



Research Article

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Beyond the Magic Bullet: Exploring an Alternative Theoretical Model in the African Context

Daniel Nkrumah

Department of Language and Communication Sciences, Faculty of Social Science Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

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ABSTRACT

The Magic Bullet Theory is a widely discounted media effects theory. Many communication scholars find the Two-Step Flow Theory a more credible model for explaining how mass media audiences receive and interpret media messages. This study uses real-life cases in Africa to evaluate the relevance of both theories within the African media landscape. Five cases are analyzed to explore the effects of traditional and new media messages on media consumers. The role of the opinion leader is examined in all cases, with particular focus on their influence relative to that of the mass media. The study confirms the relevance of both theories but argues that the Two-Step Flow is not a direct replacement for the Magic Bullet Theory. It proposes a conceptual model that brings new perspectives that enhances our understanding of how media disseminates information to the average media consumer. The model shows that when the mass media promotes a single dominant message, its effect is strong, and the influence of opinion leaders is significantly reduced. Conversely, when two or multiple dominant messages are present — such as during elections — media audiences face dilemmas, and the role of opinion leaders becomes more significant. The paper argues that the foundations of the two theories are quite disparate and make it implausible to assume that the Two-Step Flow theory was a direct replacement for the Magic Bullet Theory; The Two-Step Flow was a product of a study on how voters made electoral decisions during elections of parties making contending claims, while the Magic Bullet Theory examined the effect of propaganda messages on audiences with very limited exposure to alternative views. The paper concludes that in the African context, especially within pluralistic and digital media environments, there is renewed interest in the Magic Bullet Theory. It proposes the Media Stream Model as a bridge between the Magic Bullet and the Two-Step Flow theories.

INTRODUCTION

The effects of the media are a well-studied area, but social and cultural evolution present challenges to understanding and appropriately conceptualizing media effects in different societies. Social, technological, and cultural contexts may influence media effects, producing some differences.

The onset of media dominance in the Era of Enlightenment, following the printing of newspapers, marked an intensification of propaganda. World Wars I and II saw the use of propaganda at a scale unseen in

combative warfare geared towards influencing public opinion (Guise, 2025; Demm, 1993; Demm and Sterling (n.d.); National World War II Museum, 2020).

The seminal work of Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, expresses in an established sense the media's ability to build images in the minds of media consumers (Lippmann, 1923).

Marshall McLuhan also holds special place in media scholarship as his well-studied theory on the effects of the media technology on societal change is considered one of the hallmarks of the scholarship on

*Corresponding Author: Daniel Nkrumah

Address: Department of Language and Communication Sciences, Faculty of Social Science Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

Email ✉: nkrumahdan@gmail.com

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communication theories (McLuhan, 1964); that technology is a mover of societal change is not hard to discern but his cryptic discernment of the relationship between the technological attributes of the medium and the message characteristics belied new perspectives in understanding how technological attributes of the media defined the message and ultimately its receptiveness. Thus, when the Johannes Gutenberg introduced the Gutenberg Press, it was a technological masterpiece in the 15th Century, and brought revolutionary changes not only in the media but also in society (Lehmann-Haupt, 2023); for instance, in the propagation of religious opinions through the printing of Bible and religious pamphlets the Catholic Church faced a revolt, a protestant move was birthed, and religion began to impact socio-cultural life in new ways (Holborn, 1942).

The dominant influence of the media in the public sphere right from the invention of the Gutenberg Press presented an almost sacrosanct view of the media; the technological and industrial attributes of the media coupled with the propaganda strategies of journalists and communication strategists produced powerful effects that turned the minds of media consumers to fit the frames established by the media. Thus, when Lippmann described a media that created images in the minds of the people, he perhaps had obliquely pictured such a framing theory; for pictures are idolized and memorialised in frames (Goffmann, 1974; Fairhurst, 1996; Scheufele, 1999).

Despite extensive and substantial research into the effects of the media, scholars such as Perse and Lambe believe that the question of whether direct media effects on media consumers are strong and substantial remains largely unsettled (Perse and Lambe, 2017). Indeed, media effects scholarship is sometimes trapped in a complex matrix that makes a concise understanding of the dynamic relationship between media activity and audience engagement, receptivity, and susceptibility quite challenging.

One of the foundational theories that provided an understanding of mass media effects on audiences was the Magic Bullet Theory. Considered a largely discounted theory today, the Magic Bullet theory assumed a powerfully penetrative media that instantly changed a passive audience's beliefs and perceptions (McQuail, 2005).

Clearly, mass media effects on audiences are not easily defined, particularly in a complex arena of media effects scholarship that creates contention among various mass media theories in the bid to get a universal proposition that defines most mass media effects, if not all. There is not so much compromise in terms of the theoretical dispositions, and there sometimes appears to be the belief that a single proposition should define all mass media effects. That perhaps reflects the discerned uncertainty that has characterized media effects scholarship. But should all media effects proceed with a single philosophical

orientation? Should we necessarily discount a theory deemed insufficient to explain newly observed trends in the media effects? Do all mass media effects proceed similarly? These are some of the questions that guide this theoretical exploration of mass media effects within the context of the Magic Bullet Theory, Two-Step Flow Theory, and the proposed Media Stream Model.

Although not generally considered relevant today, this paper still attempts to explore through a qualitative approach, the relevance of the Magic Bullet Theory in contemporary African societies with the emergence of plural media and new media technologies. It also explores a contending theoretical model, the Two-Step Flow Theory, and attempts to explain why the Two-Step Flow Theory may have been ill-conceived as an alternative model to the Magic Bullet Theory.

Several studies have attempted to affirm the perceived certainty of the Two-Step Flow Theory and the ambiguity surrounding the Magic Bullet Theory, but there seems to be very little research that attempts to study the real interplay between the two theories in a digital age and within the context of a highly sprightly media audience sensitive to cultural nuances that are often harped on by the media as occurs in traditional African societies.

RESEARCH GAP

This study does not attempt to discredit the theoretical relevance of these two theories. However, there is a qualitative attempt to examine their conceptual reality. The Two-Step Theory was hailed as a direct replacement of the Magic Bullet Theory. It argues that mass media messages are not directly received and assimilated by the generality of the consuming public, as proposed by the Magic Bullet Theory. Rather, it proposes that opinion leaders first receive the information and subsequently interpret it to others under their direct influence.

The two theories were established on two completely disparate foundations. The Magic Bullet Theory was a product of media messages that presented a single narrative, with no contending or counteracting messages. In the case of Nazi Propaganda, extreme censorship in Germany meant that no other media outlets were free to publish the other side of the story. The effect of the media was therefore viewed within the context of a stream of messages that provide a single dominant narrative.

Similarly, the Payne Fund Studies examined the impact of motion pictures on Children. Definitely, with limited cognitive appreciation and understanding of reality, the consistent flow of a particular narrative in movies with no counteracting or contending narratives was bound to generate powerful effects on media consumers, more so, children.

Over the years, studies on the relevance of these two theories have failed to consider whether the Opinion Leader in the Two-Step Theory can operate effectively in an

environment where the audience is served with messages that overwhelmingly present a single dominant narrative, as was the case in Nazi propaganda. This study seeks to address this gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The Magic Bullet Theory

The Magic Bullet theory or the Hypodermic Needle Theory, proposes a direct and immediate effect of the media on media consumers or target audiences. It ascribes to the media powerful effects and considers media audiences as susceptible to the perceived power of the media (University of Twente, 2025).

The theory describes the mass media as capable of influencing their target by shooting at, or injecting them with messages of particular orientations or attributes to elicit a desired outcome. Early proponents of the theory cited the 'War of the Worlds' broadcast in 1938 as confirmation of the Magic Bullet Theory (Schwartz, 2025).

While many scholars maintain that the theory has lost its relevance, some contemporary scholars on the New Media effect on media consumers believe that there is a re-emergence of the Magic Bullet Theory (Endong and Eumole, 2023; Okon and Ekpang, 2021; Ahmad et al, 2023).

Kneer, Jacobs & Żerebecki (2024) question the belief that the media has a powerful effect on its targets, arguing that media effects should be situated within the context of selective exposure and audience participation. The note that in responding to the question as to whether media researchers really discerned a magic bullet effect could be addressed by first examining whether the media was truly, as proposed by the theory, as powerful and effective, and whether media effect researchers ever propose a theory that ascribes so much power to the media, questions in their opinion should be answered in the negative.

The theory is traced to Nazi Propaganda during World War II and was also accentuated by the effect of Hollywood motion pictures on children (Lowery, 1995). The foundation of the theory is that human nature is susceptible to media influence, and audiences fail to critically interrogate media messages. While the theory does not exactly explore the detailed psychological orientations of audiences, it simply describes audiences as passive rather than active in their engagement with the media (Croteau and Hoynes, 1997).

Two-Step Flow Theory

The relevance of the Magic Bullet theory was questioned by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1944) in their well-known People's Choice Study, which examined how voters made decisions during US

presidential elections (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944).

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) noted that voters' electoral decisions resulted from powerful, direct media messages but were shaped by the mediating influence of opinion leaders.

They described the effect of the media on the ordinary voters as occurring in two stages; the first stage is the reception and interpretation of the media messages by opinion leaders who are considered to be more media literate with the ability to make media messages more intelligible to the less literate, and the second stage is the interpretation and transfer of the message to the ordinary people or the masses (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944).

In comparison while both theories provide a conceptual framework for explaining the effects of the mass media on their target audience, they do so from different perspectives: The Magic Bullet Theory perceives media effects as direct and powerful while the Two-Step Theory explains that mass media messages go through stages of dissemination; the first being to the Opinion Leader, who then relays the message to the ordinary person (Schwarz, 2025; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944).

Relevant Studies

In a study on the impact of propaganda in the 2019 Nigerian elections, Endong and Eumole argued that the social media propaganda activities provided ample evidence that the theory remained relevant in describing media effects (Endong and Eumole, 2023). Similarly, Okon and Ekpang focused on the 2019 Nigerian election, using both quantitative survey methods and qualitative data analysis (Okon and Ekpang, 2021). In their study, which involved 1265 respondents, Okon Ekpang (2021) noted that 1103 respondents (87.2 percent) said social media was the major source of rumours about candidates in the 2019 Nigerian election with just 106 respondents (8.4 percent) naming friends and acquaintances as sources.

Nwabueze and Okonkwo noted that the Magic Bullet theory was still relevant in explaining media effects in Nigeria. Citing the Monkey Pox vaccine fake reports and Salt Water Drink fake remedy for Ebola viral reports, they described what they called a 'zombie effect' of social media on media consumers in Nigeria (Nwabueze and Okonkwo, 2018). They argue that evidence on social media suggests that news is no longer conceptualized as a substance in a hypodermic needle injected into media consumers; rather, users are more actively engaged in generating and sharing news.

In a study in Jordan, Ahmad et al (2023) noted that the Magic Bullet was still relevant in explaining the behavior of Jordanians relative to the pandemic, and the influence was directed by both new media and traditional media, although new media had greater influence.

Duyile, Royinade and Fasehun (2025) in a study on the impact of the Magic Bullet Theory also established that there is some evidence that suggests that the Magic Theory may not be a lame theory as has been suggested. Their study interviewed and observed 110 respondents, which included media scholars, journalists and member of the general public.

Results show that 80 out of 110 respondents (72.7%) agreed media possess enormous influence on their behaviours and decision-making. The remaining thirty respondents (27.3%) agreed media messages held no such enormous influence on their behaviours and responses to societal issues, except during election campaign periods when media portray political candidates. (Duyile, Royinade and Fasehun, 2025, p.710).

The relevance of the theory within the context of the Monkeypox Killer Vaccine incident in Nigeria was also emphasized by Olatunde (2025) who noted that social media contributed significantly towards spreading false rumours and creating panic. The audience has become more active in their engagement with social media content and although there are cases where the audience may passively react to social media content, the inclination to passivity is more of a choice made in response to the level of interest in the social media content and not the result of audience limitation, as may be expressed for example through a low level of media literacy.

METHOD

This paper uses a qualitative inductive approach to examine the Magic Bullet Theory and the Two-Step Flow Theory, assessing their strengths and limitations within the context of contemporary media pluralism and digital media growth in Africa.

The inductive approach primarily focuses on generating new theoretical models, and in this particular case, the study seeks to explain the effect of mass media on consumers. Inductive research usually starts with observation and then proceeds with the gathering of data. The researcher identifies patterns in the data collected and then proceeds to develop a model. The data-gathering stage is narrow and specific to particular cases, but the theory developed tends to be generalized (University of Oklahoma, n.d.; Locsin & Schoenhofer, 2024). The Inductive Approach tends to be qualitative and may not have as much empirical rigour as a deductive quantitative approach, but it is still useful in proposing theories that form the basis of future empirical testing (University of Oklahoma, n.d.; University of Warwick, n.d.). The seeming lack of empirical rigour in the inductive approach is not usually considered as a limiting factor; as Thomas (2003) notes, the basic role of the inductive approach is to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2023, p. 2).

The following are some of the purposes underlying the development of the general inductive approach. These purposes are similar to other qualitative analysis approaches.

- To condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format.
- To establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure these links are both transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research).
- To develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the text (raw data). (Thomas, 2023, p. 2).

This study uses data from five selected cases in Africa, and relevant literature is reviewed to provide the context for this theoretical exploration. The cases were purposively selected, taking into consideration the interest they generated, their impact, and the observed effect on mass media audiences. The cases were also selected because they presented clear trends in understanding media effects and also because they could easily be related to the two theories. The cases are examined to identify the trends in the effects of the mass media on audience beliefs and behaviours, whether direct or indirect. The cases are also examined to analyze the role of the Opinion Leader in mediating mass media effects on their audiences.

A model that explains the observed trends in the cases studied is developed and generalized to provide a basis for future empirical testing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The following events and observations present important focal points for the study as it seeks to explain mass media effects as mediated by plural and digital media space in Africa:

Vanishing genitals hoax in Ghana, 1997

Shrinking genitals rumours are a pervasive threat not only to organized social life in Africa but also to human lives. Over a period starting from the early parts of 1990, a weird rumour about mystical vanishing or shrinking of genitals after a handshake or a body touch by persons alleged to possess mystical powers, spread in some countries on the continent.

Some persons accused of possessing such mystical powers were lynched to death by mobs. They were accused of possessing mystical powers that shrank the genitals of people they had body contact with in public places. These rumours were reported in countries such as Ghana, DR Congo, Cameroun, Nigeria, Benin, among others. Mass media platforms were influential in spreading such rumours founded on wild mystical beliefs.

Table 1: Role and Effect of the Media and Opinion Leaders: Vanishing Genital Rumours in Ghana (1997)

	<i>Direct/ Indirect /Not Present</i>	<i>Positive/ Negative/ Neutral/Not Present</i>	<i>Powerful/ Weak/ Indeterminate</i>
Role of Traditional Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of New Media	Not Present	Not Present	Not Present
Role of Opinion Leader	-	-	Ineffective

Table 2: Role and Impact of the Media and Opinion Leaders: Vanishing Genital Rumours in DR Congo (2008)

	<i>Direct/Indirect /Indeterminate</i>	<i>Positive/ Negative/ Neutral</i>	<i>Powerful/ Weak/ Indeterminate</i>
Role of Traditional Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of New Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of Opinion Leader	-	-	Weak

In 1997, 12 people in Ghana lost their lives under bizarre circumstances after they were accused of possessing powers that caused the genitals of others to shrink, and these happened in the streets of the capital, Accra, where literacy rates are comparatively higher than in most other parts of the country (Adams and Dzokoto, 2007; Bavier, 2008).

The media, particularly liberal private radio stations broadcasting in both English and local languages, fueled these rumours, disseminating information directly to listeners, and even respected national media brands such as the Daily Graphic and the Ghanaian Times, both leading state-owned daily newspapers, initially failed to dispel these rumours¹. The *Daily Graphic*, for instance, had the headline in its 17th January, 1997 edition: 'Panic, drama in Accra: As men with alleged mystic powers hit the streets' (Nyinah and Aboagye, 1997, p.1). The *Ghanaian Times* had an even more scandalous headline: 'Seal of Satan reaches Accra: Police arrest 4 handshakers' (Owusu and Cooper, 1997, p.1). Even the highly respected CNN erroneously described the lynched men as sorcerers in a report that also stated the false accusation that penises were grabbed (CNN, 1997).

Vanishing genitals hoax in DR Congo, 2008

In 2008, just about a decade after the Ghana genital shrinking scare, the DR Congo was rocked by a genital hoax. The rumours were so pervasive the police were forced to arrest people suspected to be sorcerers and causing the genitals of others to shrink to protect them from mob action. The media was again a festering ground for such rumours as people called into radio call-in programmes to fuel the hoax. According to Bavier, the rumours "quickly dominated radio call-in shows, with listeners advised to beware of fellow passengers in communal taxis wearing gold rings" (Bavier, 2008, para 3).

¹ Narrative by Ghanaian Journalist A (Anonymous).

In a report by *Reuters*, Bavier quotes Kinshasha police chief, Jean-Dieudonne Oleko as stating; "You just have to be accused of that, and people come after you. We have had a number of attempted lynching. ... You see them covered in marks after being beaten" (Bavier, 2008, para 5).

Like in the Ghana case, there was chaos, and the police had to help avoid fatalities:

Police arrested the accused sorcerers and their victims in an effort to avoid the sort of bloodshed seen in Ghana a decade ago, when 12 suspected penis snatchers were beaten to death by angry mobs. The 27 men have since been released.

"I'm tempted to say it's one huge joke," Oleko said.

"But when you try to tell the victims that their penises are still there, they tell you that it's become tiny or that they've become impotent. To that I tell them, 'How do you know if you haven't gone home and tried it,'" he said (Bavier, 2008, para 6-8).

The evidence suggests that radio was a dominant medium for the spreading of such rumours, as around this period, social media was not as pervasive, and this view is echoed by Shahki (2026), who notes that radio broadcasts constituted a major means for spreading such rumours. Also, the evidence suggests that while there was some attempt by some opinion leaders to address the challenge by debunking the rumours, as noted by the Police Chief, people just would not budge.

Evidence clearly suggests that the media had direct access to the masses and radio call-in programmes provided the fuel for a popular, direct and personalized way of disseminating information without the mediating role of the Opinion Leader.

Vanishing genitals hoax in DR Congo, 2025

In 2025, rumours emerged again in some provinces in the Democratic Republic of Congo about vanishing penis arising from contact with men believed to possess mystical powers. As noted by a report in *The Hindu*, the reports initially sounded too absurd to believe but they

Table 3: Role and Effect of the Mass Media and Opinion Leaders: Vanishing Genital Rumours in DR Congo (2025)

	<i>Direct/Indirect /Indeterminate</i>	<i>Positive/ Negative/ Neutral</i>	<i>Effective/ Ineffective/ Indeterminate</i>
Role of Traditional Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of New Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of Opinion Leader	-	-	Ineffective

immediately gained currency with the posting of videos of the alleged victim on social media (Shikha, 2026).

According to Shikha (2026), a man in a market claimed that his genitals had suddenly shrunk after having physical contact with a stranger. Shikha (2026) further notes that reports were widespread, with some claiming that they had lost their entire genitalia.

And then the videos started appearing, people gathered around phones watching clips of alleged victims speaking inside crowded churches while pastors stood beside them claiming they had been cured through prayer. Some videos spread through Facebook pages and TikTok accounts. Others moved from phone to phone through Bluetooth shares and WhatsApp groups, spreading across villages faster than official information ever could... Several churches in Kisangani hosted testimonies from supposed victims while Facebook pages and TikTok accounts reposted clips that gathered hundreds of thousands of views. Some videos remained online even after authorities publicly dismissed the claims as false (Shikha, 2026, para 4).

The report stated that social media, churches, and rumours had combined to create something that was not easily debunked, and four health workers who had embarked on a health campaign in the Isangi area of Tshopo province were killed after villagers had accused them of causing the vanishing of genitals. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) backed Africa Infodemic Response Alliance, at least 17 deaths were linked to the rumours (Shikha, 2026).

Shikha (2026) notes that the rumours were not easily debunked, providing a hint that people with the requisite credibility who could be considered as Opinion Leaders, and made attempts to address the rumours, failed in their efforts to quell the rumours. Indeed, the evidence from this case suggests that media audiences had direct access to information from media channels, and people personally accessed information via social media platforms, gathering around phones and watching clips without recourse to the

Table 4: Role and Effect of the Mass Media and Opinion Leaders: Earthquake Hoax in Ghana (2010)

	<i>Direct/Indirect</i>	<i>Positive/ Negative/ Neutral</i>	<i>Effective/ Ineffective/ Indeterminate</i>
Role of Traditional Media	Indirect	Negative	Effective
Role of New Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of Opinion Leader	-	-	Ineffective

mediating role of opinion leaders. The role of the opinion leader was, therefore, ineffective.

Fake Earthquake Alarm in Ghana, 2010

By the year 2010, the mobile phone had become an important media tool in Ghana, and text messaging was very popular.

Before midnight on Sunday, 17th January, 2010, a text message was circulating in the country suggesting that there was going to be an earthquake in the country, so residents should come out of their houses into the open streets to save their lives (BBC, 2010). The rumour referenced the *BBC*, a global media giant, as the source of the information, creating an indirect association of the traditional media station with the rumour.

The *BBC* stated in a report on its website on Monday, 18th January, 2010, that the rumour started with a “text message quoting US space agency NASA and the *BBC* as saying that ‘cosmic rays’ were to hit the Earth by 0300 on Monday. This was interpreted to mean an earthquake was imminent...” (BBC, 2010, para 2).

The first text message that started doing the rounds on Sunday said: “Today’s night 12:30 to 3:30am COSMO RAYS entering earth from Mars. Switch off ur mobiles today’s night? NASA BBC NEWS? Plz pass to all ur friends”.

At 0400 GMT Deputy Information Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa phoned our correspondent to check if the *BBC* had indeed broadcast an earthquake warning, as there was a “national panic” (BBC, 2010, para 7-8).

The next day, local media houses were awash with stories of how millions poured into the streets in the early hours after midnight, amidst fears of an imminent earthquake. The banner headline of the nation’s biggest-selling newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, was: ‘Quake hoax - Nation forced to keep vigil’ (Salia et al, 2010).

In an Opinion article on the *Ghanaweb* News Portal, Yeboah held that even highly educated individuals who should have known better fell for the hoax on the chilly Monday morning (Yeboah, 2010). One journalist’s paper recounted the events and said as someone who was

considered credible in his community, many people called to seek his clarification on the matter:

Recounting the incidents of the early hours of the day, a Ghanaian journalist, then working for the Daily Graphic, notes that:

Around midnight to dawn, many people, including a retired engineer, called to verify the claims; while I told them, it was a hoax as an earthquake was not like rainfall that could be predicted with such level of precision, they were still anxious and decided to spend the night in the streets rather than risk their lives on my advice².

Monkeypox rumours in Nigeria, 2017

In 2017, there was an outbreak of Monkeypox in Nigeria. The first confirmed case was reported in October 2017 in Bayelsa State. When the case was reported, the media sensationalized the issue, drawing some parallels with the lethal Ebola virus, and this sent many residents into panic mode. Some of the headlines were outrageously misleading. It was described as the 'new airborne Ebola' by a publication (Oyebanyi et al, 2019). The rumour also spread on social media.

The media did not report that during this period, only two deaths had been reported among 197 suspected cases between September and December 2017, nor that most infected people recovered. Not mentioning these facts may have caused more fear and panic among the public. In addition, many articles used the pictures of a child with an extreme presentation of the disease on the front page. Both traditional news media and new media sources published inaccurate, sensationalised, or misleading stories (Oyebanyi et al, 2019, p. 2).

In some South-Eastern States, there was another wild rumour that said some soldiers were in the States to inject children with vaccines as had been alleged to have been done in Bayelsa State, with the ultimate aim of infecting children with the monkeypox disease, resulting in 50 children dead. Some parents claimed that they heard about the soldiers on the radio, and believed that the reports were true and the lives of their children were at risk (Sahara Reporters, 2017).

Seven people – five males and two females- were almost lynched at Zarama in Yenagoa, by a mob that accosted them following suspicion that they were immunization workers. The seven turned out to be sales promoters for a beer brand on a promotion visit to the area. They were beaten, stripped and dragged before the community leader (The Nation, 2017, para 26).

Edo State Police Spokesperson, DSP Moses Nkombe, advised parents to ignore fake social media rumours, providing an indication that social media was also spreading the rumour (The Nation, 2017). According to a BBC Pidgin report, the rumours started spreading on social media.

Table 5: Role and Effect of the Media and Opinion Leaders: Monkey Pox Rumours in Nigeria (2017)

	<i>Direct/Indirect</i>	<i>Positive/ Negative/ Neutral</i>	<i>Effective/ Ineffective</i>
Role of Traditional Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of New Media	Direct	Negative	Effective
Role of Opinion Leader	-	-	Weak

Indeed, while the Army was conducting a free medical outreach for adults, it had nothing to do with vaccination, let alone monkeypox vaccination for children (Sahara Reporters, 2017).

DISCUSSION

Reconceptualisation of Mass Media Effect

In all cases studied, there was clear evidence that information did not follow the two-step format proposed by the Two-Step Flow Theory and that media consumers were more active in their engagement with the media. While audiences may consult people, they consider more enlightened for perspectives on information accessed through plural, digital, or penetrative media, the classical approach of the opinion leaders mediating the dissemination of information between the media and the masses was clearly absent.

Again, the classical approach to conceptualizing the Two-Step Theory asserts that information first gets to the opinion leaders, who then interpret the media messages and then disseminate them to the ordinary people. However, the evolution of the media, even in Africa, social media, and media plurality has fragmented audiences and made messages directly accessible to media audiences, raising new perspectives. The opinion leader may not necessarily be the first to access the news, but may now be playing a more consulting role, whereby they are consulted when media consumers want clarity on a particular media narrative.

The audience attributes present, perhaps the most challenging factor in defining the effects of the media within the context of the Magic Bullet Theory. Audience characteristics have constantly undergone flux over time. Additionally, audience behavior may occur as a result of the interplay between trust in the media and socio-cultural belief systems, traditions, customs, and norms.

Over time, media audiences become more accustomed to media activity, strategies, and messages. There is a greater understanding of the limits of media credibility,

² Narrative by Ghanaian Journalist A (Anonymous).

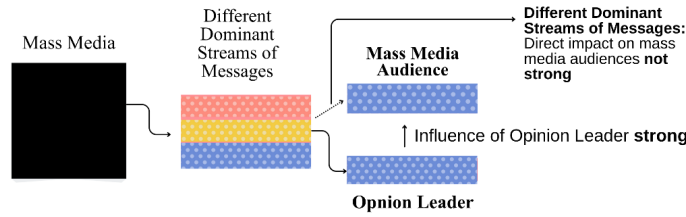


Figure 1: Mass media effect and the role of the Opinion Leader when the media disseminates different dominant streams of messages.

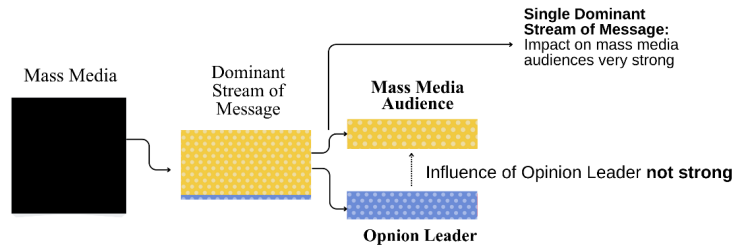


Figure 2: Mass media effect and the role of the Opinion Leader when the media disseminates a dominant stream of message

Figure: 1and 2

and a more literate, media-savvy audience is naturally self-mediated in its response to the propagandistic effects of the media. Apparently, a more enlightened media in a developed country with a more information-literate society is unlikely to give currency to unfounded rumours, and may rather quell them when they emerge.

Regarding the cases studied, the evidence suggests that when hoaxes emerged, the media fueled them, which in turn amplified them. Similarly, when the media debunked them in a unified and dominant manner, they were extinguished. The centrality of the media in fueling or quelling such hoaxes is critical. The evidence in the genital shrinking scare clearly points to the ineffectiveness or dormancy of opinion leaders in addressing such hoaxes, as shown in Tables 1,2,3,4 and 5.

The Magic Bullet effect of the media is often conceptualized in a negative sense; in other words, it is conceived as the use of the media to spread negative propaganda, and it is understandable because it was significantly inspired by Nazi propaganda, which is generally considered negative. Nevertheless, while its negative orientation may not be easily dismissed, there could also be a positive conceptualization of the Magic Bullet Theory that could help enforce its legitimacy in contemporary communication scholarship.

A limitation of the Two-Step Flow Theory that is often ignored is that it may not be successful in addressing a mass media narrative that, although false, is powerfully

believed. The opinion leaders may be overwhelmed by the unified and industrial power of the mass media or the direct and personal access of media consumers to the media. Unless the mass media present contending arguments, the role of the opinion leader is severely restrained. Thus, the opinion leader operates more effectively in a mass media audience faced with contending claims in respect of a cause, issue, or activity. The *People Choice* study, which formed the basis of the Two-Step Flow Theory, was precise in defining a context of mass media influence on electoral choices. Election campaigning is an intense period of political activism that pitches candidates against each other in grueling contests of ideas, policies, and claims on a wide range of issues. That can be intriguing for many voters, and without the mediating role of the opinion leaders, choices may be difficult for many voters.

Definitely, voters are likely to see electioneering as a deliberate advertising activity for which candidates cannot always be trusted to be credible. It is not always exactly the case that the mass media proffers a position, but rather the candidates sell their messages or broadcast their messages through the mass media. Audiences are not necessarily passive to such messages because candidates challenge each other's credibility, and this may not present any room for passivity on the part of the electorate; they are compelled to be more active in their choices as they are faced with dilemmas and contending claims and choices. Opinion leaders are considered more knowledgeable and

discerning, and are trusted to deliver more impartial verdicts on the right choices.

The strength of the opinion leader in the case of the People Choice study, therefore, rests not on his or her superior credibility to the mass media but rather on a perceived understanding of the issues in deciding which electoral choice or message should be supported. The argument then is that the Two-Step Flow does not always pitch the opinion leader against the journalist or mass media. On many occasions, it pitches the credibility of the opinion leader against the credibility of a political candidate/activist. Thus, although the 'bullet' may be shot by the media, on many occasions it may not be of the media; rather, it is of the political candidate with the media just serving as the channel – the gun. The Two-Step Flow Theory, thus, explained the political choices of the electorate, while the Magic Bullet was a generic explanation of the effect of media reports having a unified and dominant theme.

The theoretical perspective that the Magic Bullet Theory was therefore supplanted by the Two-Step Flow is questioned if stretched to other issues, as expressed in the cases of the vanishing penises rumours, the earthquake hoax, and the monkeypox vaccine. Discernibly, the role of the opinion leader was not very effective. As indicated, in such cases, opinion leaders are usually overpowered by the message's powerfully penetrative, single, and dominant nature.

Influence of the Opinion Leader

As indicated in Figure 1, two or multiple conflicting messages about a specific issue shared by the mass media can lead audiences to rely on opinion leaders for a clearer perspective. In such cases, the opinion leader's influence on the audience is strong, while the mass media's impact is relatively weaker.

A dominant stream of similar messages on a specific issue, disseminated by the mass media, presents mass media audiences with virtually no dilemma on a preferred perspective, as indicated in Fig 2. Mass media's impact on audiences is strong, and such a dominant stream leaves the opinion leader with very little influence on mass media audiences.

In all cases examined, the media again produced the Magic Bullet that was critical in reversing the effects of the earlier 'bullets', but as noted by the model, there is a key requirement for a dominant message stream. Thus, it is reasonable to state that the media greatly fueled a hoax by festering false and outrageous rumours and creating rapid hysteria; thereafter, the media quelled the hoax by presenting the alternative view in a unified and dominant manner. Clearly, people still believe the media when the message is dominantly in a single stream (Figure 2).

The strong penetrative success of the 'bullet' in all cases examined significantly exposes the ineffectiveness of

a Two-Step Flow approach to quelling mass hysteria arising from such propaganda or a dominant stream of messages. This expresses the dominance of the opinion leader as indicated in Figure 2 and the ineffectiveness of the opinion leaders in the specific cases studied as indicated in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The potency of the media is expressed in the observation that when there was an indirect attribution of the rumour to the mainstream media, people still believed it without verifying the claim, as exemplified by the earthquake hoax in Ghana (refer to Table 4).

It is important to note that in all cases studied, there were reasonable voices among the masses that were counteracting the effect of the media. As in the case of the Earthquake hoax, many experts or people with relevant knowledge told close associates that it was not technically possible within the limits of contemporary technology to predict earthquakes with such a level of precision. Yet, the power of the mass media is far more dominant than the influence of opinion leaders in the Two-Step Flow model within the context of a single stream model; that is, in the presence of a dominant message stream disseminated by the media.

The contention between the Magic Bullet Theory and the Two-Step Flow Theory, therefore, leads to an alternative view, drawing from the limitations of both theories. Social media and media pluralism are proving that we may not have entirely lost the impact of the bullet.

Although, the Magic Bullet assumes audience passivity that may not exactly be the case, for an audience that is limited in terms of an alternative view and exposed to a constant stream of message with the same characteristics in terms of frame and theme with very few options, is compelled and lulled into a mood of enforced passivity but cannot exactly be described as inherently passive. That has been the attribute of Soviet Communist Theory espoused by Siebert et al and also evident in the propaganda of the forces in World War II (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1984).

Naturally, elections provide very intriguing moments for voters. There is a contest of ideas, messages, slogans, statistics, and personalities. This presents a comparatively less media-sophisticated or politically enlightened audience with a sense of voter exasperation as to what constitutes the right choices. The Magic Bullet Theory, proposed in the first half of the 20th century, largely operated on the foundation of a media effect that thrived on selective exposure to media messages with very little or virtually no contestation at the time the messages were disseminated. The conceptualization of the Two-Step Flow as a direct and alternative response to the Magic Bullet Theory was discernibly flawed. The Two-Step Flow theory certainly brought some empirical understanding of the effect of media on voter choices, but clearly, the message

attributes that formed the foundation of the two theories (Magic Bullet and Two-Step Flow) were different. While there was selective exposure to a specific stream of media messages from the same actor or multiple actors with the same objective, in terms of the frame and orientation of the message in the case of the Magic Bullet Theory, audiences under the Two-Step Flow theory were subjected to multiple streams of messages from different actors pursuing their separate objectives.

The bullets in the two theoretical perspectives were simply not the same; one bullet was a single stream flowing freely, sometimes in a very censored and controlled channel; the other bullet comprised multiple streams beating against each other in fierce contest for the right of way and the hearts and minds of the targets. Because of the differences in the attributes of the messages, the Two-Step Flow Theory could not have been a direct response or alternative to the Magic Bullet Theory. The cases of the African hoaxes fueled by the media's penetrative power suggest that the media still holds sway, retains some 'magic bullet effect', and provides an understanding of how cultural and religious beliefs fuel this effect.

- The proposition is that for a medium to have a Magic Bullet effect, the attributes of the message should fall within the frame discussed above and emphasized as follows:
- The media should transmit messages with a single dominant narrative: what may be referred to as the single media stream.
- The penetrative power of the message is also enhanced if it aligns with a religious, cultural, social, or nationalistic belief system or fervor.

Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of the Media Stream Model

The Media Stream model is built on a premise that examines the origins of the Magic Bullet Theory and the Two-Step Flow Theory. It considers the attributes of a message in the media channel and how these attributes influence the role of opinion leaders in message mediation and audience receptiveness.

It notes that a dominant and unified message from the mass media tends to overwhelm opinion leaders and has a direct effect on media consumers akin to the effect of the Magic Bullet Theory on the target audience. Conversely, conflicting or contradicting messages in the media channel enhance the role of the opinion leader, particularly during elections when the electorate face political dilemmas and have to depend on opinion leaders for guidance.

The strength of this model is drawn from the observed inadequacy of the Opinion Leader in addressing the impact of the overwhelmingly dominant message stream as expressed in the Media Stream Model. Clearly, the direct nature of the media effect presented by a plural media and social media poses new challenges to the role of the opinion

leader. Opinion leadership in news dissemination can be considered as a relic of an old mass media paradigm of singularity, whereby mass audiences had limited exposure and access to the mass media and depended in significant measure on the more exposed and literate persons, otherwise referred to as opinion leaders, for access and interpretation. New media, higher levels of media literacy, and media plurality are redefining the concepts of news access and opinion leadership. This argument is situated within the context of the foundations of the Two-Step Flow Theory and the Magic Bullet Theory. The Two-Step Theory was inspired by the kind of politics rendered by two dominant media narratives of two dominant political traditions in the US. Naturally, many studies fail to account for obvious differences in the factors that drive the effects forming the basis of the two theories, and rather focus solely on the nature of the effects labeling one as direct and the other as indirect.

It fails to recognize that the indirect effect is engineered by a political dilemma created by equally dominant and contrasting messages, while the direct effect is created by media propaganda driven by a single and dominant narrative.

This study brings into sharper focus, the foundational basis for the two theories and why their very disparate origins and motivations make it virtually implausible that one supplants the other.

CONCLUSION

The Magic Bullet Theory has not been well appreciated in contemporary times as a result of an oversimplification of the theory; this oversimplification of the theory is a vestige of the comparatively less sophisticated media space in the first half of the 20th Century when it was conceptualized. Media plurality and new media are generating powerful effects with the attributes espoused by the Magic Bullet Theory.

The Two-Step Flow theory, which was conceptualized as a direct response to the Magic Bullet theory, is an important media effect theory that explains the mediated effect of the media when disseminating more than a single dominant narrative on an issue, with the narratives having different frames contending against each other for dominance and audience acceptance.

The dominance of a single narrative by the media affects the penetrative power of the 'bullet' in the Magic Bullet Theory. Audience passivity in the Magic Bullet Theory may, therefore, have to be redefined, considering factors such as pluralistic media, the absence of contrasting narratives relative to a particular message, and personalization of media use through new media technologies.

Limitations of the Study

The inductive approach and the case study method, while useful in research, have significant limitations as the

theoretical outcomes of such studies require detailed and expansive quantitative studies to gain optimum generalizability.

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Conflict of Interest

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Informed Consent

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required as no human subjects were sampled for this study. This paper, nevertheless, adhered to all ethical requirements for academic research and publications.

Data Availability

The author confirms that data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. All other data supporting the findings can be obtained from the author upon request.

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