

Mapping Social Responsibility Theory in Media and Journalism: A Bibliometric Analysis (2001–2025)

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Abstract

This study examines the intellectual structure and evolving trajectory of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) within media and journalism studies through a bibliometric analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2001 and 2025. Drawing on data (n = 54) retrieved from the Scopus database, the analysis employs VOSviewer to map co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence patterns, co-citation relationships, and bibliographic coupling structures. The findings reveal a highly fragmented and weakly connected research landscape, characterized by limited scholarly collaboration, low cross-national citation exchange, and the absence of a cohesive theoretical core. While earlier studies are anchored in normative concerns such as ethics, accountability, and democracy, more recent research reflects a shift toward digital-era issues, including misinformation, social media, and platform governance. However, this thematic expansion appears to be reactive rather than theoretically integrative, with SRT functioning more as a residual normative reference than as a dynamic framework. Overall, the results suggest that SRT occupies an increasingly peripheral position in contemporary media scholarship, raising critical questions about its adaptability to the complexities of the digital communication environment. By providing a systematic mapping of the field, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the relevance and future of normative media theories in a rapidly transforming media ecosystem.

Keywords: Social Responsibility Theory; Media Ethics; Bibliometric Analysis; Journalism Studies; VOSviewer

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global media environment has undergone profound structural and normative changes. The acceleration of information flow and the spread of misinformation and fake news driven by the emergence of digital platforms and social media have intensified concerns about media accountability toward audiences, public trust, and the ethical responsibilities of journalism (Abbas, 2025; Cao, 2025; Kato Nabirye, 2025; Napoli, 2021; Shiraliyeva, 2026). Traditional news gatekeeping mechanisms are being weakened by the rise of digital platforms and replaced by algorithmic systems. In such a context, answering the age-old question of how media should act responsibly has become more difficult and controversial than ever before.

Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) has historically served as a normative framework for responding to ethical concerns in the public sphere. It is grounded in the normative assumption that media institutions bear moral and social obligations toward society. In this theory, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility are emphasized as core values of journalism (Siebert et al., 1963). Despite its central role in the normative tradition of media theory, its place in contemporary research is ambiguous. There is a serious question as to whether classical media theories are still effective in analyzing and explaining the complexities of the digital ecosystem. The transition from traditional mass communication models (such as radio, television, and print) to platform-based models has changed the institutional and technological infrastructure of media. As a result, the question arises whether traditional normative models originally developed for centralized media systems can adequately address issues such as user-generated content, the global

circulation of disinformation, and algorithmic accountability. In this regard, SRT seems to occupy an uncertain position.

Despite the importance of these issues, existing research has largely examined SRT in a fragmented and ad hoc manner. What has received less attention is a systematic, large-scale analysis of how SRT is studied, developed, and applied within the broader field of media and journalism studies. To address this gap, the present study uses a bibliometric approach to map the academic landscape of SRT research over 25 years (2001–2025). This study adopts 2001 as the starting point because it marks a global turning point in media and journalism, characterized by the post-9/11 transformation of news practices, intensified debates on media ethics and responsibility, and the rapid expansion of digital communication environments. Additionally, this period corresponds with a substantial increase in indexed scholarly publications, making it a methodologically appropriate baseline for bibliometric analysis. The bibliometric approach enables the systematic analysis of studies by examining publication patterns, subject relationships, and citation networks, thereby providing insight into the structure and evolution of academic disciplines (Donthu et al., 2021). This study seeks to provide an overview of the field by analyzing publication trends, co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence patterns, and citation structures.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the publication trends in Social Responsibility Theory research between 2001 and 2025?
- RQ2: What thematic structures and research clusters characterize the field?
- RQ3: How are scholarly collaboration networks structured at the levels of authors, institutions, and countries?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the relevance and adaptability of normative media theories in the digital age. In particular, it provides empirical evidence on the structural position of SRT in contemporary research. It offers insights into whether the theory continues to function as a central organizing framework or is increasingly fragmented and marginalized.

RESEARCH METHOD

The present study, using a bibliometric approach (Groos & Pritchard, 1969), seeks to explore the intellectual structure, development process, and scientific dynamics of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) in the field of media and journalism studies. As pointed out by Gearhart and Cho (2020). This approach functions as an automated content analysis tool for academic papers, allowing researchers to rigorously process and evaluate large-scale bibliographic datasets. In fact, using this approach allows us to have a more objective and transparent evaluation of scientific productions by relying on big data (Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015).

Data Source and Search Strategy

This study adopts a focused bibliometric design aimed at capturing the core, explicitly articulated body of scholarship on Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) within media and journalism studies. This study uses the Scopus citation database as its primary data source. The reason for this choice is the extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the humanities and social sciences, as well as the database's technical capabilities for providing structured metadata

for bibliometric analyzes. As Scopus encompasses a more extensive range of communication and media science journals than alternative databases, such as Web of Science (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2015), it serves as a highly efficient tool for monitoring interdisciplinary developments in social responsibility theory. The platform's inclusive indexing strategy provides a more comprehensive overview of the social sciences (Pranckutė, 2021), ensuring that diverse and emerging perspectives on the ethical and ideological dimensions of social responsibility are not overlooked. The data collection process was carried out on December 15, 2025, through the advanced search interface of this database. In order to achieve maximum comprehensiveness while maintaining the accuracy of the results, the following query was used to search the sources:

TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social responsibility theory" OR "social responsibility of the press" OR "social responsibility of media" OR "media social responsibility theory" OR "social responsibility theory of the press" OR "social responsibility theory of media") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (media OR journalism OR press OR communication OR ethics)

This query was designed to capture core conceptual variations of SRT while restricting results to relevant disciplinary contexts. The use of the TITLE-ABS-KEY field ensures that the retrieved documents engage with the focal concepts. To refine the dataset and ensure analytical consistency, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- Publication years: 2001–2025 (to focus on post-millennium developments, aligning with the rise of digital media and evolving ethical debates).
- Document type: Articles (excluding books, chapters, reviews, and conference papers to prioritize peer-reviewed journal contributions).
- Language: English (reflecting the dominance of English-language scholarship in international media studies).
- Subject areas: Limited to Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities (to exclude unrelated applications in fields like business or medicine).

Following the application of inclusion criteria (peer-reviewed articles, English language, 2001–2025, relevant subject areas), the final dataset consisted of 54 documents. The final dataset (n = 54) reflects the limited number of publications that meet the defined inclusion criteria. Therefore, all eligible records identified through the database query were included in the analysis. All records were exported in CSV format, including full bibliographic details such as authors, titles, abstracts, keywords, citations, and affiliations.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using VOSviewer, a widely used software tool for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks. VOSviewer is particularly effective in handling large bibliographic datasets (Dereli, 2024) and generating distance-based maps that reveal relationships among authors, keywords, and publications. To capture the multidimensional structure of SRT research, several complementary bibliometric techniques were employed:

Performance analysis: Descriptive metrics on annual publication trends, most productive authors, countries, and journals were derived directly from Scopus exports and visualized in VOSviewer overlays.

Co-occurrence of author keywords: To map thematic clusters and identify dominant research streams (e.g., ethics, regulation, digital media).

Co-authorship networks: At author, institutional, and country levels, to assess collaboration patterns and potential isolation in the field.

Co-citation analysis: Of cited references and sources, to trace intellectual foundations and influential works.

Bibliographic coupling: To highlight contemporary groupings of research sharing common references.

To ensure analytical clarity and interpretability, minimum thresholds were applied during network construction. For example, only keywords with a minimum occurrence of two were included in the co-occurrence analysis. Similarly, thresholds were set for authors and documents to focus on the most relevant and connected elements within the dataset. The full counting method was employed, assigning equal weight to all occurrences and links.

FINDINGS

1. Co-authorship

Of the 111 authors identified across the 54 documents, only 8 appear in the visualized network after excluding unconnected items. Approximately 92% of authors remain outside the collaborative structure, either working individually or within small, disconnected groups. As seen in Figure 1, these 8 authors are Onayinka et al. (2025). The concentration of all connected authors within a single, geographically localized cluster further suggests that collaborative engagement with SRT remains both limited and regionally bounded, rather than constituting a globally distributed research network. Taken together, this pattern indicates that SRT is not functioning as a shared international research agenda but is instead sustained through isolated scholarly micro-communities.

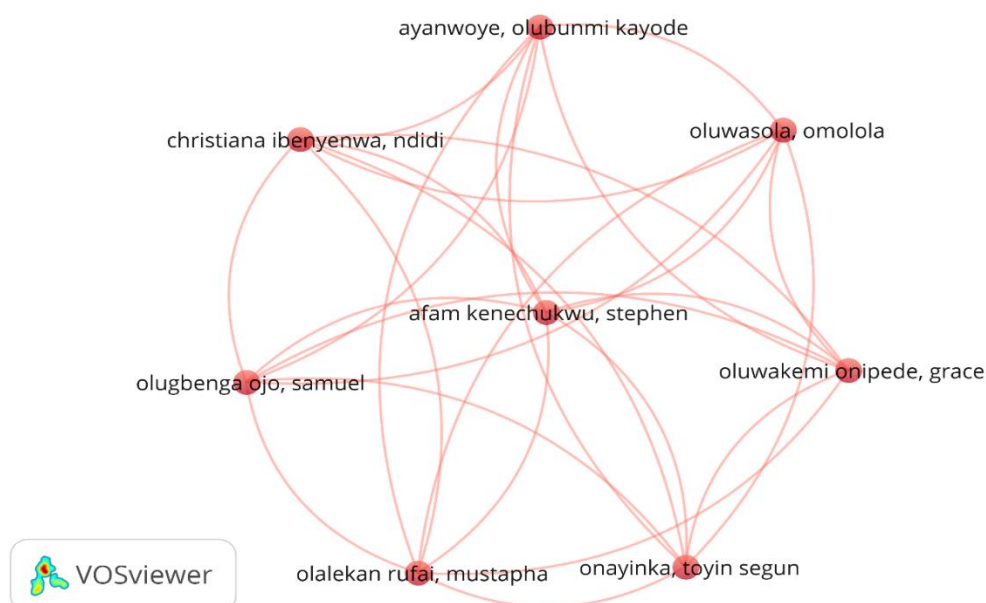


Figure 1: Author Co-authorship

Source: Author's data

2. Co-authorship Among Countries

The co-authorship analysis by country identifies contributions from 23 countries. After selecting the largest connected component, the network map (Figure 2) displays 4 countries with international collaboration links.

In the network mapping of these scholarly contributions, Nigeria emerges as the primary node with two links, paralleled by Malaysia (two links), while South Africa and Pakistan each have one link. The output volume indicates a distinct regional concentration, with Nigeria and South Africa emerging as the most prolific contributors:

Nigeria: (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Bello et al., 2025; Erubami et al., 2021; Onayinka et al., 2025; Oyesomi et al., 2019)

South Africa: (Adanlawo & Rugbeer, 2021; Asak & Molale, 2020; Pitout & Ndlovu, 2001; Prelate et al., 2025)

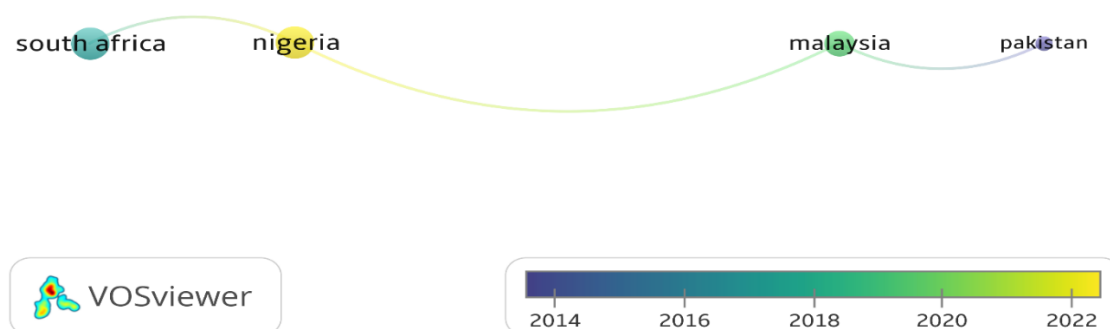


Figure 2: Co-authorship Among Countries

Source: Author's data

3. Institutional Collaboration Network (Co-authorship Analysis)

The co-authorship analysis at the organizational level, conducted with a minimum threshold of two documents per organization, reveals a completely fragmented and decentralized collaboration structure. The analysis showed that distinct academic institutions that met the productivity criteria showed no visible connecting lines (links) between them.

The co-citation analysis of cited references, with a minimum citation threshold of 3, identifies 4 references out of 450. The network map (Figure 3) shows four nodes connected by lines: "Journal of Mass Media Ethics", "Christians, Clifford G.", "Mass Communication Theory", and "Journalism Monographs, (1977)". The nodes are arranged in a curved structure with "Mass Communication Theory" positioned centrally in green, connected to the other three nodes.

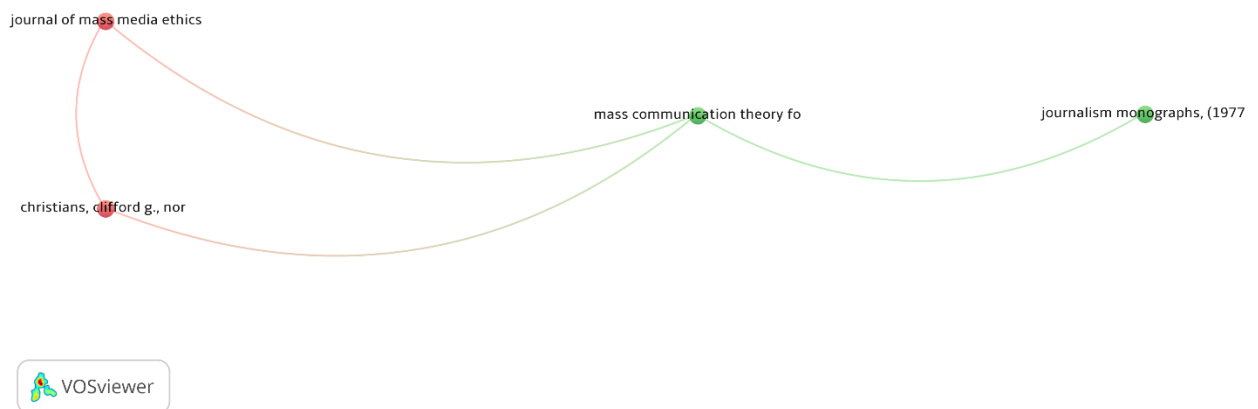


Figure 3: Co-citation analysis
Source: Author's data

5. Keyword Co-occurrence

Author keyword co-occurrence analysis, based on author keywords appearing at least twice, selected 22 keywords out of 209. As the network map (Figure 4) shows, the green cluster is centered on “social responsibility theory” (the largest and most central node) and associated with “journalism”, “accountability”, “ethics”, “democracy” and “media freedom”; a red cluster dominated by the words “social media”, “social responsibility”, “fake news”, “citizen journalism”, “media policy” and “sustainability”; a blue cluster containing the words “media ethics” and “citizenship”; and a smaller yellow-green cluster containing the words “conflict reporting”, “conflict” and “Nigeria”.

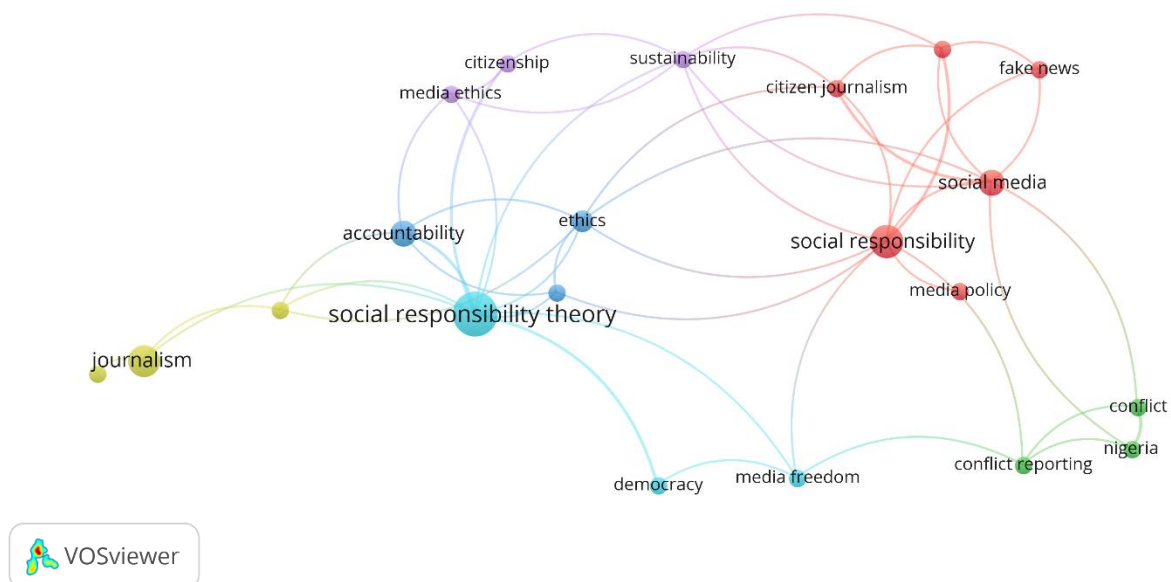


Figure 4: Keyword Co-occurrence
Source: Author's data

6. Country Citation

According to the citation map (Figure 5), the network consists of 10 distinct nodes without any linear connections, suggesting the lack of cross-citation relationships among the countries. Among them, the United States, with the largest node in the bottom center of the map, has the highest quantitative weight, followed by Nigeria, South Africa, and Slovenia, with medium-sized nodes. Other countries, including Malaysia, Australia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and Spain, are located in the network space with much smaller nodes and are scattered, each of which is defined in independent, single-member colored clusters due to the lack of citation interaction.

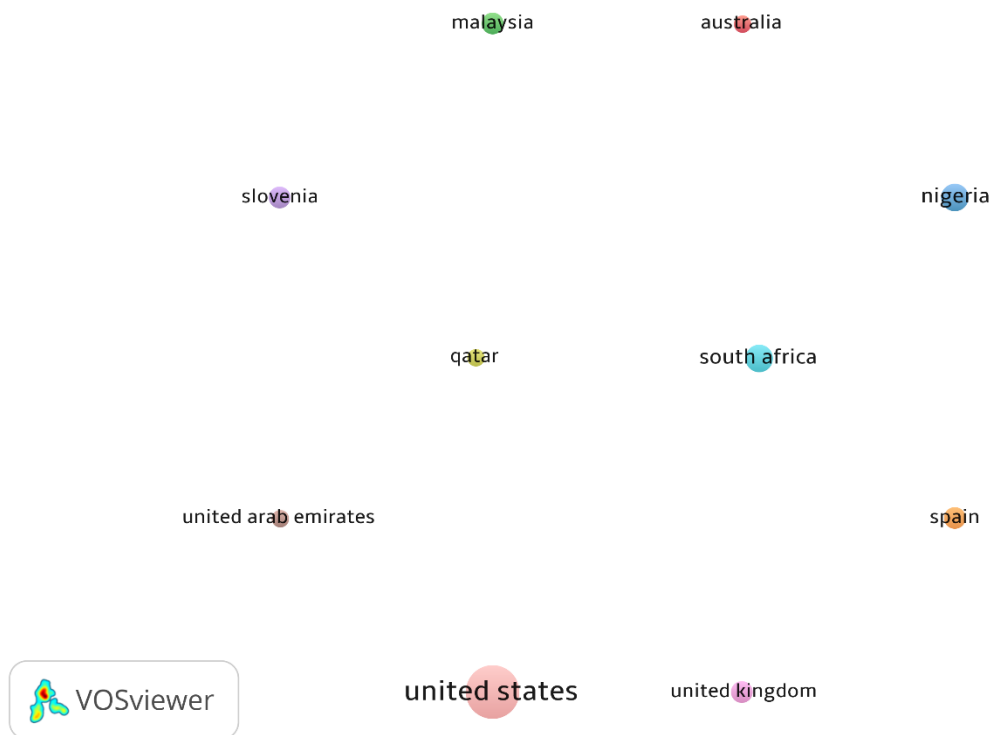


Figure 5: Country Citation

Source: Author's data

7. Bibliographic Linkage and Temporal Distribution

As shown in figure 6, the bibliographic linkage network shows a structure centered on the node of (Schauster et al., 2016), which is located in the middle of the map due to the higher number of citation sources shared. Other prominent nodes, such as (Boyles & Meyer, 2016; Sobel Cohen & McIntyre, 2019), and (Nee, 2014) are located at different distances from the center and are connected to the core of the network through links of varying thickness. Recent studies, including (Alam & Alam, 2024) and (Gibbs, 2025), are located at the very edge of the network. They are displayed with thin lines and weak connections to the main structure due to the small number of shared sources, indicating a low volume of bibliographic sharing in the newer works compared to the main body of research.

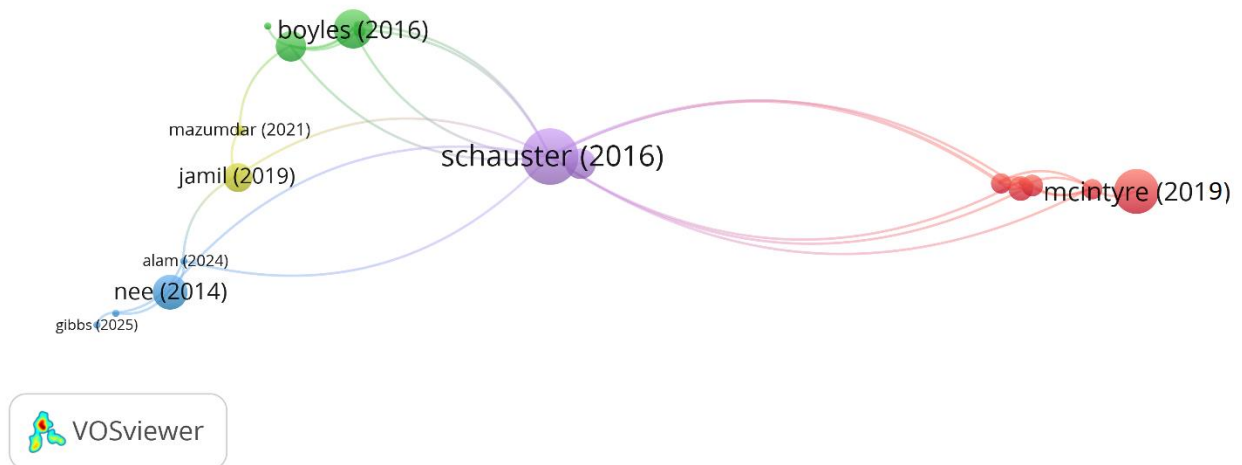


Figure 6: Bibliographic Linkage

8. Journal Co-occurrence Analysis

The simultaneity analysis of sources (journals) shows a dispersed and fragmented publication landscape regarding research on social responsibility theory. As illustrated in the network map (Figure 7), the visualization consists of six isolated nodes positioned sparsely without any visible connecting lines (links). From a temporal perspective, journals such as Journalism Practice, Journal of Media Ethics, and Journal of African Films & Media Studies are rendered in yellow, indicating their contribution in more recent years (approaching 2020). Conversely, nodes like Journalism Studies and Communication appear in darker blue hues, corresponding to the 2010–2014 period. The absence of inter-node connections suggests that no single journal has published more than one article within this specific research domain.



Figure 7: Journal Co-occurrence Analysis

Source: Author's data

DISCUSSION

Social responsibility theory, which once held an important place among normative media theories, appears to have diminished in prominence in media studies. Over approximately 25 years, the dataset comprises only 54 articles that explicitly engage with this theory. While modest in size, this corpus is analytically meaningful. Rather than being interpreted merely as a limitation, it points to the restricted institutional presence and limited reproduction of SRT within contemporary media scholarship. This pattern suggests a broader shift in the field's theoretical priorities, in which classical normative models are increasingly overshadowed by approaches more directly attuned to digital infrastructures and platform dynamics (Napoli, 2019). The majority of authors appear as isolated contributors. The fragmentation of the field emerges most clearly in the co-authorship analysis. The localized nature of the cluster suggests that SRT is being mobilized within regionally grounded research agendas rather than as a globally shared theoretical framework. This configuration may indicate that engagement with SRT is not sustained by cumulative or networked knowledge production. The authors appear with a tightly connected cluster associated with Nigerian scholars. In this respect, the theory lacks the collaborative density typically associated with expanding research traditions (Wagner & Leydesdorff, 2005), as evidenced by the low average link strength and the prevalence of geographically restricted clusters.

When it comes to countries, this pattern of fragmentation becomes more visible. The near absence of cross-national citation linkages indicates that scholars working on SRT rarely engage with one another across geographical boundaries. The observed concentration of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) scholarship in the Global South can be understood through both structural and normative dynamics. In many of these contexts, media systems remain closely tied to development-oriented roles. In these countries, journalism is expected to contribute to nation-building, social cohesion, and public education. Such expectations resonate strongly with the core premises of SRT, particularly its emphasis on accountability, public interest, and the social functions of the press. By contrast, in Western media scholarship, analytical attention has increasingly shifted toward issues such as platform governance, algorithmic power, and digital infrastructures, often drawing on alternative or updated theoretical frameworks.

Quantitatively, the United States maintains a dominant position among other countries. Contributions from countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, Malaysia, and Pakistan remain structurally peripheral. This asymmetry reflects deeper epistemic imbalances within global media research. In this field, knowledge production remains unevenly distributed and limited in reciprocal exchange (Waisbord, 2019). As a result, the theory does not operate as a conceptual framework across contexts. It serves as a fragmented reference point shaped by localized scholarly concerns.

The thematic evolution of the literature further underscores the unstable position of SRT in contemporary scholarship. Earlier studies are predominantly anchored in classical normative concerns such as ethics, accountability, democracy, and media freedom reflecting the theory's original intellectual orientation (Christians et al., 2009; McQuail, 2010). In contrast, more recent publications increasingly engage with issues emerging from the digital communication environment, including misinformation, social media, citizen journalism, and platform governance. However, this shift does not appear to reflect a systematic theoretical development of SRT itself. The theory is often applied retrospectively to new phenomena, functioning as a

familiar normative vocabulary rather than an actively evolving analytical framework. This pattern aligns with broader concerns about the limited adaptability of classical media theories to platformized communication systems (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019). The field's limited cohesion is further reflected in the structure of keyword co-occurrence clusters. Although several thematic groupings can be identified, they remain relatively small and weakly interconnected, indicating the absence of a consolidated research front. Rather than converging around shared conceptual developments, studies tend to cluster around loosely related thematic concerns, with minimal integration across clusters. This pattern reinforces the view that SRT does not currently serve as a generative theoretical core capable of organizing and directing sustained scholarly inquiry. Instead, it occupies a more diffuse position within the broader landscape of media and journalism studies, failing to meet the criteria for a cohesive thematic core often identified in mature research traditions (Donthu et al., 2021).

Insights from co-citation analysis further highlight the field's limited consolidation. The small number of references meeting the inclusion threshold and their strong anchoring in foundational texts suggests that contemporary research does not build cumulatively on a shared and evolving intellectual base. Canonical works continue to serve as reference points, yet they are not systematically extended or reinterpreted in light of current media transformations. This weak co-citation structure indicates that SRT lacks the dense intellectual interconnectivity typically associated with theoretically vibrant fields, raising questions about its capacity to sustain long-term scholarly development (Small, 1973; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Bibliographic coupling and source analysis reveal a similarly fragmented pattern. Recent publications exhibit only weak connections to the established body of literature, suggesting limited shared referencing and intellectual alignment. At the same time, the dispersion of articles across a wide range of journals without the presence of a central or specialized outlet points to the absence of a stable disciplinary core. Together, these patterns indicate that research on SRT is institutionally and intellectually scattered, lacking the structural coherence that would enable cumulative knowledge production and sustained theoretical advancement (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Several interrelated factors may account for these patterns. Most notably, the transformation of the media environment through processes such as platformization, algorithmic curation, and the rise of user-generated content has exposed the structural limitations of traditional normative frameworks. Originally developed in the context of relatively stable, institutionally bounded media systems, SRT presupposes forms of professional control and public accountability that are increasingly difficult to locate within decentralized digital ecosystems. As a result, many scholars appear to gravitate toward alternative frameworks such as platform governance, digital ethics, and political economy approaches that more directly address the distribution of power in contemporary media environments (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019; Pickard, 2019).

At the same time, the normative foundations of SRT may limit its appeal within critical and postcolonial traditions. Rooted in liberal democratic assumptions about the role of media in society, the theory has been criticized for insufficiently addressing structural inequalities, global power asymmetries, and the political economy of communication. For scholars working within these perspectives, SRT may appear normatively constrained or analytically under-equipped to engage with the complexities of contemporary media systems. This tension further contributes

to its marginal position within the broader theoretical landscape. However, the findings of this study do not suggest that SRT has lost its relevance entirely. On the contrary, its central normative premise that media institutions bear responsibility toward society remains highly pertinent in an era marked by declining public trust, pervasive misinformation, and intensified polarization (Ward, 2015). The challenge, therefore, is not the theory's obsolescence, but its lack of systematic re-articulation under contemporary conditions. Revitalizing SRT would require its integration with current debates on digital governance, algorithmic accountability, and global media inequalities. In this sense, the apparent marginalization of SRT should be understood not only as a decline but also as an opportunity for theoretical renewal and reconstruction. It is worth noting that these interpretations should be considered in light of the relatively small dataset.

LIMITATION

This study adopts a deliberately narrow search strategy centered on the explicit articulation of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), which necessarily limits the size of the dataset. While this approach excludes studies that engage with related normative concepts without directly naming SRT, it enables a more precise examination of the theory's discursive visibility and institutional presence within media and journalism scholarship. Future studies may complement this approach by employing broader conceptual queries or multi-database searches to explore the wider ecosystem of normative media theories.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to trace how Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) has been taken up, used, and left aside in media and journalism scholarship over the past two and a half decades. By mapping patterns of collaboration, citation, and thematic focus, it becomes possible to see the extent to which these works are intellectually interconnected. This study found that connections between scholars are thin. Citation networks rarely extend beyond limited circles. Theory, in this sense, does not function as a shared intellectual project. It is sometimes grounded in region and sometimes tied to specific concerns. It is seldom as part of a broader, evolving discourse. Earlier work tends to stay close to the theory's classical language: responsibility, ethics, democracy, the public good. More recent studies focus on the pressures of the digital environment, misinformation, social media, and platform power. Although, this shift appears uneven and theoretically underdeveloped. The dataset size is limited to 54, which quietly reinforces this picture. It suggests that the theory, once central to normative debates, now occupies a narrower space. Social responsibility theory appears less frequently, and when it does, it is not always central to the analysis. The issue, then, is not that SRT no longer matters, but that it has not been seriously rethought. It persists as a largely unmodified inherited framework, one that is invoked but not substantially rebuilt.

Future research could extend this bibliometric study through qualitative approaches, particularly in-depth interviews with active scholars in the field, to gain deeper insight into the underlying factors contributing to the declining visibility and fragmented development of Social Responsibility Theory (SRT). At the same time, future work should move beyond merely applying SRT to emerging cases. Instead, critically reconsider how the theory itself might be reconstituted in contemporary contexts. This would likely require sustained engagement with current debates in digital ethics, platform governance, and global media inequalities in order to reassess the conceptual scope and normative foundations of SRT in today's rapidly evolving media

environment.

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