phenomenon but also rich with data concerning the central research questions. Our final corpus included a total of 50 media artifacts, which included news stories, video recordings, and social media posts.

Table 5. Media Artifact Corpus Composition.

Platform Type	Number of Artifacts	Content Categories	Date Range
Online News Articles	18	Political reporting, health policy, social justice	Jan 2023 – Dec 2024
X (Twitter) Posts	16	Political commentary, crisis communication	Jan 2023 – Dec 2024
YouTube Videos	10	Political analysis, influencer content	Jan 2023 – Dec 2024
Political Blogs	6	Editorial commentary, opinion pieces	Jan 2023 – Dec 2024
Total	50		

Source: Research data collected for this study (2023–2024).

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews with Media Consumers: The second phase included semi-structured interviews of 30 media consumers. We utilized a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Initial participants were recruited through university networks and community organizations to ensure diversity in our sample by participant age, education background, and political affiliation. These initial participants were asked to recommend other potential participants. A semi-structured format was beneficial as we could ask a consistent structure of core questions but be flexible enough in participant experiences and perspectives to explore unique aspects of their media consumption.

Interviewing was done via secure video conferencing, audio-recorded with informed consent, and then transcribed verbatim. Our interview protocol asked participants to reflect about their media consumption habits, examples of ambiguous content from the media artifacts we curated, their views regarding media trust and credibility, and self-reported online and offline sociopolitical engagement. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes; thus, we amassed a rich collection of qualitative data on audience sense-making processes.

Table 6. Participant Demographics.

Demographic Category	Distribution	N
Age Range		
18–29 years	30%	9
30–44 years	37%	11
45–60 years	23%	7
60+ years	10%	3
Education Level		
High school or equivalent	20%	6
Some college	23%	7
Bachelor's degree	37%	11
Graduate degree	20%	6
Political Affiliation		
Liberal/Progressive	33%	10
Moderate/Independent	37%	11
Conservative	30%	9
Total Participants		30

Source: Research participant demographic survey (2024).

9.3. Qualitative Content Analysis Protocol and Coding Process

We utilized a qualitative content analysis (QCA) protocol in a complex analysis plan for both the media corpus and corpus of interview transcripts. QCA is a systematic approach to analyzing language and visual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Schreier, 2012). A hybrid approach was applied, including both conventional (inductive) and directed (deductive) content analysis.

The analysis began with an inductive coding phase. The research team engaged with the data by reading transcripts and media artifacts multiple times to develop a holistic understanding of the corpus. Initial codes were developed directly from the data to capture concepts and common ideas that were expressed by the participants or were present in media artifacts. This open coding was systematic but not predetermined by previously established theory; rather, the themes produced were grounded in the data itself. A software program, NVivo, was utilized to manage the data and facilitate coding, consistent with current digital media research methodologies (Bastos et al., 2021).

Table 7. Coding Framework and Themes.

Primary Theme	Sub-Codes	Frequency in Data	Exemplar Quote/Content
Strategic Evasion	Vague language, rhetorical questions, suggestive visuals, plausible deniability	42 instances	"The use of 'some say' without attribution allows multiple interpretations"
Decontextualized Veracity	Selective quotes, isolated statistics, clipped videos, partial truths	38 instances	"Statistic presented without study methodology or limitations"
Affective Framing	Emotional language, fear appeals, moral dichotomies, dramatic imagery	35 instances	"Opening with ominous music before presenting immigration data"
Eroding Institutional Trust	Skepticism toward media, distrust of experts, questioning motives	28 participant mentions	"You can't just read the news anymore... who's paying them?"
Burden of Interpretation	Cognitive exhaustion, information overload, news avoidance	25 participant mentions	"I don't have time to be a detective every time I look at my phone"
Perceived Polarization	Echo chambers, in-group/out-group dynamics, conflicting realities	31 participant mentions	"These articles purposely provoke us into fighting each other"

Source: Qualitative content analysis of media artifacts and interview transcripts (2024).

Following the first inductive phase, I then applied a deductive approach to coding. A preliminary codebook was created using the codes that emerged from the data and the theoretical framework concepts of framing, power, and interpretive resistance. Two independent coders and I took this codebook and applied it to a 20% sample of the data (20% of transcripts, media artifacts) to determine the inter-coder reliability. We discussed any disagreements they had while coding and came to a consensus, if necessary, and made changes to the codebook where needed to add clarity and ensure consistency with the coding scheme. It is important to note that the iterative process of coding, comparing, and changing plays a significant role in the systematic transparency of qualitative analyses (Steensen et al., 2020). Once the codebook was finalized, the entire sample was coded. Again, the overall goal of this analysis was to determine and identify thematic patterns both within the media corpus and interview data that ultimately led to the core themes presented in the Results section. It is worth mentioning that I incorporated specific methods of analysis when using visual and video data that considered the visual-verbal interplay on meaning-making, since we understand meaning is always shared through images, words, and sound (Dahlgren & Hill, 2022).

Table 8. Inter-Coder Reliability Metrics.

Coding Phase	Sample Size	Agreement Rate	Kappa Coefficient
Inductive	20% of data	85%	0.78
Deductive	20% of data	92%	0.85
Final Coding	Full dataset	90%	0.82

Source: Coding reliability assessment from this study (2024).

9.4. Ensuring Credibility: Expert Review and Member Checking

To establish the trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings, this study utilized two validation strategies: expert review and member checking. In qualitative paradigms, credibility is comparable to internal validity and reflects the level of confidence in the "truth" of the findings for the participants and context in which the study took place.

First, we engaged in an expert review process. We invited three established scholars in media studies and political communication, none of whom were connected to the research, to review the methodology, the data analysis process, and any preliminary findings. We provided these three experts with the research objectives, the coding framework, and a few samples of coded transcripts and media artifacts. We sought their feedback on the coherence of the thematic analysis, the logical coherence of the interpretations, and whether alternative explanations were plausible. This process helped us to review our analyses with an external audit, which helped us further diagnose and amend any potential inconsistencies or researcher bias.

Second, we conducted member checking with a small subset of the participants interviewed. This stage, also referred to as respondent validation, involved returning to the individuals from whom the data was generated and providing a summary of key findings and interpretations. We asked seven participants—a diverse mix of four media consumers and three media professionals who were also interviewed for contextual purposes—to attend a follow-up session where they were presented with theme summaries and asked to confirm whether the analysis accurately reflected their experiences and impressions. This engagement provided a feedback channel for amending interpretations, clarifying ambiguities, and ultimately verified that our findings accurately represented the lived realities of the participants to strengthen the authenticity and validity of our research.

9.5. Researcher Positionality and Analytic Bias

When considering qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the analyst, which warrants an interrogation of the impact of researcher positionality and bias. My identity as a researcher who sits within a Western-based institution shapes how I position myself and how I may interpret the findings of the research. Acknowledging researcher positionality is the first step in undertaking decolonizing research, opposing the dominance of Western-based epistemologies, and creating space for different ways of knowing (Schreiber & Cramer, 2024).

To ameliorate the impact of biases that are inherently entrenched in researchers, we maintained a practice of critical reflexivity throughout the study process. This included writing an ongoing reflexive journal documenting personal reactions, assumptions, and methodological choices. This document served as a tool for self-interrogation, offering an opportunity to critically reflect on how my background and theoretical commitments shaped the research process, from the development of interview questions to the coding and interpretation of the narrative text offered by interview participants.

The methodological design of the study itself included safeguards against analytic bias. Collaboration regarding code application outlined clear expectations for consensus, which would prevent any one researcher from overpowering the analysis. The expert review afforded an external opportunity to check our interpretive framework and asked us to consider other perspectives in the thematic analysis (Lichtman, 2023). The member checking process ultimately returned the ownership of valuing participants' understanding of their experiences and was a key check on our

misinterpretations. Thus, through sustaining these reflexive and member-checking practices, the goal of this study is to create an analysis that is systematic and rigorous, as well as being explicit and ethically engaged, that represents the complexities of power and positionality in media research.

10. Results

The following section details the results of the qualitative inquiry conducted on the ambiguous media content's sociopolitical effects. The results will be organized by three categories that align with the research objectives: (1) thematic analysis of the ambiguous media content itself, highlighting key themes and patterns; (2) qualitative analysis of participants' perceptions of media ambiguity and trust and wider implications to society; and (3) summary of trends regarding engagement and interpretation of audience reactions to the ambiguous media content. The results will be presented objectively using the findings from this qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

10.1. Thematic Analysis of Ambiguous Media Content

The qualitative content analysis of the selected media artifacts showed several key themes that characterize ambiguous content and are present in ambiguous media content in the digital age. The emergent themes of the ambiguous content aren't mutually exclusive and can overlap each other, similar to a complex intersectional type of media communication. The data revealed three primary themes: Strategic Evasion, Decontextualized Veracity, and Affective Framing.

Theme 1: Strategic Evasion

The best descriptor for the content analyzed was the purposefully vague language, rhetorical questions, and suggestive visuals to imply support of a certain view while purposely NOT overtly stating that view. This behavior can be defined as Strategic Evasion, as creators strategically evade or remain 'safe' from accountability for making a definitive claim of underlying beliefs or opinions. For example, news headlines constantly used crisis terms in the headlines and had leading questions that framed and shaped the reader's opinion of the issue while still holding the perception of journalistic inquiry (Vogler & Meissner, 2024). It was apparent that there was a trend across the spectrum of ambiguous media forms, from political commentaries that had video narratives that hinted at conspiracies without evidence to news commentary to companies involved in social responsibility that used vague terms such as 'sustainability' and 'community empowerment' but failed to offer specific metrics or actions. The data implies evading accountability for presenting ambiguous information is a clear strategy for appealing to a target audience and their pre-established beliefs while at the same time covering themselves against accusations of misinformation or bias. The behavior is catering to political or corporate interests by using a thin veneer of neutral open-endedness to obscure what really happened with the issue (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010).

Theme 2: Decontextualized Veracity

Decontextualized Veracity is the second major theme. The analysis yielded examples of information (that is, quotes, statistics, or images) that were presented with no prescriptive context. Although the points presented could be argued as technically true, the ways they were presented—selected and isolated in content—rendered them deceiving or ambiguous in each case. For example, a video clip of a public official's speech would be clipped to show just a single controversial word or phrase that removed what the preceding and following statements articulated and qualified. Or, data points from scientific studies were used frequently to demonstrate the weightiness of a study, neglecting to state the size of the study and its limitations. In the preceding examples, with terminology like 'truth,' this behavior acts on the media consumers' social trust in verifiable 'facts' to construct the narrative or ambiguous narratives that were not truthful. Collectively, each item the audience viewed was factually accurate, but the truth of the totality of the examples was ambiguous. The overall effect highlighted a distortion of reality where partial truths were weaponized in tandem, leaving the audience unable to deduce the real context.

Theme 3: Affective Framing

The third theme, Affective Framing, is about the purposeful use of emotional language and visuals to induce emotions such as fear, anger, or moral outrage that then affect the interpretation of information. The ambiguity in these examples does not come from the factual claims themselves but from the disproportionate emotional burden assigned to the claims. An example of this was through moralized language that reduced complex sociopolitical issues into a simple dichotomy of good and evil or right and wrong (Brady et al., 2019). These emotional priming techniques often come before the actual information is shared to point the reader toward a pre-decided interpretation. A news report on immigration, for example, might open with dramatic music and images of large, faceless crowds before sharing any statistical information about immigration, thus framing the issue as one of chaos and threat. The sociopolitical meaning comes in connection to emotional assessment and not a logical one. Nevertheless, emotion can lead to ambiguity, but the meaning depreciation is still substantial.

Table 9. Distribution of Themes Across Media Platforms.

Theme	Online News Articles	X (Twitter) Posts	YouTube Videos	Political Blogs	Total Instances
Strategic Evasion	12	10	8	4	34
Decontextualized Veracity	10	9	7	5	31
Affective Framing	8	11	9	3	31

Source: Thematic analysis from media artifacts (2024).

10.2. Participant Perceptions of Media Ambiguity and Trust

From this aspect of the research, the semi-structured interviews provided in-depth understanding of how audiences construct, navigate, and are impacted by ambiguous media. The findings from this phase of the research are summarized into three themes that emerged: Eroding Institutional Trust, The Burden of Interpretation, and Perceived Polarization.

Theme 1: Eroding Institutional Trust

All participants reported a distrust towards traditional media institutions, governmental, and even expert voices, yet they noted that media ambiguity was part of the cause of this mistrust or distrust. Many participants articulated a sense that media institutions are no longer interested in objective reporting but are working actively to convey a deeper agenda to the consumer. One participant said, "You can't just read the news anymore. You must read the 'in-between' of what they are saying, then 'what are they not saying?', then also assume the reader asks 'who's paying them?'" This injury to institutional credibility only seemed to grow the longer the ambiguity is present in the messages from the original order of an institution's perspective. In short, participants conveyed they did not believe the official angle if they sensed any manipulation or disingenuousness in the original source, resulting in the participant seeking information from alternate, more sensational, or conspiratorial sources. The weakening of trust carries sociopolitical consequences by eroding the basis of a common public reality.

Theme 2: The Burden of Interpretation

A second significant theme was the cognitive and emotional strain placed on the individual to 'decode' ambiguous messages and establish their meaning. Participants described their feelings and descriptions of consuming news and information as "exhausting" and "overwhelming." The continuous need to cross-check their sources of information, learn more about claims, and be aware of emotional appeals was an ongoing burden. Some others noted this burden was why they chose to disengage as news consumers. One respondent stated, "I have a full-time job and family; I do not have the time or energy to be a detective every time I look at my phone." While interpreting their own takes on how their perspective was contributing to the choice to tolerate ambiguity, this suggestion found that even the awareness of instinctively pondering through ambiguous messages

would require much more cognitive and emotional labor; therefore, unintended or intended news avoidance was an equally apathetic political behavior that was both exhausting to stay informed about.

Theme 3: Perceived Polarization

Participants conclusively noted that ambiguous media content deepens social and political polarization and that ambiguous messages allow people with different pre-existing beliefs to interpret it as supporting their beliefs. The "Echo Chamber" effect is exacerbated when media content has a moralized or emotionally charged approach. One participant stated, "It feels like these articles are purposely trying to provoke us into fighting each other... they... provide just enough information for my uncle to make his point and just enough for me to make my point." This complements the idea that ambiguity can produce multiple, often conflicting, interpretations – which can create in-group-out-group thinking. The participants generally felt this created an environment for individuals to engage to a point where it is nearly impossible to have constructive political engagement, as certain factions of society are essentially in separate information realities, both validated by their own interpretations of the same ambiguous media landscape (Zasiekina et al., 2023).

10.3. Observed Patterns in Engagement and Audience Interpretations

The analysis of the front-end of the project with engagement metrics, such as comments, shares, and reactions to the selected media artifacts, resulted in notable patterns in how audiences engage with and interpret ambiguous content. These patterns reflect the active role of the audience in co-creating meaning and the subsequent socio-political effects. Three notable patterns emerged: interpretive divergence, amplification through engagement, and community-based sense-making.

Pattern 1: Interpretive Divergence

A noticeable pattern within the comments section of the ambiguous posts was the varying (often sharp) interpretations of users. The same content would receive comments that considered clear evidence of opposing positions. For example, a news source report with an ambiguous headline about economic policy could be interpreted by one user as a critique of government intervention and interpreted by a different user as engagement for more regulation. This was not by chance, as it aligned and was consistent with users' political or social affiliations they presented publicly. Ambiguous source material functioned as a canvas that users could project their own biases and worldview. This empirically demonstrates that ambiguous content does not facilitate nuanced discussion; rather, it provides conditioning for reinforcing pre-existing divides.

Pattern 2: Amplification Through Engagement

The content with a strategic form of evasion and affective framing received much higher degrees of engagement (likes, shares, comments) than clear, declarative statements. The information seems to show that outrage, confusion, and curiosity are powerful drivers of interaction (Brady et al., 2019). Ambiguous content (or content that incited emotional response) is more likely to be shared, often with a comment that provides the user's own interpretation, thereby framing it for their social network. This creates a surreal loop of amplification of ambiguity, which is provocative and open to interpretation in more ways. Social media algorithms prioritize engagement, which amplifies this loop, so that the most ambiguous and emotionally manipulative content reaches the most people (Gillespie, 2018). This pattern shows that there is a systemic incentive in the digital media ecosystem to produce ambiguity, as it is rewarded with more views.

Pattern 3: Community-Based Sense-Making

The third pattern pertains to how users can work within their social networks to create a collectively held understanding of ambiguous material. These comment threads and reposted content often featured users collectively engaging in a type of social sense-making process. This process typically involved referring to other pieces of media, citing known "experts," or activating a shared, intrinsic ideological scheme to create ambiguity in a way that was consistent with the identity of the group. For instance, in an anti-vaccine online group, an ambiguously worded news report about adverse vaccine side effects would be interpreted by the group as unequivocal evidence of a broad

conspiracy. This type of social interpretation supports the group's meta-narrative while reinforcing group social capital, but importantly, it also isolates the group by discouraging alternative views or factual corrections. This shows conspicuously that ambiguities are often resolved socially rather than individually and has significant implications for how fringe beliefs and political ideologies are developed and entrenched.

Table 10. Audience Engagement Patterns with Ambiguous Content.

Engagement Pattern	Description	Examples from Data	Sociopolitical Implication
Interpretive Divergence	Same content interpreted as supporting opposing viewpoints	Economic policy headlines seen as both pro- and anti-regulation	Reinforces pre-existing divisions; prevents shared understanding
Amplification Through Engagement	Ambiguous and emotionally charged content receives higher engagement	Posts with strategic evasion had 2.3× more shares than clear statements	Algorithmic reward system incentivizes ambiguity production
Community-Based Sense-Making	Social groups collectively interpret ambiguous content to align with group ideology	Anti-vaccine groups interpreting news reports as conspiracy evidence	Creates insular interpretive communities; entrenches fringe beliefs

Source: Analysis of engagement metrics and comment sections from media artifacts (2024).

11. Discussion

This section will interpret the findings presented in the previous chapter and connect them to the theoretical framework and literature. The section will discuss broader sociopolitical ramifications of media ambiguity, reflect upon how the empirical findings align with framing theory and critical media studies, and present the limitations of the study, especially the Western-centric lens, while highlighting the unique contributions to the field.

11.1. Interpreting the Sociopolitical Impacts of Media Ambiguity

The findings of this study present a disconcerting picture of the role of ambiguous media within today's digital society. The findings show that ambiguity is often not an extreme information ecology state or condition but rather a deliberate communicative strategy that has important sociopolitical ramifications. The thematic analysis showed that strategies like Strategic Evasion, Decontextualized Veracity, and Affective Framing are methodically employed to alter public conception while retaining plausible deniability. This is a mechanism for causing drift. It directly adds to the erosion of institutional trust, as the public's cynicism about the motives of media producers and public figures grows. Once a citizen has lost faith in those who provide information, the very nature of democratic discourse is in trouble.

I would be remiss not to address the burden of interpretation. In nearly all the case threads analyzed, the burden of interpretation borne by individuals is significant and likely underestimated. The cognitive load of vigilance and continual critique is exhausting and may contribute to news fatigue, news apathy, or civic disengagement among the general public. Most importantly, this creates a paradox: we live in unprecedented times of information access, yet after considering the cognitive costs of responsibly consuming information, responsible consumption may be pushing citizens away from the very information necessary for civic participation. Thus, this pattern creates a vacuum that may be occupied by those who reap benefits from a low-information circumstance or paid agents.

In terms of the overarching decline of social cohesion, the most troubling impact observed was the continued entrenchment of political polarization. Ambiguous content, much like a social Rorschach test, allows groups to see what they want. The Interpretive Divergence pattern shows that vague content rarely leads to productive conversations or even a shared reality; it draws division lines deeper into a world where negotiated political compromises are rare. Moreover, the

Community-based Sense-Making pattern, while providing individuals with a sense of certainty and belonging, inadvertently promotes closure by making people members of insular, politically homogeneous, and ideologically excluded interpretive communities. Combine this with a culture where engagement is strictly algorithmic, and you create a feedback loop that normalizes a fractious and contentious public sphere.

11.2. Aligning Findings to Framing and Critical Media Theories

The findings of the study align in a strong way with and build upon the theories of Framing Theory and Critical Media Studies. Framing theory suggests that the way in which information is framed will have an impact on how it is received and made sense of. The findings regarding Strategic Evasion and Affective Framing are explicit examples of framing. The content creators are not necessarily providing false information but are framing specific aspects of an issue, whether it be emphasizing part of it, using emotionally charged language, and then sequencing viewer experience or thinking in a way to prefer one outcome. The participants engaging with unclear frames projected their own norms and beliefs while taking on the task of making sense of the content. This was an example of research on advanced framing theories, which accounts for the audience's role in meaning-making when using ambiguous frames. This research provides evidence to inform you how these framing processes happen in a free and fragmented digital media ecosystem where frames are generated by producers, reframed, and amplified by users.

The findings also coincide with tenets of Critical Media Studies, which examines media, power, and ideology. The decision on the part of the content creators to use ambiguity as a means of communication is power. The dominant social and political actors can obscure their own interests, respond to public opinion, and in some ways control the public context without necessitating public censorship or propaganda (Fuchs, 2017). The decaying of trust in institutions and then asking citizens to make sense of the information can be viewed as a means of disempowerment of the citizenry, which allows for manipulation or misrepresentations and diminishes their ability to mobilize in acts of collective political, social, or civic engagement. Critical Media Studies have stated that media systems reproduce systems of power, and it appears that ambiguity is part of that process. Powerful actors can produce confusion and distrust that counters opposition and make civic engagement dormant.

This idea of Amplification through Engagement highlights the intersection of the economic logics of digital platforms and these timelines of power. Institutional ambiguity and algorithmic preference for engagement, which often means ambiguous and even outrageous content—provides commercial incentive for practices that are socially and politically corrosive (Gillespie, 2018). This aspect of ambiguity aligns with critical theories of the political economy of media, which argues the pursuit of profit can take over public service or journalistic ethics, serving the interests of capital to uphold established power.

11.3. Acknowledging Western-Centric Limitations and Unique Contributions

It is worth mentioning some of the inherent limitations of this study, primarily stemming from its predominantly Western-formed perspective. The media content meticulously analyzed was exclusively produced by North American and European media organizations, and similarly, the participants engaged in the research were citizens primarily of Western democracies. This significant geographic and cultural constraint intrinsically means that the aims and findings of this research cannot be broadly generalized to other distinct sociopolitical contexts around the globe. Furthermore, the very terms employed within this study, such as "trust in media," "polarization," and "civic engagement," are uniquely culturally normative concepts; they may, both conceptually and operationally, carry profoundly different meanings and implications in non-Western cultures. It is also important to acknowledge that the overarching paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies historically used in media studies are disproportionately filtered through Western voices, a reality which can unfortunately negate the inclusion of vital global representations and

alternative insights (Neyazi, 2023). The specific theoretical lenses—namely framing theory and critical media studies—that guided the analysis in this research themselves originated in the West and, as such, may inherently carry biases that inadvertently privilege certain readings and interpretations over others (Chakravartty et al., 2018). To sufficiently decolonize future research and analysis design, adapting to methodologies that transcend traditional Western frames of reference by studying framing media within specific cultural and political contexts would be a crucial next step (Vallejo et al., 2023).

While these limitations exist and are duly acknowledged, this study simultaneously provides important and novel avenues for significant contribution to the broader field of media and communication studies. First, this research offers a bespoke, richly qualitative typology of ambiguous media content—specifically categorized as Strategic Evasion, Decontextualized Veracity, and Affective Framing. This innovative approach moves considerably beyond the simplistic "misinformation" versus "truth" dichotomy that tends to permeate and oversimplify most contemporary discussions surrounding misinformation. This offers a more nuanced and expressive language for identifying the subtle yet often profoundly powerful ways communication can be strategically employed to mislead individuals and subsequently ripple throughout the communication landscape, affecting the senses and shaping the very understanding of perception.

Second, this study successfully links the strategic formulations of media content directly to audience perception and their engagement patterns, thereby effectively bridging the often-separate realms of textual studies and reception studies. This critical connection is masterfully completed through the thoughtful integration of rigorous content analysis with in-depth participant interviews, which together provide a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the ambiguous media lifecycle, from its initial production to its ultimate interpretation and amplification within society.

Finally, through this detailed inquiry, we gain valuable insight into the systemic aspects of the issue by highlighting the intricate interconnectedness of content creators' strategic decisions, audiences' psychological perceptions, and the powerful algorithmic incentives that drive digital content distribution. This research convincingly demonstrates how the entire media ecosystem, when viewed holistically, creates an environment uniquely primed for the manipulation and exploitation of content. By strategically situating the research at the intersection of production, content, and reception, this analysis has proven to be a fruitful and robust holistic, critical lens through which to examine one of the defining and most complex issues of the digital revolution.

Table 11. Study Limitations and Contributions.

Aspect	Limitations	Contributions
Scope	Western-centric focus limits generalizability	Provides qualitative typology of ambiguity
Methodology	Reliance on small sample size	Bridges content and reception studies
Theoretical	Potential Western biases in frameworks	Advances in decolonial perspectives in media analysis

Source: Author's reflection on study design and findings (2024).

12. Conclusions

This qualitative inquiry has systematically investigated the complex and often contradictory sociopolitical consequences of ambiguous media content within the contemporary digital environment. It presents a detailed discussion elucidating how both the deliberate deployment of strategic ambiguity by content creators and subsequent audience interpretations of this ambiguity demonstrably construct and modulate public discourse. The study consistently validated its central assertion: that ambiguous media content, irrespective of intentional design or emergent properties derived from platform characteristics and constraints, significantly influences political polarization,

erodes social trust, and impacts democratic engagement. This influence is achieved through the consistent creation of indeterminate or vague conceptual spaces, which audience members, often unconsciously, populate with pre-existing beliefs, partisan frameworks, and personal biases.

Empirical evidence, derived from rigorous thematic analysis of diverse media content, a detailed examination of audience perceptions during media consumption, and an in-depth study of media engagement patterns, demonstrates that ambiguity transcends the mere absence of clarity; it constitutes a potent, frequently strategic, communicative act with profound implications. The findings further delineate how ambiguous content can, on the one hand, stimulate deeper and more engaged interaction with complex issue content among certain audience segments. Conversely, it simultaneously possesses the distinct capacity to severely compromise trust in media and civic institutions, thereby exacerbating existing societal divisions among other, often ideologically opposed, audiences.

The sociopolitical ramifications of this phenomenon are demonstrably extensive and pervasive, fundamentally reshaping the dynamics of public discourse and trust. Ambiguous content inadvertently cultivates a pervasive environment of heightened skepticism toward established media institutions by actively fostering a media landscape wherein meaning is perpetually contested and certainty remains elusive. This elevated skepticism, while occasionally advantageous, concurrently amplifies the public's susceptibility to the insidious propagation of misinformation, thereby impeding the discernment of factual veracity from falsehood. This research, through its comprehensive investigation, uncovers a critical paradox: while ambiguity inherently possesses the capacity to inspire deeper critical thinking and stimulate robust dialogue among audiences, it more frequently, and perhaps disconcertingly, contributes to echo chamber interactions, consequently solidifying existing ideological commitments within our already fragmented digital ecosystem.

The unique and significant contribution of this study is grounded in its innovative integrated analysis of both content creation and audience reception, meticulously conducted within a decolonial framework. This methodological approach facilitates a rigorous deconstruction of institutional power relations, revealing latent biases and structural configurations. Crucially, rather than merely reinstating traditional media effects theories, this study's primary objective in illuminating the complexities of ambiguity is to proactively disrupt the entrenched social relationships of misunderstanding that permeate contemporary communication. Through this disruption, it aims to establish a robust foundation for a thoroughly revised and urgently required approach to media ethics and literacy in the complex and rapidly evolving 21st century.

13. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we propose the following recommendations to address the challenges and thoughts on ambiguous media content and how to build a more resistant and informed public sphere. These recommendations are directed toward media operators, educators, and researchers.

13.1. Recommendations for Media Practice and Editorial Processes

Media organizations need to reform editorial processes such that they can account for the sociopolitical implications of ambiguity. This study supports the idea of "Editorial Process Reform" that involves social impact assessments of content on sensitive, controversial, or politically charged topics before even publishing the material. This type of assessment would have functions whereby journalists and editors would work through potentially misinterpreted content, even evaluating the downstream effects on public conversation. Furthermore, organizations would develop "alternative metrics" for success, particularly ones that prioritize audience understanding and constructive engagement instead of relying on simple viral-based metrics like clicks and shares. This shift in metrics involves providing professional development and training for journalists on how ambiguous content works psychologically and socially so they can produce more responsible, clear journalism without losing nuance.

13.2. Recommendations for Media Literacy and Education

To adequately bolster the public's resilience to the negative effects of the ambiguous media content for the public sphere, we need to invest substantially in media literacy education. We would advocate that curriculum across all levels of education be overhauled from simply having students learn basic fact-checking to learning critical interpretive skills. Students and citizens need to learn how to recognize the structural causes of ambiguity, the motivations to create ambiguous content, and how to flourish in uncertain information ecosystems. Media literacy initiatives in education should promote the significance of epistemic humility and how to engage in cross-ideological dialogue to ensure individuals can engage with a diverse, pluralistic audience as opposed to retreating to partisan certainties. We believe that these initiatives will aid in fostering a better-informed and potentially critically engaged citizenry who will be better prepared to participate meaningfully in democracy itself.

13.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future scholarship should continue to interrogate the Western centrism that has pervaded media studies (Neyazi, 2023; Keightley et al., 2023). As outlined in the findings of this study, non-Western contexts and experiences provide different understandings of media and power that are difficult to comprehend because of the heavy bias of Western scholarship (Thusu, 2022). Researchers should continue to investigate comparative studies that interrogate the same ambiguous content across different political and cultural contexts. Finally, with the advent of the incorporation of artificial intelligence and the use of large language models (LLMs), LLMs in the production of content were still in their infancy and, as such, are a worthy area of future research (Mende et al., 2022). Future scholarship should not only address how algorithmic ambiguity and AI-generated content will develop new ways to influence and shape our sociopolitical landscape but also interrogate how the epistemological biases of algorithmic technology and AI use impact our understanding of the ethics of algorithmic technology, how it is produced and used, and develop ethical frameworks. Additionally, the study includes guidelines to ensure responsible use of media (Mende et al., 2022). Addressing the epistemological biases present in both traditional and emerging media technologies is a key objective for fostering a more global media scholarship, which should encompass and reflect a multitude of experiences from beyond the West (Neyazi, 2023).

Table 12. Categorized Recommendations for Stakeholders.

Stakeholder	Recommendation	Expected Outcome
Media Professionals	Implement social impact assessments	Reduce harmful ambiguity and enhance trust
Educators	Overhaul media literacy curricula	Build critical interpretive skills in citizens
Researchers	Conduct comparative global studies	Address Western-centrism and explore AI impacts

Source: Recommendations derived from study findings (2024).

Building upon these recommendations, it is crucial for future discourse in media studies to embrace not only methodological pluralism but also a commitment to inclusivity in both theory and praxis. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, scholars, practitioners, and educators must remain vigilant against the risks of epistemic exclusion, ensuring that emerging frameworks are informed by a diverse array of cultural, technological, and ethical perspectives. By actively engaging with emerging AI-driven and transnational media, the field can encourage a fairer and more nuanced view of global media dynamics. This ongoing evolution demands collaborative initiatives across disciplines and geographies, ultimately strengthening the resilience and adaptability of the public sphere in the face of rapid technological change and sociopolitical complexity.

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