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An Assessment of Social Media Platforms as News Sources among Residents of South-east Nigeria

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Abstract

The study was aimed at ascertaining the perception of South-East residents regarding social media usage as news sources. The study was anchored on the perception theory. The survey research method was used for the investigation while the questionnaire was utilised as data collection instrument. Residents of South-East Nigeria constituted the population of the study from where a sample size of 381 was drawn using the Creative Research Systems online sample size calculator. The multi-stage sampling technique was used while tables and simple percentages were deployed to present and analyse the collected data. Based on the analysis of data, it was revealed among others that residents of South-East Nigeria do not perceive the social media platforms as credible sources of news. Accordingly, it was recommended that news gotten via social media should be properly cross-checked for the purpose of authenticity.

Keywords: *Social Media in Nigeria, Social Media and News Sources, Online Journalism in Nigeria, South East Nigerian Social Media, Social Media Platforms for News*

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Introduction

In this contemporary era, social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Myspace and others are now used in producing and sharing information. Twitter especially is described as a media for breaking news in a manner close to omnipresent CCTV for collective intelligence. A lot of breaking news spread on Twitter faster than other type of media. The larger media companies like "CNN", "New York Times", "Time" reach millions of people via Twitter. Not only the companies, but also the journalists and the columnists are also very popular; they have millions of followers who follow them during the day to read their coverage of events. The Turkish Statistical Institute claims that, accessing social network sites and accessing online news have increasingly become two of the major reasons for internet users to go online in recent years (TUIK Data, 2004-2011, p.10). Although there is not any research which focuses specifically on uses and gratifications by Turkish users, some other research shows that Twitter in particular is used for information needs rather than for satisfying social needs. While most favourite reporters and columnists have been followed by one fourth of Turkish users, some of them are more popular than even their companies as of the August 2011 (Sozeri, 2011, p.73).

Traditionally, news is information about events that are currently happening or that have happened recently. These new technologies (social networks) now allow news to be more current as audience are virtually transported to the scene of the event. The presence of Goggle, Twitter, Facebook and other social networking media are also changing the face of journalism. Now it is possible to build customized news report from all the articles being read in the morning to the reader's social network. For instance, Digg is a networking site devoted to such news stories, Digg's web sites provide contents that have been selected by other users from prominent news sources according to the votes of Digg's members to give highlights. This is changing radically the concept of professional journalist as gatekeeper; hence, changes in the concept of traditional news values come to debate (Talabi, 2011).

In the pre-internet era, mainstream media like television, radio and newspapers used to be the primary sources of news. That situation is changing as news websites, most of which are hosted by the major media companies, are now competing sources of news. Alternative news sources on the Internet, like websites featuring user-generated content (UGL), blogs, social networking sites and wikis are also gaining momentum. Like mainstream media, these sites offer a wide variety of news. Some of the news articles on these sites are original reporting of local events and disasters, contributed by audiences or users. Some of them are commentaries on entertainment and news stories appearing in mainstream media elsewhere. From this grew citizen journalism which is a growing voice comprising blogs and social media that analyse and debate issues and stories appearing in mainstream media. Such commentaries and debates generally keep stories alive much longer than the original publishers. Some scholars are of the view that this is emerging to be one of the most important functions of citizen journalism (Chari, 2013, p.113) cited in (Okoro, Diri & Odii, 2013).



Consequently, there has been a decline in the number of people relying on conventional sources of news. According to a study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2011, p.18), in the United States, more people in the 18 to 20 age bracket (65%) now say they get their news from the social media and only 21% cite newspapers as their main source. Even among the over 50s, 34% use the social media to access the news while 38 percent read a newspaper. Furthermore, people are getting news via smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices. In fact nearly half of American adults claim to get some local news and information on their cellphone or tablet computers via the social media (Rosenstiel et al, 2011) cited in (Cochrane, Sissons, Mulrennan, 2012).

Statement of the Research Problem

The emergence of the social media platforms has redefined the way media audience access news. The platforms have brought a new dimension to audience reception of news. They (the platforms) have continued to expand the sources or channels from where news are transmitted to the audience.

Sequel to the need to ascertain how the audience perceive social media as news sources, this study was carried out. The researchers therefore investigated the perception of social media as news sources among residents of South-East Nigeria.

Objectives of Study

The broad goal of this study was to investigate the perception of social media as news sources among residents of South-East Nigeria. However, the researchers specifically sought to:

1. Find out the frequency at which residents of South-East Nigeria use the social media as news sources.
2. Ascertain the perception of South-East residents regarding the use of social media as news sources.

Research Questions

The study provided answers to the following research questions

1. What is the frequency at which residents of South-East Nigeria use the social media as sources of news?
2. How do residents of South-East Nigeria perceive the utilisation of social media as news sources?

Significance of the Study

This study shall serve as valuable literature for future researchers in this area of knowledge. This implies that those who would want to engage in further studies in this area of knowledge will find this study very helpful especially in the area of literature review.

Media organisations and individuals who use the social media to transmit news shall benefit from this study as it will serve as a feedback mechanism regarding how the platforms are perceived as news sources among the audience.

Also, tertiary and research institutions shall find this study relevant in the teaching and learning of online journalism.



Scope and Limitations of the Study

Since the study focused on South-East Nigeria, the residents of the five states in the geopolitical zone constituted the scope of the study. The study was restricted to only those who use the social media as news sources.

Literature Review

The way in which news is conceptualized, gathered, produced, disseminated or consumed is changing in the context of new communication technologies. Earlier research on the impact of new media technologies on journalism practice has tended to focus more on how these technologies have reconfigured news production, dissemination and consumption practices. New media technologies, such as the mobile phone enable journalists to gather news from every nook and cranny of the globe, and send text messages to their newsrooms with relative ease. Others demonstrate how the internet provides media personnel with unlimited access to information on any subject, and how email newsgroups allow journalists to "... tap into the collective brain, wit and wisdom of thousands of knowledgeable journalists and non-journalists" (Berger, 1997, p.124) cited in (Chari, 2013, p.113). The new technologies have offered new opportunities to journalistic practices and modes of news production. The citizen journalism projects, "pro-am" (professional-amateur) actors and crowd sourcings have become sources of information and home to a wealth of independent media alternatively the mainstream media (Croteau & Hoynes 2006) cited in (Sozeri, 2011, p.72).

This growing importance of social media is not surprising considering that editors at traditional media outlets are increasingly telling their reporters to embrace blogs as sources. In 2013, Peter Horrocks, director of the BBC World Service, told his news reporters to use social media as a "primary source" of information. "This isn't just a kind of fad from someone who's an enthusiast of technology," he told them. "I'm afraid you're not doing your job if you can't do those things. It's not discretionary." While social media becomes ever more useful as a source of information, it is unlikely that it will ever actually replace more traditional information sources. A tweet will never replace a face-to-face meeting with a CEO, for example, which will always have more impact on the angle of a story. However, surveys according to Gunn and MacDonald (2011, p.59) show that posts on sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, key blogs, and tweets can, and do, spark initial interest in a story, and add clarity or new information to developing stories. As such, journalists in traditional media will rely on them more and more.

The social media have dramatically changed the way journalists do their work. It is therefore not surprising that about 40% of U.S. journalists said that social media are very important to their work. The importance of these interactive media to the journalist is underscored by the fact that one-third (34.6%) of U.S. journalists spent between 30 to 60 minutes every day on social networking sites. The survey findings also indicate that more than half (53.8%) of all U.S. journalists regularly use microblogs such as Twitter for gathering information and reporting their stories. Other types of social media were used much less regularly, including blogs maintained by other journalists (used by 23.6%), crowd sourced sites such as Wikipedia (22.2%), audio-visual sites such as YouTube (20.2%), and professional sites such as LinkedIn (10.6%). Journalists were least likely to



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use citizen blogs in their work (7.1%). U.S. journalists use social media in their reporting for a variety of purposes. The most common uses of these media are to check for breaking news (78.5%) and to see what other news organizations are doing (73.1%). Social media also are regularly used by U.S. journalists to identify story ideas (59.8%), to interact with audiences (59.7%), to find additional information (56.2%), and to find news sources (54.1%). Social media are least often used for verifying information (24.7%), meeting new people in the field (21.9%), or interviewing news sources (20%) (Willnat and Weaver, 2014, p.18-19).

Talabi (2011) did a paper on “The Internet and Journalism Practice in Nigeria”. The purpose of the paper was to appraise the impact of internet on journalism practice in Nigeria with the aim of bringing to limelight what underlines the under utilization of the new communication technology in Nigeria journalism profession. It also looked at the power of latest technology and how it is changing the traditional journalism. Library research was used to generate secondary data for the paper. The paper posits that what is emerging is a new media ecosystem, where online communities discuss and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These communities it was found out produce participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking which the mainstream media feed upon, develop as pool of tips, sources and story ideas (Talabi, 2011, p.15).

Sozeri (2011) carried out a study entitled “Does Social Media Reduce ‘Corporate Media Influence’ on Journalism? The Case of Turkish Media”. The research basically seeks to understand how the social media were being perceived and used by Turkish journalist for their journalistic practices and their potential to diminish the corporate interests pressure on journalism. To effectively address the tasks of the study, three different qualitative methods were used in different steps of the research. The observation of journalists' conventions on Twitter was used based on the messages (Tweets) of nine very popular journalists from mainstream newspaper and TV broadcasting companies between 15 April and 15 May 2011. Nine of them are very popular and politic correspondents, six of them at the same time are columnist. In other words, all of them have 'star power' in Turkish media space. To evaluate their intentions associated with the agenda, two events which show the differences between mainstream media's and Twitter's approaches have been chosen as the cases and the contribution of journalists to the conversations are been examined via their messages on those days (Sozeri, 2011, p.77).

Paulussen and Harder carried out a study entitled “Social Media References in Newspapers: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as Sources in Newspaper Journalism.” It was an exploratory study which provides an initial insight into how social media are used as a news source in Belgian newspaper journalism. First, the data showed that in the two Flemish quality newspapers, De Standaard and De Morgen, references to social media have become commonplace. As such, the findings give support to the claim that for many of today's newspaper journalists monitoring social media platforms has become a part of their daily newsgathering routines. This does not mean, however, that social media dominate the newspaper content as a source of information. On the contrary, the number of articles citing social media as a news source appears to be low. On average, both



Flemish quality newspapers publish only five articles per day referring to Facebook, Twitter and/or YouTube, either as (part of) subject or as source, or both. In 7 out of 10 of these articles the social media sites function as a source of information. Facebook and Twitter are more popular as a journalistic source in the newspapers than YouTube (Paulussen & Harder, 2014).

Findings reveal that Twitter has been considered an alternative news source to corporate news journalism. However, short case studies show that this claim is a little exaggerated for now. As seen in case studies, the information sharing strategy of journalists is not so different from the mainstream's coverage strategy. The contributions of followers like comments, questions, criticism, make all the difference. These contributions and opportunity to reach enormous sources of information are invaluable for journalistic practices nowadays. Most of the journalists' motivations for being a member of Twitter, are to diversify their sources of information, confirm information and follow different agenda all over the world. They recognized that they were no longer invisible and that they have to be aware of the requirements of this new platform. They want to be accredited so they avoid personal polemic with audiences unless someone is affronted. The younger of them pay more attention to their utterance in consideration of their own career plans (Sozeri, 2011, p.87).

Theoretical Framework

Based on the importance of theories in studies such as this, the researchers anchored the study on the Perception theory.

Perception Theory

Perception according to Bovee, Thill, Dovel and Wood (1995, p.97) is the process of being exposed to a stimulus, paying attention to some degree, and then interpreting the received message. Hence, perception involves the process of exposure, attention and interpretation. In other words, for perception to take place there must be exposure to stimuli with certain level of attention paid to the stimuli and finally the stimuli are interpreted by the audience (Ezinwa, 2015).

Perception theory helps to explain the process by which individual selects, organizes and evaluates stimuli from the environment to provide meaningful experiences for him or her. This means that people focus on certain features of their environment to the exclusion of others. The audience automatically chooses which information to notice and this kind of selection is dependent on different perceptual filters which are based on the consumer's earlier experiences (Smith, 2011). The theory provides explanation on why a particular message is perceived differently by the audience. This implies that the way a particular audience views a given message may differ from the perception of the message by another audience.

This theory is relevant to this study because the study is a perception study. It looked at how the audience perceive the utilisation of social media as sources of news.

Methodology

The researchers used the survey research method to carry out study while the questionnaire was deployed as data collection instrument. A projected population of 21,602,533 residents of South-East Nigeria constituted the population of the study. A



sample of 400 was drawn from the population using the Taro Yamane's formula. The multi stage sampling technique was used to select the States, LGAs, communities and individuals whose perceptions were ascertained regarding the subject of investigation.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The collected data were collated, presented and analysed using tables and simple percentages. After the administration of the questionnaire, 391 copies were properly filled and returned while 7 copies were not returned. The researchers therefore analysed the returned 391 copies for the study.

Table 1: Frequency at which residents of social media use social media as sources of news

	How frequent do you use the social media as news sources?	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Regularly	88	22.5	22.5	22.5
	Occasionally	297	76.0	76.0	98.5
	Don't use as news sources	0	0	0	
	Not sure	6	1.5	1.5	100.0
	Total	391	100.0	100.0	

Table one above shows that majority of the respondents (297) representing 76.0% occasionally use the social media as news sources.

Table 2: Perception of the use of social media as news sources

	How do you perceive the use of social media as news sources?	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Credible	119	30.4	30.4	30.4
	Not credible	264	67.5	67.5	98.0
	Don't use as news sources	0	0	0	
	Can't say	8	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	391	100.0	100.0	

Table two above shows that most of the respondents (264) representing 67.5% perceive social media as news sources without credibility.

Discussion of Findings

The researchers discussed the findings of the study with reference to relevant empirical literature.

Research Question One: What is the frequency at which residents of South-East Nigeria use the social media as sources of news?

This research question was put forward to establish the frequency at which residents of South-East Nigeria use social media as news sources. To answer this research question, data collected and presented on table 1 above were utilised. Table one above shows the frequency at which the respondents use the social media as news sources. Data on the table indicate that 88 respondents constituting 22.5% regularly use the social media as news sources, 297 respondents representing 76.0% occasionally use the social media as



news sources, no respondent indicate the “don’t use as news sources” option while 6 respondents constituting 1.5% indicated that they were not sure of the frequency at which they use the social media as sources of news. The implication is that majority of the respondents occasionally use the platforms as sources of news. Giving credence to this finding, Newman (2015) found in his study that Accra residents regularly use the social media for various purposes but not regular when it comes to accessing news via the platforms.

Research Question Two: How do residents of South-East Nigeria perceive the utilisation of social media as news sources?

This research question was posed by the researcher to ascertain how residents of South-East Nigeria perceive the use social media platforms as news sources. Table two above shows how the respondents perceive the use of social media as news sources. Data on the table show that 119 respondents constituting 30.4% perceive the social media as credible news sources, 264 respondents representing 67.5% perceive social media as not credible sources of news, no respondent indicate the “don’t use as news sources” option while 8 respondents constituting 2.0% indicated that they can’t exactly say how they perceive the use social media as news sources. The means that majority of the respondents perceive social media as not credible news sources of news. This finding is in line with Tellen (2015) who found that citizens of Pretoria do not perceive social media as credible news sources.

Summary of Findings

Based on the analysis of data, the researchers found that:

1. Residents of South-East Nigeria occasionally use social media as news sources
2. Residents of South-East Nigeria do not perceive social media as credible news sources.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers therefore conclude that social media platforms are not seen as worthy sources where the audience can seriously rely for news. This implies that the platforms have credibility problem which has heralded the negative perception among the respondents.

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings of the study, the researchers made the following findings:

1. The audience should always double check the information they get from social media sources to ensure they have the correct information.
2. Factual and verifiable reports should be disseminated via the social media to gain audience confidence.



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