

Evaluating the Accuracy of Social Media News Reports

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Abstract

The emergence of social media has led to the emergence of new generation of content creators and distributors. Some of these creators have also delved into the business of news production and distribution online. Online news reports come with a lot of imperfections because of the flexible or outright lack of professional gatekeeping. This has led to the emergence of fake news. Based on the Uses and Gratification theory, this study evaluates the accuracy of online news reports, audience reliability on online news platforms and their level of believability. To achieve the afore-mentioned, a pragmatic process of data mining, unobtrusive observation coupled with online and offline survey research methods were deployed. The study also identified and presented dataset of conflicting online news reports and the diverse reactions that follow them. Findings from the study support the need to defend the journalism profession by promoting truthfulness and professionalism in news reporting and dissemination. As a check on the rising profile of online news platforms or social media news, news consumers are advised to check the veracity of such news circulated online through other credible platforms before believing and even sharing them.

Keywords: Accuracy, Ethics, News, Social Media, Professionalism, Online news, Journalism.

Introduction

As expressed by Elgan (2017), technology has advanced to the point where instant communication anywhere in the world is an everyday activity. Social media (an offshoot of technological development) form one of the most common ways of communication and pretty much of knowing anything and everything around the world these days; and it is growing very rapidly, changing and affecting information dissemination in diverse ways. Itule and Anderson (2008) add that before social media, we were extremely limited in our means of obtaining information, depending

largely on the traditional print and electronic media.

Today, that has drastically changed as recent years have seen the development and huge growth of social media to a point where they are now regarded as ubiquitous and revolutionary. Just considering social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the recorded growth rate has been amazing. According to *Zephoria* (2018), Facebook had 2.07 billion monthly active users as at the third quarter of 2017, reflecting a growth rate of 16% in the previous year. Twitter with its 330 million monthly active users as at the third quarter of 2017 recorded a growth rate of 6.5% (*Statista*, 2018). Wade (2018) states that Instagram has doubled its user base, to 800 million monthly active users in two years and this has been fuelled by new features such as stories, shoppable photos, explore pages and many more new features. All these seem to suggest that social media are becoming too big to be ignored.

Rich (2010) describes news as a globally important media form which flows at incredible speed, 24/7, across radio, television, print, mobile phones and the Internet, in both local and international contexts, and, increasingly, in ways both formal and informal (such as blogs and the immediate use of mobile phone footage in disasters). Its audiences are huge, and modern democracies depend on accurate news to give adequate accounts of a complex world, even though this is far from always being the case.

The case of inaccuracy in news reporting has become a worldwide concern. In 2015, *The Conversation* reported that the World Economic Forum (WEF) invited its 1,500 council members to identify top trends facing the world, including what should be done about them. The WEF consists of 80 councils covering a wide range of issues including social media. Members come from academia, industry, government, international organisations and wider civil society. The top three issues highlighted for 2014 concerned rising societal tensions in the Middle East and North Africa; widening income disparities, and persistent structural unemployment. Perhaps surprisingly, in tenth place was a concern over the rapid spread of misinformation online, specifically social media's role in this. At a value of 3.35 this was seen as somewhat to be very significant.

Elgan (2017) laments that within a number of professions, journalism being an obvious one, the spread and potential for reporting misinformation is a genuine concern. Being first to report breaking news has long been a key value for traditional media outlets. Though this may no longer hold the appeal it once had. Now some news organisations rather place higher value on being right even if that means not being first in reporting a story. This is probably a result of various high-profile mistakes made recently using social media information. All thanks to the Internet in general and social media in particular, there is proliferation of news technologies and forms leading to 24-hour news in different forms. Every person armed with an Internet enabled device is empowered to be a news reporter thus the populace are faced with a social space with series of reports that sometimes prove to have no logical bearing.

Based on the rate at which inaccurate information find prominence in the social media sphere, it could be argued that social media reports lack credibility. This also raises ethical concerns.

Based on a pragmatic method of data mining and unobstructive observation, this study evaluates the concerns over accuracy in online news reporting and also seeks to highlight possible ways of ensuring accuracy when obtaining news via social media platforms.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Examine the accuracy of news reported through social media platforms.
2. Find out which is the more preferred medium for obtaining news; between traditional media and online media.
3. Ascertain the most visited website for obtaining news and the reliability level of such website.
4. Examine how social media have affected news reporting
5. Find out if Internet users make efforts to verify news obtained via social media

Research Questions

This study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How accurate are news reported through social media platforms?
2. Between traditional and new media, which is more preferred for obtaining news?
3. Which are the most visited websites for obtaining news online and how reliable are they?
4. In what ways have social media influenced news reporting?
5. As a social media reporter, how often do you verify information before posting on the Internet?

Statement of the Problem

According to the *Pew Internet Report* of 2016, more than 250 million people obtain news from the web on a daily basis. However, questions have been raised about the credibility of online news; these concerns are significant in that journalism is built on credibility. News reporting should not be subjected to personal opinion; rather it should be approached in an objective manner with the purpose of stating the facts. However, recent concerns over the credibility of online news reports have magnified the concept of fake news, further raising concerns about the credibility of the so-called online journalism. Therefore, if different arms of news reporting have ethics of which they operate under, should the act of news reporting be an all for all activity? How accurate are the news items reported via social media? Should they be consumed gullibly or should verification always be carried out? Using data from online and

offline survey method, this study seeks to examine the accuracy of social media news reports.

Literature Review

Social Media

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), there are many differing definitions of what social media are (and are not). At their root, social media are understood to be web-based platforms that enable and facilitate users to generate and share content, allowing subsequent online interactions with other users (where users are usually, but not always, individuals).

Taprial and Priya (2013) describe social media as: “all web based applications which allow for creation/exchange of user-generated content and enable interaction between the users. These could be in the form of social networking sites, blogs, Internet forums, bookmarking sites, online community sites and Q&A sites etc.” (p.8). Social media platforms such as Facebook have a dramatically different structure than previous media technologies used in news reporting. Content can be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. An individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as most reputable news organisations can. The issue of inaccuracy in online news got the Chairman of Channels Media Group, Mr. John Momoh to lament:

Social media, blogs and the fake news phenomenon have all thrown the media in a precarious position. Those of us who still believe in the civic value of good journalism has been left in a quandary...social media, which many had hoped will be a saviour with its open access and extensive reach, have actually compounded the problem by rewarding speed and sensation, over accuracy. Both broadcast and print media are faced with the challenge of unprofessional reduction on the quality of information disseminated (*Channels Television*, 2018).

Social Media have the ability to increase the distribution of news and content and build a network through which this content can be disseminated. Statistics from *Social Bakers* indicates that as far back as July 2009, Facebook surpassed email as the number one platform used to share content. Social Media are increasingly becoming the primary way through which many people find out about, respond to, and share news. It turns the information on a static webpage into content that is shareable in a way impossible to replicate on any other electronic platform. In the March 2010 Pew Internet report, titled *The Strength of Internet Tie*, more than half (52%) of people surveyed who get their news online used Social Media. Furthermore, a replica of that study in 2017 reports that 67% of Internet users have contributed to the creation of news, commented about it, or disseminated it via postings on Social Media sites.

News and Dominant Value

Branston and Stafford (2007) argue: “However dispersed news is now, it is not as obvious a 'thing' as it may seem to be. News does not exist, free floating, waiting to be discovered in the world outside the news room, as is suggested in many images of news reporting” (p. 196). This infers that news values systematically construct rather than simply accompany the 'gathering' of news. They are not consciously held value. Indeed, many journalists would say that their main ideal is the achievement of objectivity or truth, and this remains an important aspiration, whatever the problem with stating it as an absolute standard.

News is the end product of complex processes of evaluation and framing. The process begins with a usually speedy sorting and selection of events and topics according to professionalised news values (and lived practices), defined as “the professional codes used in the selection, construction and presentation of news stories in corporately produced press and broadcasting (O'Sullivan *et al*, 2003, p. 1994).

As expressed by Branston and Stafford (2007), two points are often made about news within media studies:

1. It is not transparent, not unbiased, not the 'window on the world' it often sets itself up to be.
2. Its constructed versions of events usually serve dominant interests. This matters particularly with television news, from which most people get their sense of the world's happenings, especially at moments of perceived crisis (p. 194)

In upholding its value of news accuracy, *Channels Television* released a disclaimer notice during its programme 'Politics Today' on Wednesday, January 13th, 2018. The disclaimer notice was a response to a news release by an Internet user who claimed his source to be channels news. Mr. Seun Okinbaloye, (the programme anchor) raised concern over the message which proliferated social media about the anchor of 'Politics Today' making conflicting announcement on Delta State Local Council elections. He complained: “the writer of the post went as far as creating an old visual of this programme to substantiate his claims with a view to misinform the public. We wish to set the record straight that the information is fake and the story is totally untrue” (Okinbaloye, 2018). He added:

I did not at anytime say any of the things attributed to me on any of our platforms. We condemn the intentional attack on my person and the integrity of this organisation. The story is only false and exists as a figment of the imagination of those who have shown to be on a mission of corrupt character and assassination. We advise those orchestrating these stories and posts to retract and desist from propagating such falsehood (Okinbaloye, 2018).

Fig. 1: Disclaimer Notice Broadcast by Channels Television, Lagos



Source: Channels Television

What Makes News?

According to Dominick (2011), “news values are formed by tradition, organisational policy, economics, and more recently, by the digital revolution” (p. 304). News is new, it is perishable and stale news is not interesting. The digital revolution has put an additional premium on news timeliness. Nonetheless, most journalists still agree that there are core elements that characterise news worthy events. Itule and Douglas (2008, p.15) outline the elements to include:

1. **Timeliness:** is it a recent development, or is it old news?
2. **Proximity:** is the story relevant to local readers?
3. **Conflict:** is the issue developing, has it been resolved or does anybody care?
4. **Eminence and prominence:** are noteworthy people involved? If so, that makes the story more important
5. **Consequence and impact:** what effect will the story have on readers?
6. **Human interest:** even though it might not be an earth-shattering event, does it contain unique, interesting elements?

Social Media and the Changing Delivery of News

Constant changes in technology have spawned an alphabet soup of new terms related to forms of delivering news. Almost all news websites offer to deliver information via the Internet to devices that are Internet enabled. Rich (2010) lists some of the terms that describe the changing forms of news delivery:

1. **Blogs:** The term blog is short for weblog because blogs are posted on the web, particularly in free social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. A blog can be a personal journal or brief commentary about any topic and can include audio or video.
2. **Podcast:** This is digital media information in audio or video form distributed over the Internet for use on a portable media player.

3. **RSS:** These letters stand for Really Simple Syndication. It enables an Internet user to subscribe to certain blogs or podcasts and receive updates regularly. Also, search engines such as Google or yahoo offer to deliver automatic updates of news via RSS feeds. Such feeds usually contain headlines, summaries and links to the articles concerned.
4. **Aggregator:** This software compiles or collects certain web information that an Internet user wants delivered via subscription regularly. The aggregator is also known as a feed reader because it reads the sites it will feed to its user. It checks such sites for new materials and downloads updates to the users Internet enabled device.

Features of Online News

The web has changed the nature of news in many ways. Rich (2010) identified the following:

1. **Continual Deadlines:** When news story breaks, reporters at many newspaper and broadcast organisations are expected to file the story immediately for the web and update major stories online throughout the day. Competition for readers is now very keen.
2. **Interactive Content:** One of the main distinctions of online news is the ability to interact with readers. Web news stories often feature polls, chats, and questions at the end of stories to prompt readers to express their views. More than ever, writers need to consider how their audience will be affected by the story, regardless of the medium.
3. **Related Links:** Online news is accompanied by links to related information, so a news story may no longer be a single entity. Traditional print and broadcast news stories also refer readers and viewers to related online information. The web has intensified research and reporting.
4. **Nonlinear Structure:** Print and broadcast news stories are written in linear order – to be read or heard from beginning to end as if in a straight line. Because the web has features like links and multimedia features, it creates a nonlinear environment, meaning readers may access content in any order they chose. Although many online news stories are still linear, original web content is organised in more related pieces. Instead of one story containing all the information, nonlinear news might be split into separate parts for background, profiles, timelines, databases and multimedia.
5. **Databases:** Many news sites offer databases that allow users search for information about different topics and concerns.
6. **Personalised Journalism:** In addition to blogs as a form of personalised journal, online news sites are reaching out to other users by asking them to contribute their personal stories.
7. **Specialised Beats:** Almost all news sites feature sections devoted to health,

technology, money, travel, and other subjects that appeal to readers' special interests. Although traditional media have always covered these subjects, sometimes limited to certain days of the week. Web news sites offer more frequent and more thorough coverage.

The Importance of Accuracy

Accuracy is paramount for a good journalist. Every mistake could jeopardise a newspaper's or broadcast station's credibility with readers and viewers. Because of the credibility factor, newspapers throughout the country print corrections every day, many for the incorrect spelling of peoples' names. That's another reason for proof-reading and confirmation of stories. According to Stephens (2005), accuracy is “a journalist's religion; an error of fact is a professional sin. Some might argue whether there is such a thing as truth, but there certainly are such things as fact” (p. 384). He added that “the basic attitudes that lead to inaccuracy are fudging, assuming, sloppiness and trusting” (p. 384).

Rich (2010, p.316) observed that:

Print and broadcast journalists and public relations practitioners have codes of ethics that govern their media. Although codes do not resolve ethical dilemmas, they can serve as guides. But who tells bloggers and citizen journalists what ethical principles to follow? The blogosphere is like an unruly wild west with no sheriffs to enforce law and order.

With the proliferation of blogs and social networking sites, journalists have raised concerns about the lack of any ethical codes to address these forms of media. However, Rich adds that several news and blog organisations have proposed codes of ethics and some require bloggers to adhere to ethical principles stated on their sites. The media bloggers association (www.mediabloggers.org) encourages its members to follow these standards:

1. Honesty, fairness and accuracy. Use links to supporting documents whenever possible.
2. Transparency. Clearly disclose conflicts of interest
3. Accountability and trust. Use your own name and offer a means for readers to communicate with you.

In addition to the requirements to be accurate, some of other principles in that code are:

1. The citizen reporter does not spread false information
2. The citizen reporter does not use abusive, vulgar or offensive language.
3. The citizen reporter uses legitimate methods to gather information
4. The citizen reporter does not damage the reputation of others by composing articles that infringe on personal privacy

Still in an attempt to promote accuracy in online news reporting, Jonathan Dube, creator of cyberjournalist.net, proposed a code of ethics for bloggers based on

the code from the Society of Professional Journalists (www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp). His model includes these main points:

1. Be honest and fair. Never plagiarise; identify and link to source when feasible
2. Minimize harm
3. Be accountable. Admit mistakes and correct them promptly
4. Disclose conflicts of interest

The fight in ensuring accuracy in online news reporting has resulted in the operation of webpages that specialise in verifying information spread online. Such include the web page *Check4Spam*, *Snopes*, *Hoax-Slayer* and so on. These webpages have also established their presence on different social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Academic bodies are not left out in the struggle to positively fine tune the act of online reporting. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) has established a body for student bloggers called 'The UNN Bloggers' Association'. This body holds in-house training and also host the student blogging challenge which runs twice a year; in March and October.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Uses and Gratifications Theory; according to Musa, Azmi and Ismail (2015), the theory was pioneered by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974. But McQuail (2010) asserts that the theory could be traced from the early 1940's when researchers started investigating why people listen to popular radio programmes and why they read newspapers daily. Therefore, the theory emerged in response to the needs of explanation to why people use certain media and the benefit they get from them.

Asemah (2011) explains that the basic assumption of the Uses and Gratification theory is that people use mass media for different reasons and seek to derive various gratifications. However, the emergence of social media technologies changes the way people use mass media as they differ in forms and context. Therefore, people who use social networks and other computer mediated communications are quite different from the mainstream media audiences who relied on specific media contents (Li, 2015). Social media audiences have the advantage and freedom to actively seek for information and many messages that are of interest and benefit to them.

New media technologies have not only altered the way information is gathered and distributed but have also change the existing relationship between mass media and their audiences. Li (2015) states that people use social media to satisfy their needs which include cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, tension release needs, and medium appeal needs. For this, social media become a fertile research field demonstrating the direct relevance of the Uses and Gratification theory and its participants (Matei, 2010).

Review of Empirical Studies

Cases of Conflicting Online News Reports

The World Wide Web has changed the dynamics of information transmission and agenda-setting. Facts mingle with half-truths and untruths to create online news contents. Social media in particular allow users to create and distribute contents to a widespread audience. And this in a paragraph has empowered a lot of people to become news reporters; reporting both the truth and untruth. According to Elgan (2017), the rise of false information online is caused by five factors:

1. The Internet allows anyone anywhere to publish anything everywhere
2. Digital content is easy to counterfeit or modify
3. Many people have powerful incentives to spread false information
4. It is easier for social network algorithms to favour emotionally reactive content than true content
5. The public increasingly relies upon digital Internet content.

Lots of news breaks on social media with different versions all claiming to be reporting the truth. One of such is a story accompanied with pictures that flooded different social media platforms some time in 2017. *Now8news* claimed, a 24 year old female tourist from Germany reportedly gave birth to a litter of German shepherd puppies in Stellenbosch, Western Cape Province in South Africa, after being hospitalised with severe stomach pains. The story continued that Doctors at the Western Cape private hospital were surprised to see Kedder (the supposed woman who gave birth to puppies) go into labour, as she did not know she was pregnant and it was even more of a shock when three tiny puppies came out instead of a baby – this they claimed was stated by Dr. Brown of the Medical Centre where Kedder gave birth to her puppies. *Now8news* went further to claim Kedder admitted that while she was recently living at home, she would often have sex with the family dog, Jonsey, because she couldn't find a date.

Check4Spam (2017) carried out a verification process and claimed: “It is false. It is a hoax which is already debunked by *Snopes*” Both *Check4spam* and *Snopes* are independent online news verification sites that publish results on investigations into news that trend online. They explained that the pictures that accompanied the story were life-like baby dolls that had appeared online in an article titled “Amazing Na'vi Dolls Based on the Hit Avatar Movie Look Like They are Straight Off the Film Set” as at 6th November, 2016. *Check4Spama* added that the video accompaniment of the story is about Na'vi dolls based on the movie *Avatar* created by a Spanish company called Babyclon. A look at the Babyclon Company Instagram account ([babyclon_oficial](#)) confirmed the findings of *Check4Spamas* and revealed the pictures of the dolls produced with different looks and a voice description of their capabilities. A case like this further calls for strengthen investigation over online news.

Fig. 2: Babyclon produced by the Babyclon Company



Further inquiry revealed an article by Taylor (2017) who inferred: “These are the amazing, if slightly confusing, baby Na’vi dolls that look like they are straight out of the blockbuster film”. The post was accompanied by pictures of the dolls and carried a date older than when the news of puppy babies flooded the Internet. Taylor explained that Babyclon is a company that makes incredibly realistic baby dolls and has created some painted with the iconic blue markings of the Na’vi in the Avatar film. To further assert this claim are videos released on the company’s Instagram page demonstrating just how lifelike the dolls are. The Babyclon Company, on its website (www.babyclon.com) described itself as a Spanish Company founded by Cristina Iglesias and specialises in a range of different lifelike dolls which have a

starting price tag of more than 800Euros. The website stated: “The material used in the manufacturing of our Babyclon doll is platinum medical silicone, which is the most flexible, elastic and resilient there is in the market. This silicone has very little oil in its composition, which makes it last longer and doesn’t transpire oil with the pass of time. The dolls also come with a chip and a certificate of authenticity”.

Another news story that attracted so much interest on social space was in December, 2016. It was a story about a 12-year-old boy found mysteriously in the wall of a house in Ondo State, Nigeria. Mmuojeke (2016) quoted a Facebook user as saying: “am too shocked for words because no one can begin to imagine or even explain how the assailants managed to carry out the atrocious act”. This infers that the boy was a victim of an assailant and fortunately he has been rescued. Egbo (2016) quoted another Facebook user as saying: “Mysterious things that happen in Africa. A 12 year old boy found in the middle of a moulded block in Ondo State. Am too shocked for words, I don’t know how to explain the possibility of this because it is

beyond science. Only someone with deep understanding of the spiritual realm will analyse this. Someone help us explain this please”. This version concluded that the incident is purely metaphysical, attributing the cause of the event to some supernatural powers. Responding to Egbo's side of the story, an online user, Olorunleke (2016) insisted: “Maybe you should find out if he was really buried or he entered into that place and got stuck. Why was he singing? Or how long was he there? Can he talk or what is the state of his health? Do not just copy story and paste here.... Work”. This implies that not all patronisers of online news are gullible to what the social space throws at them.

Another version by Bohlah (2016) claimed the report from a public relations officer and online media personality, Rose P. Graham was the true story of what happened. His report claimed:

The owner of a brick house where a young boy was rescued alive in Ondo state recently has been declared wanted by the officials of Ondo State police command. The innocent boy who is said to be 12 years old was declared missing by his parents several years back. He was rescued at a house located on Oduduwa Street in Ijapo area of Akure few days ago. When his parents were contacted, they claimed some spiritualists told them he has been used as sacrifice and that they should stop looking for him but as fate will have it, those who heard the sound of the boy as he was singing broke the wall and rescued him alive. People are still wondering as to how the boy made it to the foundation of the building that is over 20 years old and how he managed to survive. An eyewitness at the scene who identified himself as a priest said the boy was called into the place from a spiritual altar and that he has been there for more than five years and that they fed him with human flesh and blood from the spiritual realm. He urged the parents of the boy to take him to a powerful native doctor for redemption ritual because he is now a demon in human form.

Bohlah's version swore to relate the truth about the incident and even involved a priest who recommended that the services of a native doctor be sought. The controversial and varying connotation of the incident propelled *Channels Television* to conduct an investigation to get the true picture of the incident. According to a news report by *Channels Television* (2016), a crew for the television station visited the town in Ondo State and was at the very house where the incident happened. *Channels* reported that the incident had happened at a bungalow located on 3B Akinfemisoye Street, Oduduwa Area in New Town, Ondo City in Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State. They expressed their report thus:

According to the information gathered, the owner of the house had travelled out of the country several years ago. But the building at the back is being inhabited by tenants who are students of the Adeyemi College of Education in the town. Charity Adebayo - one of the students living in the compound

told Channels Television that the boy, who is suspected to be mentally deranged, fell into a little space between the walls of the house and a food canteen next to it. She claimed that they the occupants of the house started hearing the boy saying meaningless things from inside the wall. Charity explained that at daybreak, people came and broke the fence and brought the boy out and the grandmother of the boy came to pick him. Felicia Olaniyi, who operates the food canteen, gave her own account of the story. She stated that the boy was said to have escaped from his grandmother one evening while she was taking him to a church for healing and thus must have fallen in-between the walls of the two buildings. According to her, after they heard the voice of the boy in the wall, people got attracted to the scene and a ladder was brought. The boy was discovered in the space and the wall was broken to bring him out. She added that the residents alerted the police before the boy was brought out and also corroborated Charity's claims that he was taken away by his grandmother. Michael Gbala, a medical practitioner, who also lives in the neighbourhood, told Channels Television that he learnt that the boy was mentally deranged.

Channels Television further reported that, in a determination to get to the root of the matter and more revelations, the Television crew proceeded to the church where the boy was taken to by his grandmother for healing. The church was overseen by an old woman, Prophetess Dorcas Adebayo who explained that the boy's grandmother had brought the boy for healing but later came back to take him away. She said she believes the boy must have, in a bid to escape from the grandmother after she took him away from the church, fallen into the wall. The old prophetess added that she did not know the boy's whereabouts ever since. In an interview with Channels Television, a little boy also gave his account of the story, saying that the boy had been taken to the State Specialist Hospital in town. At the hospital, sources said that the boy's name is Aduragbemi Saka and that he was admitted but had since been discharged. *Channels Television* went ahead to report that the address of the boy and his grandmother is at Number 11, Okegbogi Street in the town. The television station reported to have paid a visit to the address; on getting to the house, it was locked with a padlock and the residents of the street refused to speak to reporters about the incident but claim that they know the boy but had not seen him for a long time.

The report by Channels television brought out a version of the incident no one had found important to investigate. Incidents and reports such as these calls for more caution and heighten the need for proper investigation into news reported online.

Method

The research method adopted for this work employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Survey was the research design; copies of questionnaire were administered to 300 respondents across the three Senatorial Districts of Akwa Ibom

State. Out of the 300 copies of questionnaire administered, 289 were filled and returned. The sampling techniques were both probability and non-probability which involved cluster sampling and purposive for targeting social media users. To get the broadest view, the authors also launched an online poll survey, (using the poll application 'polleverywhere') of which respondents across different countries participated. Though the online poll was launched using 'polleverywhere', links to the poll were posted on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; the links were also distributed through WhatsApp. By this, participants only had to click on the link to gain access to the poll and partake in the survey.

The questions were guided by the principles of the Uses and Gratification theory which seeks to understand why people seek out the media that they do and what they use it for. The theory assumes that individuals have power over their media usage, rather than positioning individuals as passive consumers of media. Some of the survey questions were close ended while some were open ended to allow enriched response. Using the online medium guaranteed that participants are Internet users. The results of both survey approaches were then tabulated to achieve the objectives of the study. Also, data mining allowed the authors to sort cases of conflicting social media news reports and weigh them against different reactions.

Results/Discussion of Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Gender of the Respondents

SOURCE	Male	Female	Total
Questionnaire	115 (39.8%)	174 (60.2%)	289
Online Poll	234 (43.7%)	301 (56.3%)	535
	349 (42.4%)	475 (57.6%)	824

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents

SOURCE	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55 & above	Total
Questionnaire	29	76	108	58	18	289
Online Poll	22	204	291	13	5	535
	51 (6.2%)	280 (34%)	399 (48.4%)	71 (8.6%)	23 (2.8%)	824

Table 3: Highest Educational Qualification of Respondents

SOURCE	Primary	Secondary/ High School	Tertiary	Total
Questionnaire	3	69	217	289
Online Poll	2	47	486	535
	5 (0.6%)	116 (14.1%)	703 (85.3%)	824

Table 4: Most Visited Website for News

Source	Face book	Twitter	Google	Newsp Sites	TV Station sites	None	Total
Questionnaire	83	61	53	34	17	41	289
Online Poll	60	106	7	101	176	85	535
	143	167	60	135	193	126	824

Data from Table 4 shows that a greater number of the questionnaire respondents obtained news from Facebook; reasons outlined in the questionnaire that supported the choice of the medium include the ease of retrieval and availability of shared information. By this, users gain easy access to contents they did not subscribe for and do not need to first of all conduct a search before being informed. For the online poll, more persons preferred obtaining news from television station websites. Reasons for the choice included the audio-visual power of the medium which allows for clarity and gives assurance of accuracy.

Table 5: Most Preferred Medium for Obtaining News

Source	Radio	TV	News papers	Social Media	None	Total
Questionnaire	35	67	42	106	39	289
Online Poll	97	185	34	159	60	535
	132	252	76	265	99	824

From Table 5 above, the questionnaire respondents mostly preferred obtaining news from social media. The reason listed included the ease of accessibility, and constant updating feature the App comes with. This is coupled with the interactive nature of the medium which allows for contribution and airing of views thus giving room for creating of bond. From the online poll, television is most preferred. Reasons outlined

Table 6: Most Reliable Medium for Obtaining News

Source	Radio	TV	News papers	Social Media	None	Total
Questionnaire	78	104	69	31	7	289
Online Poll	89	272	119	55	-	535
	167	376	188	86	7	824

Data from Table 6 show that both the questionnaire and online poll respondents choose television as the most reliable medium. Reasons given explained that though social media have wider coverage and are more easily accessible, television remains a medium operated under ethics and thus information from there is more reliable. They added that, often, social media users quote television station as a way of buying into its integrity especially when forwarding messages online.

Table 7: Most Accurate Source of News Report

Source	Radio	TV	News papers	Social Media	None	Total
Questionnaire	60	83	77	59	10	289
Online Poll	189	213	87	43	3	535
	249	296	164	102	13	824

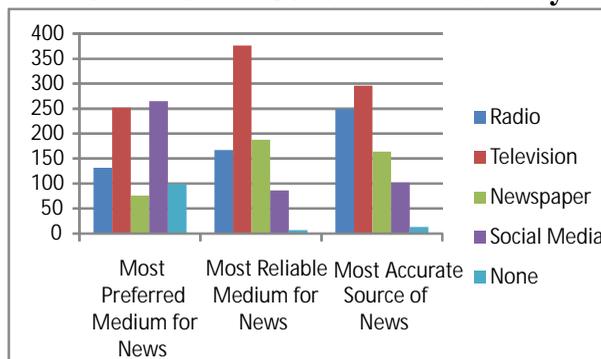
Data from the survey shows that, while more people find it convenient to get news reports from social media, not all of them find reports via social media to be accurate.

Table 8: Efforts at Verifying News Obtained from Social Media

Source	All the time	Most times	Rarely	Never	Total
Questionnaire	54	78	88	69	289
Online Poll	213	185	113	24	535
	267	263	201	93	824

Data from Table 8 shows that respondents make attempt to verify information obtained via social media. Reasons obtained from the survey stated that often time conflicting versions of reports surface online thus consumers at a fix as to the version to go with. Below is a bar chart representation of respondents' responses analysed to ascertain the accuracy of online news reports.

Fig 1: Bar Chart Representation of Respondents' View on Choice of Medium for News and Concern for Accuracy



Conclusion

People wake in the morning and want to know what happened since they went to bed. They read up posts by news stations and papers, sort through tweets to get the news, read WhatsApp broadcasts, Facebook post all in a bid to stay informed. With these and increasingly more avenues opened up by social media, the quest for news is not likely to go away. Social media have helped present news in simplified and entertaining form thus there is increasing interest in news across different age groups. While this is a positive development, it also calls for caution in its operation. It calls for a defence of the journalism profession.

The Uses and Gratification theory on which this study is based is an audience-centred approach that focuses on what people do with media, as opposed to what media do to people. Thus supporting freedom of the mass media and protection of individuals' right to contribute to content creation and distribution, however the findings of this study calls for rationale and caution in consuming everything news the social media has to offer.

The ethical guidelines of the Society of Professional Journalists insist on seeking the truth and reporting it. And since the democratic nature of the social space might not allow this to be checked properly, it therefore falls on Internet users to always test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid gullibility. For the news reporter, inadvertent error should be avoided while having in mind also that deliberate distortion is not permissible.

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