

Influence of Social Media on News Reportage and Authenticity of Covid-19 Stories

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Abstract: *This work evaluates the influence of social media on news reportage and authenticity of covid-19 stories. In conducting this study, the researcher raised three research questions and three hypotheses. User and gratification theory was developed in 1974 by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch and Diffusion of Innovations theory by Rogers were used to build theoretical support for the study. The survey research design was used to evaluate the opinions of 53 sampled respondents from Passion FM Uyo and NTA Uyo. After the analysis, findings revealed that, social media has an influence on news reporting in Nigeria and that it also has influence on the authenticity of news reported. Finally, it was found that social media had an influence on COVID-19 news reporting. Based on these findings, it was recommended that users of social media should be wary of some of the contents they consume as unscrupulous users have been found to display misleading information that could be harmful to the public. Again, members of the public are encouraged to desist from the various abuses of the use of social media for the interest of greater number of Nigerians found to be users of the sites in search of various relevant pieces of information.*

KEYWORDS: social media, news reportage, authenticity, Covid-19 stories

INTRODUCTION

For the last few years, media executives and consultants seem to be concerned with only one issue: how traditional news outlets can prepare themselves for what ought to be one of the biggest changes in recent history of distribution and potential market growth – the online business (Ganiyu, & Akinreti, 2011). Not only has digitalization brought new possibilities of reaching audiences as well as clients all around the world, but actually changed the way people communicate and interact with each other. This also means that news distribution itself has to face a new environment: Readers, listeners and viewers are not passive consumers any more but actually engage with news sources and play a growing role in the shaping of what the news business of the

future will look like. One key to this new game are social media platforms (Dominick, 2002). It seems crucial that media firms engage with these new forms of communication in order to stay competitive and follow an old rule: to be where your consumers are. But while this looks like a tough task for media outlets like newspapers or broadcasting companies, for news agencies it could prove even more difficult, especially if they mainly rely on a business to business model. How can news agencies use social media and at the same time maintain their core business of selling news on a subscription basis?

Nobody will deny that social networks play a very important part in the development of future communication markets, as the figures speak for themselves: At the end of 2012 close to 1.9 billion people were using social networks in one or the other way (Dominick, 2002). These users are able to interact with one another, as well as with countless news companies who have entered the social media world. Thus journalism not only has to cope with what shaped the last decades in regards to changing work flows – from the first computers and content management systems to new means of gathering and distributing news via online channels – but it is also confronted with a new type of audience. People are able to gather more news from many different channels than ever before, using traditional sources like newspapers, television or radio alongside online sources or apps on their smart phones. This means nothing less than the need for news companies to rethink the way they handle information, deal with commentary and engage with both their audiences and their customers (Ganiyu, & Akinreti, 2011). According to Dwyer, (2010), many traditional players have developed strategies to deal with these challenges. Whether it is a more focused approach to their core potential whilst distinguishing the key benefits of old media, or an attempt to serve both worlds the analogue as well as the digital. But still there are big differences if a media outlet tries to distribute its news via a website – regardless of whether it is behind a pay wall or not – or via social media channels like Facebook or Twitter. Whereas the website can almost be categorized as a safe environment as all the power over its content lies in the hands of editors, journalists and IT people, social media is something completely different. Here, the power lies with the user – at least to a certain extent. As soon as a posting has been made, the linking and sharing can start, being probably the most powerful tool for the audience. This can be identified as the biggest potential for reaching new recipients. At the same time there is the danger of losing control over the usage of certain amounts of information with the link to the original posting always being present (Dwyer, 2010). “Social media is a term used to describe the type of media that is based on conversation and interaction between people online. Social media are media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques.” - Wikipedia For almost two decades, the web has changed the world and revolutionized how information is stored, published, searched and consumed.

The ripple effect has spread so wide that it impacts not just businesses and industries but crosses over into politics, medicine, media and breaches geographical locations, cultural boundaries and ultimately, affects people’s day to day lives. The great wave of web innovation since Google in 1998 has been in social media. Social media is about

networking and communicating through text, video, blogs, pictures, status updates on sites such as *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *LinkedIn* or microblogs such as *Twitter* (Dwyer, 2010). What makes social media of particular interest to journalism is how it has become influential as a communication and news-breaking tool. In June 2009, the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to delay scheduled maintenance on the service because it was being used by protestors angered by the results of Iran's disputed presidential election. In July 2009, a Twitter user in Jakarta beat most major news companies by tweeting about the Bali bombings. More recently, Google and Microsoft began integrating Twitter messages into their respective search engines, a new feature described as real-time search of the problem.

Statement of the Problem

Nobody will deny that social networks play a very important part in the development of future communication markets, as the figures speak for themselves: At the end of 2012 close to 1.9 billion people were using social networks in one or the other way (Dwyer, 2010). This number has more than doubled in almost a decade, particularly with the surge in usage amongst citizens of emerging economies with huge populations like China, India and Nigeria. These users are able to interact with one another, as well as with countless news companies who have entered the social media world (Ganiyu, & Akinreti, 2011). Thus journalism not only has to cope with what shaped the last decades in regards to changing work flows – from the first computers and content management systems to new means of gathering and distributing news via online channels – but it is also confronted with a new type of audience. In this regard, the social media platform plays an extremely critical role in information dissemination and communication by virtue of its capacity and reach. The outbreak of the novel Corona virus disease 2019 (a.k.a. COVID – 19) which metamorphosed into a global pandemic however exposed the grave vulnerability of the social media in terms of news reportage and essentially the authenticity of the news/information. Ajashi and Alawari (2020) posits that the COVID-19 pandemic posed some serious information management issues, with a plethora of manipulative and distorted information about the virus being brandished across the social media. Ranging from the actual origin of the virus to the infectious and fatality rate, the social media was awash with conflicting and misleading information. All these confusion coupled with the impasse of lack of access to relevant information constituted a major challenge to the conventional media reportage of the pandemic in Nigeria. It is in view of this that the researcher intends to investigate the influence of social media on news reportage and authenticity during Covid 19.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be answered in this study:

1. Do social media have an influence on news reporting in Nigeria?
2. Do social media have an influence on the authenticity of news reported?
3. Did the social media have an influence on COVID-19 news reporting?

Statement of the Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are relevant for this study:

Ho₁: Shows that social media have an influence on news reporting in Nigeria

Ho₂: Shows that the social media have an influence of the authenticity of news reported

Ho₃: Showed that the social media have an influence on the reporting of COVID-19 news stories across Nigeria.

Scope of the Study

This study is focused on a critical appraisal of the influence of social media on news reportage and authenticity of COVID-19 stories. Specifically, this study is focused on ascertaining whether social media has an influence on news reporting in Nigeria, investigating the impact of social media on the authenticity of news reported, evaluating the roles of social media in COVID-19 reporting in Nigeria. This study was carried out at the NTA, Uyo and *Passion FM*; a private radio station in Uyo; Akwa Ibom State – South South Nigeria.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The impact of social media on the production of news

The growth of social networks and the emergence of simple tools – such as provided by YouTube, Flickr, Facebook and Twitter – for enabling the publishing of “personal media” has led to a rebalancing of the traditional relationship between news producers and consumers. Paul Saffo (2005) has reflected on this change:

The Mass Media revolution 50 years ago delivered the world to our TVs, but it was a one-way trip – all we could do was press our nose against the glass and watch. In contrast, Personal Media is a two-way trip and we not only can, but also expect to be able to answer back.

Some of the earliest manifestations of this two-way relationship were the commenting and message boards around news websites, but in the early days there was very little connection or integration into wider mainstream coverage. In Britain, this changed during the Asian Tsunami of December 2004 and the London bombings of July 2005, with footage shot on digital cameras and mobile phones – from networked individuals of the Fifth Estate – incorporated into prime time television coverage for the first time. Within hours of the explosions on the London underground and bus network on the 7th July 2005, the BBC had received more than 1,000 photographs, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 text messages, and 20,000 e-mails. According to the BBC’s Head of News at the time, Richard Sambrook, this led to a rethink of how news organisations needed to think about audiences: When major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on news coverage is a partnership (Sambrook, 2005).

Issues: From misinformation to manipulation and audience distance

Despite the increased opportunities for journalists to enrich their reportage with the use of social media, there have been some complexities in the use of social media during conflicts that journalists have attempted to negotiate. These issues range from technical limitations, especially in terms of access to quality content, to the overall verification

of information, which can lead to misinformation, manipulation or subjective reportage. This is because information spread on social media often does not match the standards of objectivity, independence and accountability to which journalists feel compelled, whether by law, or by professional codes of ethics, to conform (Hermida, 2012). This challenges journalists because social media requires time not only to be verified, but also to be found in the masses of content that is posted on various platforms.

Social Media and COVID-19 News Reporting

In the aftermath of the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, health experts, authorities as well as the media struggled significantly to understand and communicate the details and information inherent in the unprecedented situation facing the world. Consequent upon the novelty of the virus, it was extremely challenging to get reliable information; with both accurate and inaccurate information about the pandemic being reported across several news media (print and electronic). Getting credible and factual information about the origin, infectious and fatality rate of the COVID-19 was a rarity, with different reports that either claimed it was meant to control world population or that it was a biological weapon (Duncan 2020), etc; a situation described by the WHO (2020) as a ‘‘massive infodemic’’.

The unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially its entrance into the country in February 2020 witnessed the inundating of information and misinformation particularly on the social media. Ajasin and Alawari (2020) observe that the pandemic proved a fertile ground for conflicting and misleading information. The period witnessed a massive surge in the circulating of hoaxes, fake remedies as well as conspiracy theories essentially via social media platforms with Coughlan (2020) adding that there was an instinct to spread news without verifying them which subsequently led to an acceleration in level of panic and conversely lowered the level of trust of public health officials and related measures.

However, the serial misinformation replete on the social media platform notwithstanding; the social media still possess certain concrete attraction and advantages which was as well brought to the fore in the management of the pandemic. Considering the fact that a good number of people particularly the young population still prefer sourcing their news and information from the various social media platforms available, the authorities significantly engaged users of social media in disseminating information bordering on the pandemic. This preference and popularity of the social media necessitated that it became a viable media for community and health information spread.

Theoretical Framework

User and Gratification theory

User and gratification theory was developed in 1974 by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (Wimmer & Dominick 2011). Basically, the theory places more emphasis on ‘‘what people do with media’’ rather than ‘‘what media do to people’’ (Katz, 1959 cited in Idakwo, (2011). Uses and Gratifications theory is the study of the gratifications or

benefits that attract and hold audiences to various types of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs.

Social networking sites as new media of communication also lends itself to uses and gratifications approach, in part due to its interactive nature (Grant, 2005). Uses and gratifications research has typically focused on how media are used to satisfy cognitive and affective needs involving personal needs and entertainment needs (Rubin, 2002). This hypothesis specifically puts power in the hands of the crowd. Instead of expecting that media messages have immediate, uniform impacts on the individuals who devour them, the Uses and Gratifications point of view suggests that beneficiaries make planned, purposeful choices about the media messages they open themselves to and at what recurrence taking into account individual needs and cravings independent of its impact on them-positive or negative.

Relating this theory to this current study, it shows that the use of Social networking sites like facebook, whatsapp, instagram, twitter etc has affected authentic news reportage.

Diffusion of Innovations theory of communication

This study was based on diffusion of innovations theory of communication by Rogers (1995) as one of its theoretical foundation. The theory was coined from the work of a 19th century French legal scholar and sociologist, Gabriel Tarde, titled “the Laws of Limitation”, (1903). Diffusion of innovations theory states that an innovation (that is, an idea, new technique, or new technology) diffuses or spreads throughout a society in a predictable pattern. A few people will adopt an innovation as soon as they hear of it. Other people will take longer to try something new, and still others will take much longer. When a new media technology or other innovation is adopted rapidly by a great number of people, it is said to explode into being (Bryant and Thompson, 2002).

Rogers and other diffusion researchers have identified five separate innovation-adoption categories into which all people in a society will fall. These categories include: **The innovators:** This category is described as venturesome and ready to try new things. Their social relationships tend to be more cosmopolitan than those of other groups. Such groups tend to form cliques and communicate with one another despite geographical distances (Rogers, 1995).

The early adopters: they are more localite than cosmopolite. Due to their integral part in the local society, this adopter’s category produces the opinion leaders of any category. Early adopters are sought out for information about innovations, and their advice is valued. Those in this adopter category have the respect of others in the community because of their success and willingness to try new innovations. The respect of others in the community is important to the early adopters and their actions are geared towards preserving that respect (Rogers, 1995).

The early majority: this adopter category includes people who do not wish to be the first to adopt new technologies or ideas. Instead, the early majority prefers to deliberate, often for some period of time, before its members make a decision to adopt. These people serve the important function of legitimizing an innovation, or showing the rest of the community that the innovation is useful and adoption is desirable.

The late majority: members of this category are skeptical and cautious about the benefits of adoption. They wait until most of the community has already tried and adopted the innovation before they act. Sometimes peer pressure or social pressures serve to motivate the late majority group. In other cases, economic necessity induces them to adopt the innovations.

The laggards: members of this group are the last to adopt. The laggards are tied to the past, to the traditional way of doing things, and are reluctant to try anything new. Many of these people interact with others of the same mindset. Once a laggard adopts an innovation, the rest of the society may have moved so far forward that the “innovation” has become outdated (Rogers, 1995).

The theory discussed above conforms to the study because social media are new tools journalists use in carrying out their duties, yet some are still skeptical about its impact in the field of journalism and are reluctant to adopt them or use them.

Empirical Review

Ruth (2010) carried out a study on “Social Media Revolution: Exploring the Impact on Journalism and News Media Organizations (New York Times 2010). In the study, the researcher listed various social media tools available to journalists. The researcher also noted the rise in the popularity of social networking sites as at 2010. The research reports that about 49 per cent of internet users had created or updated a social networking profile, compared to just 17 per cent two years before.

The researcher also explored the impact of social media on the workforce of journalists that it makes their work more efficient in a number of exciting ways, citing an example of how an investigative reporter, with the aid of social media, is able to carry out her work by capturing contents shared on social networks to enrich her stories and sometimes even make use of the virtual audience to help them find out about an issue. The researcher gathered preliminary information using two main strategies; by staying up-to-date on current events and industry news and following conversations and communications by professionals on Twitter. Also the researcher engaged in a few Monday “journchats” on Twitter to see into professional journalists’ mind, hear or rather see what they talk about in relation to media industry and perhaps even engage in conversation with said professionals.

In addition, the researcher found numerous articles and related excerpts in communication related books, journals, magazines, websites, and blogs. Combining information from articles and secondary survey gave the researcher quantitative and

qualitative data that was used to discuss the research purpose, which is to identify how social media has impacted journalism and news organization.

According to the result obtained by the researcher, newspapers have a legacy for breaking news and uncovering stories of historic proportion, yet they are losing ground to a generation of consumers embracing digital and mobile alternatives. The research also found out that even though social media have become popular, TV remains the dominant news source, with 71 per cent of respondents saying they favor TV. The research also observed that the younger generation lacks patience and require speedy news and information and which the internet becomes handy.

Consequently, the research found that about 60 per cent of news organizations were politically biased and were not to be completely trusted from the respondent's perspective while just 20 per cent said news organizations were "independent of powerful people or are willing to admit their mistakes".

This research and the current study are related in the sense that both studies are focused on the impact of social media on journalism and journalists. However it is worthy to note that the reviewed study also studied impact of social media on media organizations too. The reviewed study failed to specify its scope of study and was not based on any communication theory while the current study defines its scope to be journalists in Makurdi metropolis and is based on a communication theory as its theoretical foundation.

Ismail (2012) investigated on how Nigerian Journalists use Social Media to Source Stories (Daily Trust, 9th September 2012). The objective of the study was to discover how Nigerian journalists use social media tools to source for news stories. The study found out that except for few exceptions, Nigerian journalists are excited about the new opportunities social media have offered to them. That it aid them to carry out their tasks of news monitoring and gathering with ease. They are able to explore various sites on regular basis daily like their counterparts in other countries. They also monitor what citizen journalists and newsmakers post on their Twitter handle, Facebook timeline, YouTube, Linkdin, blogs, etc.

The researcher interviewed some Nigerian journalists working with different media houses on their view of social media in relation to their duties and 9 out of the 12 journalists interviewed said that social media aid them to gather news, disseminate and interact with their audience and newsmakers and that social media have brought about "tremendous benefits to them". Also that social media have changed journalistic practice in Nigeria and other parts of the world. While the other three journalists said that social media cause more harm than good on journalism, pointing out that some stories published on social network are unverified and some defamatory in nature which is contrary to the ethical code of the press.

The research therefore is relevant to the current study because it answers one of the research questions posed in the current study as whether social media enhance the productivity of journalists. The scope of the reviewed study is too wide and not effectively executed as most of the interviewed journalists are based in Lagos and Abuja which does not give a comprehensive view of journalists in Nigeria on the study. While the present study is limited to a particular location (Makurdi) to exhaustively execute the research and generate relevant data that can be generalized.

Research Design

Research designs are perceived to be an overall strategy adopted by the researcher whereby different components of the study are integrated in a logical manner to effectively address a research problem. In this study, the researcher employed the survey research design. This is due to the nature of the study whereby the opinion and views of people are sampled. According to Singleton & Straits, (2009), Survey research can use quantitative research strategies (e.g., using questionnaires with numerically rated items), qualitative research strategies (e.g., using open-ended questions), or both strategies (i.e. mixed methods). As it is often used to describe and explore human behaviour, surveys are therefore frequently used in social and psychological research.

Population of the Study

According to Udoyen (2019), a study population is a group of elements or individuals, as the case may be, who share similar characteristics. These similar features can include location, gender, age, sex or specific interest. The emphasis on study population is that it constitutes individuals or elements that are homogeneous in description.

This study was carried out to examine the influence of social media on news reportage and authenticity using Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Uyo and Passion FM Radio Uyo as a case study.

Sample Size Determination

A study sample is simply a systematic selected part of a population that infers its result on the population. In essence, it is that part of a whole that represents the whole and its members share characteristics in like similitude (Udoyen, 2019). In this study, the researcher adopted the convenient sampling method to determine the sample size of 53 staff of Passion FM and NTA Uyo.

Sampling Technique and Procedure

According to Nwana (2005), sampling techniques are procedures adopted to systematically select the chosen sample in a specified way under control s. This research work adopted the convenience sampling technique in selecting the respondents from the total population.

In this study, the researcher adopted the convenient sampling method to determine the sample size. Out of the entire staff of the Passion FM and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Uyo, the researchers conveniently selected 53 participants as sampled size for this study. According to Torty (2021), a sample of convenience is the terminology used

to describe a sample in which elements have been selected from the target population on the basis of their accessibility or convenience to the researchers.

DATA PRESENTATION

The table below shows the summary of the survey. A sample of 53 was calculated for this study. A total of 50 responses were received and validated. For this study a total of 50 were used for the analysis.

Table 1.1: Distribution of Questionnaire

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage
Sample size	53	100
Received	50	78.57
Validated	50	71.43

Table 1.2: Demographic data of respondents

Demographic information	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	32	64%
Female	18	36%
Education		
HND/BSC	30	60%
MASTERS	16	32%
PHD	04	8%

DATA ANALYSIS

Question 1: Do social media have an influence on news reporting in Nigeria?

Table 1.3: Respondent on question 1

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	30	60
No	05	10
Undecided	15	30
Total	50	100

From the responses obtained as expressed in the table above, 60% of the respondents said yes, 10% of the respondents said no, while the remaining 30% were undecided.

Question 2: Does social media have an influence on the authenticity of news reported?

Table 1.4: Respondent on question 2

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	23	46
No	18	36
Undecided	14	28
Total	50	100

From the responses obtained as expressed in the table above, 46% of the respondents said yes, 36% said no. while the remaining 28% were undecided.

Question 3: Does social media have an influence on COVID-19 news reporting?

Table 1.5: Respondent on question 3

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	26	52
No	13	26
Undecided	11	22
Total	50	100

From the responses obtained as expressed in the table above, 52% of the respondents said yes, 26% said no. while the remaining 22% were undecided.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study have been organized and discussed according to the three research questions raised and the three hypotheses formulated to guide the study. The research questions were discussed first followed by the hypotheses as outlined below.

Influence of social media on news reportage in Nigeria

The result of hypothesis one reveals that there is a significant influence of the social media on news reportage in Nigeria.

This result firmly buttresses the assertion of Didiugwu, Ezugwu and Ekwe (2015) that the social media significantly enhances and influences a journalists' news content generation and reporting. Thus journalism in Nigeria not only has to cope with what shaped the last decades in regards to changing work flows – from the first computers and content management systems to new means of gathering and distributing news.

Influence of social media on the authenticity of news reported

The result of the test of the second hypotheses shows that there is an influence of the social media on the authenticity of news reporting in Nigeria. This is because information spread on social media often does not match the standards of objectivity, independence and accountability to which journalists feel compelled, whether by law, or by professional codes of ethics, to conform (Hermida, 2012).

Influence of social media on the reporting of COVID-19 news stories across Nigeria

The result of the test of the third hypotheses showed a significant influence of social media on the reporting of COVID-19 news stories with a massive surge in the circulating of hoaxes, fake remedies as well as conspiracy theories essentially via social media platforms with Coughlan (2020) adding that there was an instinct to spread news without verifying them which subsequently led to an acceleration in level of panic and conversely lowered the level of trust of public health officials and related measures. This ultimately affected how the pandemic was reported by news journalists across Nigeria.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher made the following conclusion.

1. Social media has an influence on news reporting in Nigeria.
2. Social media has an influence on the authenticity of news reported.
3. Social media had an influence on COVID-19 news reporting.

Recommendations

Based on the responses obtained, the researchers proffer the following recommendations:

- a) Nigerians users of social media should be wary of some of the contents they consume as unscrupulous users have been found to display misleading information that could be harmful to the public.
- b) Members of the public are encouraged to desist from the various abuses of the use of social media for the interest of greater number of Nigerians found to be users of the sites in search of various relevant pieces of information.
- c) Media practitioners and academics should devote time to education the people to avoid negative uses of the social media as they form major credible channels of public communication in Nigeria.
- d) Social media users should go extra miles to verify from other credible sources on some of the information they get from the sites since anybody can post anything on social media.

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