Assessment of Citizen Journalists' Fake News in Media Space

By

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Abstract

This study, Assessment of citizen Journalists' Fake News in Media Space' was to examine the authenticity of information disseminated by citizen journalists to the society. Citizen journalism is an attempts by ordinary citizen without professional training to use the development in technology to gather information and contribute to the public in form of pictures, text message, video or voice note as news via the internet. The study, therefore, was to find out the reason (s) citizens disseminate fake news. Furthermore, the study also aims to ascertain the extent to which fake news has been popularize as brand name. The study used content analysis which enabled the researcher to quantitatively describe the manifest content on media space. The population of study is 8,358,078. residents of Rivers State (UNDP 2014 annual growth rate at 3.2 percent). The researcher adopted the checkmarket website to get sample size of 370. Instrument for data collection was copies of the questionnaire. Findings showed that ordinary citizens are now active disseminators of fake news, however, most of the post centered around politics and crime. Findings also revealed that most of the discourses on media space were not based on important socio-economic issues. The study, therefore, recommends that citizen journalists should use their news contents to engage in discourses that have social significance and relevance in the lives of people.

Key Words: **Citizen, Journalist, fake news, media space, Politics**

Introduction

We live in media society. Mass media surround and influence our world in a variety of ways. They entertain us, they inform us, and they sell us everything. Media are pervasive in modern life. The public is largely passive and accepts unquestioningly the media it consumes, making it more important than ever to understand how their massages may influence us and manipulate our opinion.

News is generally distributed from producers to passive consumers, there are aspects of news which persisted for many years, since the development of journalism, the aspects include; gathering, producing and disseminating which remained within the monopoly of

a few, while being consumed by many. The developments and technological advances in Tv, video, photo and any other digital medium never could break out of this monopoly.

Citizen journalism also known as online journalism is a contemporary form of journalism where media content is distributed via the internet as opposed to publishing via print or broadcast. What constitutes citizen journalism is debated by scholars. However, the primary product of journalism, which is news and features on current affairs, is presented solely or in combination as text, audio, video, or some interactive forms like news games, and disseminated through digital media technology.

There have been different definitions as to what constitute citizen journalism by several scholars. In his contribution, Carpenter (2010) describes citizen journalists as an individual who intends to publish information meant to benefit the community. Citizen Journalism, as cited in Dare (2011), has further been defined as the individual "playing an active role in the process of colleting, reporting and disseminating news and information". Nip (2010) asserts that citizen journalism, sometimes called online citizen journalism, can also be defined as a process in which people were entirely responsible for gathering content, along with envisioning, producing and publishing the news product. Meanwhile, J.D Lasica (2003) developed a typology for the different types of citizen journalism, and they include:

Audience participation (such as user comment attached to news stories, personal blogs, photographs or video footage captured from personal mobile cameras, or local news written by residents in a community). Independent news and information website (consumer reports, the Drudge Report). Full-fledged participatory sites. Collaborative and contributing media sites. Other kinds of thin media (mailing list, email newsletters). Personal broadcasting sites (video broadcasting sites).

What is common from the different definitions put forward by the various scholars is that citizen journalism is people-centered. It attempts to get ordinary citizen without professional training to use the development in technology to contribute to news gathering and reporting. It makes every citizen a reporter. With simple hand set connected to the internet, people can interact, share pictures, text message and voice call, with just a simple click. In essence, citizens are now playing an active role in news and information dissemination.

This is made possible because of fewer barriers to entry, lowered distribution costs, and diverse computer networking technologies have led to the widespread practice of citizen journalism. It has democratized the flow of information that was previously controlled by

traditional media including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Some have asserted that a greater degree of creativity can be exercised with digital device by citizen journalist when compared to traditional journalist and traditional media. The digital aspect may be central to the journalistic message and remains, to some extent, within the creative control of the writer, editor, and/or publisher.

Citizen journalist may not have the eye in distilling certain news qualities such as balance, fairness, objectivity, significance, truth, but they sure do know the type of stories that will capture imagination of people. The power to control the public sphere, where critical rational debates are conducted no longer resides with the media alone, but has shifted to the door steps of the people, who are the custodians of ultimate sovereignty. For this reason therefore, Pavlik and McIntosh (2017) states that "the internet is full of hoaxes, cracks, scams, and cons. The up -to-the-minute, 24/7 nature of news online and via social media and its low-cost distribution make the web an ideal place for misinformation to spread quickly because facts cannot always be quickly verified". (p. 57)

The attracting bate of fake news is the eagerness in which people struggle to be up-to-date with current issues in their environment, especially as it affects them, this is informed by the fact that headlines creates an expectation and leaves an impression on readers about how a story should be interpreted in order to correct initial misconception.

Statement of the Problem

The major events that helped spur the researcher's interest into this study is what happened during the ENDSARS protest in Nigeria on Thursday 8 October 2020, nationwide protests on ENDSARS started after weeks of outrage and anger with videos and pictures taken by citizens, showing police brutality, harassment and extortions in Nigeria. The protests were led predominantly by young Nigerians in different cities alongside many activists and celebrities.

The protest, which morphed from social media campaigns into street demonstrations in October 2020, was triggered by the excesses of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a now-disbanded police tactical unit notorious for cruelty against crime suspects. In its 309-page report, the panel with the aid of armature videos and photographs taken by the protesters, found that soldiers stormed the Lekki Toll Gate to disperse #EndSARS protesters on the night of October 20, 2020 and that at least 48 protesters were either shot dead, injured with bullet wounds or assaulted by soldiers. Retrived on 3rd September+ 2022 from https://www.google.com/search?q=the+burning+of+lakky+by+endsars+protest&oq=the+b

urning+of+lakky+by+endsars&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j33i10i160.34316j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

The worrisome aspect of the videos and pictures are the captions and write ups which tells a different stories capable of further fueling the existing crises.

The nasty effect of fake news is that people are confused by the news stories that contradict each other, both fake news and real stories being shared by the same people, readers get confused about which facts are true and which are false.

In recent times citizen journalists are increasingly becoming more conscious of the effect of their operations on their publics, they try to be careful not to be identified. While many consumer have difficulties in verifying the authenticity and the credibility of the news content they consume, as such, making it tough for public to believe news from online media space, branding every breaking news as fake news or rumour. Udoudo (2019) 'identified rumour as a strong working tool in the hands of citizen journalist'

Wardler (2017) in Amannah (2019) sees the activities of citizen journalist as peddlers of fake news, and describes fake news as a type of yellow journalism or propaganda that consist of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via broadcast news media or online media. Wardler further states, that, 'it is written and published with the intention to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or a person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership, online sharing, and internet click revenue. Michael Radutzky cited in Allcot and Gentzkow (2017) defined "fake news as (sic) stories that are probably false, have enormous popular appeal... and are consumed by millions of people"

Fake news in media space is a big broad discussion forum for Nigerians, covering dozens of topics including politics, crime, technology, business and insecurity etc.

This study, therefore, sought to find out reason citizens takes pleasure in misinforming the public. From the foregoing, the study also sought to find out if, fake news, through it comments thread is able to galvanize the citizenry through discourse that have socio-economic significance.

Objectives of the study

Drawing from the statements above, this study among others sought to:

1. find out the reason (s) citizens disseminate fake news
2. investigate public perception of fake news
3 ascertain the extent to which fake news has been popularize as brand name

Research questions

1. Why do citizens disseminate fake news?
2. What is public perception of fake news?
3 To what extent has fake news been popularize as brand name ?

This study was focused on examining Citizen Journalists' fake news in media space. The study therefore was restricted to the subject matter. Geographically, the study was carried out in Rivers State, Nigeria. However, this is without prejudice to national events that require assessment across the states.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Democratic Participant Media Theory and Gate-keeping theory. Democratic participant media theory was proposed in recognition of new media developments and of increasing criticism of the dominance of the main mass media by private or public monopolies (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2012). From the 1960s onward, calls could be heard for alternative grassroots media, expressing the needs of citizens. The theory supports the right to relevant local information; the right to answer back and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of community interest groups or subculture (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2012). This theory challenged the necessity for and desirability of uniform centralized high-cost commercialized professionalized or state-controlled media. In their place should encourage multiple small-scale local non-institutional committed media which link senders to receivers and also favour horizontal patterns of interaction (Virtual University of Pakistan, 2012). The theory came into existence as a response to the elitist nature of the press; thus, it is known as a Reaction Theory. The theory according to (Folarin, 1998), insists that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and hegemony in media system be broken down so as to guarantee media access for all potential users and consumers.

The need for access and right to communicate is stressed. Bureaucratic control of media is decried (Shah, 2010). The democratic participant media theory as part of the working normative media theories embraces the principles of democratization of the media for the

purpose of accessibility by all and sundry. The main assumption of this theory is that every individual and every part of the society, religious institutions like churches, mosques and many others in the society should have access to the media so that they too can air their views about happenings in the society. Through this, they are automatically exercising their rights to self-determination.

According to (Yaroson & Asemah 2008) " the democratic participant media theory stresses the need for access and right to communication by all".

Asemah et al., 2017) observed that, the strength of this theory is that, the target audiences have an opportunity to make their views heard; the target audiences have the right to alternative news sources. It addresses the inadequacies of the authoritarian and libertarian theories; it helps eliminate marginalization as all persons are given equal access to the media; media are the instruments to champion democracy and it promotes small group media.

However the theory also has its weaknesses; it puts the media in the hands of citizens for their own liberation through a process of conscientiousness, without considering the fact that the citizens may lack the necessary skills to operate the media; not every community and group has the means to establish community media; regulation of contents is difficult in democratic participant media theory; regulatory bodies like National Broadcasting Commission will find it difficult to monitor the content of local media, thus, they may not act responsibly particularly as it concerns abiding by the code of professional ethics.

Gate-keeping Theory of the Media

Post from citizen journalists are not controlled by the power of gate-keeping which the mass media has. In social media websites like facebook.com participants are able to express their arguments, views and opinions without any form of censorship. Individual are free to state what issues they find important enough for discussion. In this instance, the citizens/or public are no longer passive spectators but active creators of news. In the gate-keeping theory, the media are the ones shaping public opinion. The media do the gate-keeping by pushing some events into the public space, while inadvertently withholding others. The concept of gate keeping was coined by Austrian psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1947. In explaining the concept Hiebert (1985) cited in Okunna (1999) say that Lewin used the term gate-keeping "to describe the process by which news item, travelling through channels gains clearance at checkpoints along the way". Hiebert explained further that "Lewin called these checkpoints "gates". The individual or organizations who give clearance was labeled by him as the gatekeepers. Subsequently, Lewin defined gatekeepers

as individuals or groups of persons who control "the travels of news items in the communication channel". On his part, Bittner (1980) defines gate-keeper as "any person or formally organized group directly involved in relaying or transferring information from one individual to another through a mass medium. Bittner goes on to explain that a gate-keeper can be a film producer who cuts a scene from the original script, or any individual in the processing or control of messages disseminated to the public through the mass media.

From the above, we can see that journalists or the mass media can limit what news item makes it through the checks before being disseminated to the audience. In citizen journalism practice, the user is in charge over content, thus removing the power of traditional media as the gate-keeper of news. They are now usurping the customary role of the media as the gate-keeper which should filter what should finally get to the audience. It must be pointed out here that gate-keeping also serve other functions to news item such as checking for errors, clarity, grammatical mistakes, structural errors and checking content for any potentially defamatory material. Understandably, the mass media use gate-keepers to standardize, filter and determine which news item should be made available to the audience. Herein lies the problem; despite the good intentions of the media organizations to maintain certain professional and ethical standards in the process of undertaking the gate-keeping function, certain information can be held back based on the choices, biases, preferences of the editor/reporter. So, what might be considered well enough by the audience is not deemed good enough to make the bulletin by the news editor.

Before now, the media had the power to determine the nature and flow of certain kinds of information. They can expunge a message or remodel a message. They can halt a message by shutting out the gate. It is for this reason that Hiebert et al, as cited in Okunna (1999) informs that all these gate-keeping decisions affect the ability of an audience to receive specific media experiences, therefore, deleting or stopping a message is the gate-keepers' most powerful role. In effect, inasmuch as the media gate-keeps for errors, clarity, mistakes, grammar, defamation, etc, they can indeed reduce the opportunity of the audience to grapple with the entire spectrum of the story. In illustrating the power of the mass media to gate-keep.

Since 2010, and up on till now, Nigeria has been dealing with different crises rocking various parts of the country, from the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, to the Niger Delta militancy in the South-South, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South East, and a lot more of other issues. However, one dominant theme that usually arisen

between these groups and the Nigerian military is that the number of casualties are usually underplayed by the media. It has always been observed that whenever the dreaded Boko Haram militants launched any attack, and there are resulting human casualties, the state owned media with connivance with some private media houses, have been accused of trying to deliberately suppress the actual number of casualties.

Video clips from citizen exposed some of the instances Mohammed said 'no protester was killed at the Lekki tollgate'. In November 2020, the minister attacked **DJ Switch**, a disc jockey, who filmed the army shooting #EndSARS protesters at Lekki tollgate.

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Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design. The method was informed by the intent of the study to elicit opinion of respondents on Citizen Journalists' fake news in media space. The survey method is appropriate for analyzing, interpreting and reporting the status of an institution, group or area in other to guide practice in the immediate feature (Turner & Robb,1979 cited in Adamu, 2007).

Population of study

The population of the study comprised residents of Rivers State. The 2006 National Census Population puts the population of Rivers state at 5, 564, 525. Considering that the state's population would have increased within 14 years period, it became imperative that the current population be determined. Therefore, the United nations projection formula will be use. The United Nations Development Programme puts the annual growth rate at 3.2 percent (UNDP, 2014) Therefore, the projection formula is presented thus

Pp=Gp x pi x T
Where: Pp= projected population
Gp= given population (as at last census)
Pi= population increase index
PT= period believed the given population and year of study.
Thus pp = 5, 564, 525
Pi = 3.2% or 0.0032, 2006-2021=15 years
Pp = 5,564,525 x 0.032 =178,064,8

Therefore:
Pp = 178, 064, 8 x 15 = 2,670,97

In view of the above, the Rivers state has increased by 2,893,553 in fifteen (15) years to get the current population. therefore the research added the projected population (2,793,553) to the given population at the last census (5,564, 525), i.e. 5,564, 525 + 2,793,553 = 8,358,078. This therefore, suggests that the population of Rivers state is 8,358,078.

To determine the sample size, the researcher adopted the checkmarket website for the calculation of sample size. The checkmarket website provides a space where the researcher is expected to enter a margin of 5%. The 95% confidence level implies that 95% of the entire population is sampled. Therefore the sample size for the study is 370.

Copies of the questionnaire served as measuring instrument and data collection for the study.

Wimmer & Dominick 2011, p. 175 opined that "validity of the instrument is the degree to which an instrument actually measure what it sets out to measure". The questionnaire were examined by project supervisor for clarity, coherence and comprehensibility. This was done to test the extent the research questions were consistent with the study variables and as such address the general and specific objectives raised in this study (Okwu, 2017).

The questionnaire was tested for internal consistency. To achieve this, the researcher carried out a test-retest. The test-retest was carried out in the Department of English and Communication Art. Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni Port Harcourt. Rivers State. Within a two week period. The first test was carried out among select final year students of the department. The second which was done the following week was also among the students of English and Communication Art Department. The outcome of the test and retest was consistent with the first.

Data collected was presented and analysed using descriptive statistics. Research questions were answered using simple frequency distribution table, percentage and weighted mean score. A few of the questions were analysed with weighted means scores from a five-point Likert scale.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Issues respondents are conversant with in peddling with fake news

Programme	Frequency	Percentage
1. Political issues	103	27.8
2. Social services (medical, sanitation)	67	18.1
3. Crime and insecurity	185	50
4. Infrastructural development	65	17.5
Total	**370**	**100**

Table 1 above shows that respondents are mostly conversant with fake news disseminated in the areas of crime and insecurity. This result implies that although fake news can be disseminated in several platforms but are mostly in the programmes of crimes and insecurity.

Research Question 1: Why do citizens disseminate fake news

This result sought to ascertain the reason members of the society misinform the public in Rivers state. The result is presented in table .

Table 2: Reasons citizens disseminate fake news in Rivers state

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
1. Mislead the public	59	15.9
2. cause societal damage	48	12.9
3. Increase readership	110	29.7
4. Gain internet click revenue	47	12.7
5. Gain political relevance	106	28.6
Total	**370**	**100**

Table 2 above shows that majority of the respondents (47 or 12.7%) believed that the reason citizens disseminate fake news in media space is not for internet click revenue. This result implies that most respondents do not think financial gains is the reason for peddling fake news in Rivers state.

Research question 2: What is public perception of fake news?

This research sought to gauge respondents' public perception of fake news in Rivers State, the result is presented in table 3.

Table 3: Public perception of fake news

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	138	37.2
Negative	170	45.9
Indifferent	52	14.0
Not sure	10	2.7
Total	**370**	**100**

Table 3 above shows the perception of respondents of fake news in Rivers state. The result shows that the majority of the respondents (170 or 45.9%) had negative perception of fake news in Rivers state. On the contrary, 138 respondents representing 37.2 % had positive perception of fake news in Rivers state. The tin line that separates these main perceptions

(positive and negative) seemingly shows that people enjoy being entertained by whatever is put up in the media space.

Research Question 3: To what extent has fake news been popularize as brand name ?
Table 4: Recognition of fake news as brand name, public perception and acceptability

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	20	5.4
Agree	198	53.5
Undecided	16	4.3
Strongly disagree	29	7.8
Disagree	107	28.9
Total	**370**	**100**

Table 4 indicates that the majority of the respondents (198 or 53.5%) agreed that frequent dissemination of fake news in media space has increased its popularity, thereby making fake news a brand name. The result implies that fake news in media space has come to stay.

Findings
The findings show that political activities, crime and insecurity was the most posted/commented subject matter on fake news in media space.

That infrastructure did not dominate discussions was surprising considering that the country has been battling with bad leadership from politicians, again, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East of Nigeria that has been kidnapping people, burning houses and destroying the railway tracks has re-enforces the fact that fake news peddlers in media space are becoming more conscious of the type of information they disseminate to their publics, they try to be careful not to disseminate news that can be easily discovered. While many consumer have difficulties in verifying the authenticity and the credibility of the news content they consume.

Research question two was intended to ascertain public perception of fake news. It was revealed that citizen's fake news focuses on significant subject matters were more than those on infrastructural programmes. There is no doubt that the finding from research question two corroborates the findings of Kperogi (2011) which revealed that some traditional newspapers are establishing online presence, with user generated content. This of course is as a result of citizen journalism sites such as Nairaland.com as an avenue of

supplying news as they happen, and adding some elements of misinformation to an ever demanding public. Nonetheless, a majority of the comments thread were not issue based, as they basically dealt with soft news such as scandal, social events, accidents and disasters, sports and recreation. This is against what one would call hard or serious news such as public affairs, economic matters, social problems, science and technology, education, health and labour. It must be said that in the field of journalism, hard news allows people to reflect on the stories and has the potential to transform society, by removing the scales from their eyes and the shackles from their foot.

Research question three sought to ascertain the extent to which fake news has been popularize as brand name. It was revealed that the majority of the citizen's fake news on media space was socially acceptable and popularized without trying to dismiss or debase other the perpetrators. This is in tandem with Nnanyelugo, Okoro, and Odii (2013) who opined that citizens should be sensitized on proper use of new communication technology.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study focused on the subject matter of finding out reasons citizens disseminate fake news through the media space. The study revealed that the area of interest where citizens disseminate fake news were political programmes, crime and insecurity among others, it was discovered that the majority of discourse on the media space were not actually based on substance/issues that have the capability to transform / unit the society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings already stated above, the following recommendations were made.

1. The study revealed that there is lack of objectivity on some of the comments posted on social media space, thus we recommend that in order to regain the credibility of the platform, users should only post comment that has verifiable evidence.
2. Again, some of the users use language that was filled with vilification and invectives. This should not be encouraged on the media space as it has the capability to cause public unrest.
3. Mostly, one obvious flaws noticed was the over concentration of ridicule on politics/politicians, social services, crime and insecurity, with less emphasis on infrastructural development. The study recommend that users should concentrate on other subject areas that have the capability of liberating the people from social oppression and bad governance.

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