Online-Newspaper Reports of 2015 Nigerian Presidential Election: The Impact of Readers' Comments on Voters

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ABSTRACT

This study did a content analysis on readers' comments to online-newspaper reports of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Using two online newspapers as a case study, readers' comments on randomly selected 10 political news stories in the 30 days prior to the election were used as samples. Readers' comments were rated based on their analytical and persuasive content. An opinion survey of 200 voters following the election was also conducted to justify the influence of the comments on voting behaviour of readers. Using gate-keeping and public-agenda in readers' comments as theoretical underpinning, this study found that the direction of more than three-quarter of online readers' comments influenced the voting behaviour for more than 90% of online-newspaper audience. It concluded that the platform could be an avenue not only to boost political campaigns but also to measure public opinion on political issues.

Keywords: Agenda transition, Feedback, Online-newspaper, Political behaviours, Readers' comments

INTRODUCTION

Readers-comments on political issues and its implication on voting behaviours in online

newspaper reports is an area of importance in influencing voting behaviour.

Mobile phones with internet facilities have made reading online newspapers a public enlightenment avenue most especially among literate Nigerian youths. Reading and participating in online newspaper reports according to Brossoie et al. (2012) only requires internet access, a personalized site user name (most often unreal i.e. nick-

name), and agreement to abide by site posting rules. The readers' comment forums broaden the commenters' understanding on news reports as they express their thoughts.

Brossoie et al. (2012) cite (Bentley et al., 2007; Cenite & Zhang, 2010; Goode, 2009; Lee & Jang, 2010) to succinctly describe online-newspapers and readers' relationships as participatory journalism, the concept that has become a household to the researchers and journalism scholars. They submitted that:

The readers posting comments (i.e., posters) are creating news, ideas, and public discussion rather than just consuming information. Their exchange of comments fosters communication that is more provocative than traditional media formats and influences a broader audience about how to think about solutions to community problems especially among persons less inclined to analyze and contemplate issues.

The attention is on the benefits of online comment forums most significantly on its all-encompassing opportunity to increase public awareness, free of media agenda and propaganda; scrape the dictatorial and information monopolistic of the media; and to potentially influence the users' political decisions and participations.

Two main reasons inspired this study. The first is to assess readers' comments on online newspaper reports on political issues. The second is to verify whether online comments on political news reports, particularly during 2015 polls influenced public voting behaviours. To study this issue the following questions will be examined:

RQ1: What are readers' comments on 2015 presidential news reports in online newspapers framed?

RQ2: How do members of the public perceive the feedback advantage (readers' comments) in online-newspapers?

RQ3: What influence do comments on political reports in online newspapers have on readers' political decision?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development of Online-Newspaper and the Trends of Readers' Comments

The integration of social media into the world of communication and information sharing has redefined the media audience-relationship. The common social media (such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook) are interactive, but they do not conform to journalistic formats and principles and therefore create unstructured responses and comments unlike the user-generated news media that are manned by professional journalists (Holt & Karlsson, 2011). According to Holt and Karlsson, such news media are "*Ohmynews* in Korea, *Newsvine* in the USA, *Janjannews* in Japan and *Newsmill* and *Sourze* in Sweden – who mainly publish articles written by their users – are often presented as enterprises that stem from visions about a better democracy".

Sahara Reporter focus on Nigeria is one of the user-generated online news media, which activities are likening to *Janjannews* and others.

The idea of the online newspaper germinated as a result of the widespread of internet connectivity and the increase in accessibility and public acceptability. The idea was first experienced in America when *Chicago Tribune*, in partnership with America Online, launched *Chicago Online* in May 1992 (Chung & Yoo, 2008; Singer, 2003). As a result of competitive nature of the media market and the keen interest of the newspaper audience in the online edition, as well as the introduction of World Wide Web (www), which allowed online publication to flourish as emphasized in Peng et al. (1999), some other newspapers not only in America but also across the globe fleat their online versions.

The online newspaper publication alongside other online news sites are recently major concerns of media researchers as the avenues are gaining more momentum. The concerns are not about the assumed elusive future of professional journalism and the traditional media institutions due to the threat that online editions posed to the number of copied published and sold upon which the newspaper houses fret (Fortunati & Sarrica, 2010). Sylvie and Chyi (2007) discuss how the online editions affect the offline newspaper readership in America. They ascribe the effect to two different newspaper markets competing for the same audience, which necessitates that one necessarily needs to give in to the other to thrive. This might result from what Chyi and Lewis (2009) describe as monopolistic nature of the local media market highly common in different part of the state. On the contrary, local and national newspapers in Nigeria hardly enjoy monopoly of audience market.

Online audience constitute more than the offline newspaper readers partly due to low level of computer literacy among the aged literate. Similarly, the offline newspaper readers constitute more than the online newspaper audience owing to limited economic means to afford a copy daily, compared to online, where different editions could be accessed with no cost. The concern is far beyond losing the market to online edition since according to Obijiofor and Green (2001) and Scheufele and Nisbet (2002), the emergence of radio in 1920s and television in 1950s did not result to the demise of offline newspaper publication as predicted by researches around the periods despite the shift in the market interests.

The concerns are with the management of online editions; the exploration of the interactive advantage for the improvement of the news values; the integration of readers' news judgments and analyses in the newspaper philosophy and its understanding of the society in which it operates; and the modality to monitor and protect the ill-use of the readers' forum.

All these put together is a non-issue when compared to the attention given to the feedback vantage and the opportunity to turn master-servant news dissemination pattern of the mainstream media to horizontal

pattern, where news become discussions rather than information. And the media audiences become active (Schultz, 2000) rather than passive; their comments, in addition to helping sieving news stories, also act as checks on what information news media disseminate (Garman & Folayan, 2004).

The feedback opportunity, which restructure newspaper-readers relationship by turning news stories from one-way directional information to two-way communication model, has been discussed as: Citizen Journalism (Carpenter, 2008, 2010; Goode, 2009); Participatory Journalism or Participatory Media (Domingo et al., 2008; Nguyen, 2006); and Online journalism (Garman & Folayan, 2004; Ihlstrom, 2005; Sanlier & Tag, 2005).

The Fear and Gains of Going Online among Nigerian Newspapers

The fear of losing journalistic values and audience markets has been the major consideration why many Nigerian newspapers initially refused to publish online editions. However, having realised that traditional journalism might lose its authority by unrestricted access and speed in which information is available on internet has led Nigerian newspapers to diversify.

Audience Involvement in Online-newspaper Reports of 2015 Presidential Election

The role of the media in the democratic process and political development at various capacities substantiate the essence of the media as the fourth estate of the realm (Kaufhold et al., 2010). The involvement of the media in political processes and governance is not only essential for development of politics but also to define the content of political structures and practices in many societies. The kind of media practice in a society is always a perfect reflection of the political structure of the society because a vibrant media supresses absolute political power.

The mass media had found it difficult to ensure that public interests top the priorities during an election because of the top-down structure of the media-audience relationship (reeked of minimum feedback), which beclouded the media proper understanding of the public interests and reactions. This key aspect of the democratic process (public interests) used to be formally measured by the outcome of electoral polls; all other forms of public reactions to politics or political change and policies are not structured (though may have constitution backing) and as a result regarded informal. The polls were characterised by the media agenda, which are the products of political campaigns and party manifestos with no room for public analyses, filtrations and dissections of the one-way (stage-managed) information that convincingly confused the electorates during the polls.

Many factors significantly differentiate the 2011 electoral poll from the 2015 election in Nigeria. One notable factor and the concern of this study is the structural change in media output composition through

online-newspaper feedback. No sooner the newspapers released online editions (which appear earlier in the day than offline editions) readers began commenting. Interestingly, the comments are not restricted to the context of the online-newspaper stories but also the analyses of the related radio and television news/programmes aired. The readers' comments take many forms:

a. Various analyses and interpretations of the news stories and related stories from other media reports based on the facts detectable from the story and the perspectives of the analysts;

b. Arguments and counter arguments for supporting or rejecting the direction(s) of a news stories by refuting, supplementing or confirming the fact cited;

c. Criticisms of the credibility and authenticity of the news stories (in parts or in whole); the integrity of the sources quoted; the measure of media objectivity displayed; and the deviation from or conformity of the stories with reports on the same issues from other media; and

d. Media noise, which comes inform of advertisements or promotions posts, raising abuses or curses on fellow commenters in the forum, and other form of irrelevant and condemnable participations.

After studying 583 journalists' perceptions of readers' comments in online American newspapers (Nielsen, 2014, p. 471)

speculates that journalists may have seen the comment forums as avenues for "readers to make contributions, to allow readers to converse with other readers, or as a space to open a conversation between readers and journalists." Schultz (2000) agrees that the interactive media has given the media audience their voice to control and criticise journalism, influence how issues are framed and chase journalists towards standardization of their reports.

Gate-keeping and Agenda-setting Transfer Theoretical Perspectives to Readers' Comments in Online-Newspaper Reports of 2015 Presidential Election

An important demarcation between raw information and news reports is the sieving and severing of information for blemishes which are dregs in the media profession and not consumable by an audience. Journalists see the uncensored and unverified readers 'comments, not only on the same page with their reports as a slap on the profession. Such is the reason why Deuze et al. (2007) wrote that "journalists have been generally resistant to interactivity as it challenges their traditions of gatekeeping and conception of professional identity".

Gatekeeping is a measure that ensures the sanctity of the professionalism in journalism and repels all forms of junk journalism practices. It goes beyond newsroom affairs. It entails news or story filtering, selectivity, editing, placing, covering, authenticating and attribution, killing, and many others that dictate the

inclusion or exclusion of a story in a publication. It is also a ceaseless routine that empowers mass media (off-line newspapers) to remain the custodian of information and exert domination on the readers. Comment forums in online-newspapers have striped mass media of the gatekeeping functions as journalists' jurisdiction is limited to their online news reports. Nielsen (2014) argues that the same technology (internet) that allows readers to express their opinions by anonymously posting online comments on newspaper websites without being censored, also robs the journalists of their professional roles not only to decide on what information is good for public consumption but also to refine the information to meet public tastes. It does not cover the readers' comments, which appear on the same page with the news reports and most often appeared having more influence on the audience than the news reports.

Similarly, online media and its tag-along citizen journalism is changing the face of traditional media role in agenda-setting. Discussions on media agenda-setting are now focusing on agenda sharing between producers and consumers of information as the mass media succumbs to audience involvement in news making (Cenite & Zhang, 2010). As a result, arguments on who sets the agenda is becoming non-vital. It appears the gatekeeping function of the media is gradually slipping away from the media to media audience (Adelakun & Adnan, 2016).

Commenters on online news reports are most often instrumental to agenda-setting transfer – from media agenda to public agenda, as the reports are given interpretations from the commenters' perspectives leaving other commenters or readers of the follow-up comments with new perspective to debate on. Adelakun and Adnan (2016) cite studies (Kim et al., 2002; Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; Moon, 2013) that use Agenda-setting transfer to depict how media agenda translate to what the audience consider as the most important issue. The concept mostly explains how "issue attributes salient in the media were functioning as significant dimensions of issue evaluation among audience member" (Kim et al., 2002, p. 9). Some of the studies emphasised that agenda setting role is no more a monopoly function of the media but rather interchange role between the media and the public. Though the question on 'where does agenda setting of an issue originate?' is still debatable, comment forums in online-newspaper substantiate that the media agenda-setting role could be transfer to the audience (readers/ commenters), who assumed active role.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Mixed method was employed to link the structure of the comments to audience voting decision. Content analyses to understand the frequency and structure of the comments and opinion survey to link the voters' perceptions of the comments

to voting decisions. Comments of online newspapers readers on ten major political news stories each from *The Punch* and *The Sun* newspapers was analysed. Each pair of news stories from the two newspapers are on the same news material to ensure that not only the newspapers were given equal treatment on the stories but also readers interests in them. The newspapers were chosen because they allow readers to comment on their news reportage and large online followership (audience).

Three major variables were considered as measures in the analyses:

a.   Number of comments from readers in each newspaper; each comment was counted once. Repetitions of the same comment were not considered in the analyses.

b.   Direction of the comments contents: who or which party is favoured by a comment.

c.   Evaluation of the comments analyses: whether analytical or otherwise. A comment was considered analytical if it analyses key issues in the news story or related issues by raising points, quoting sources, giving fact and figure and establishing justification for its standpoint.

A Pilot test was conducted on 10 per cent of the texts data (1,147 comments on ten news reports of 2015 poll) from the sample newspapers using four independent coders. Employing Scott's pi intercoder reliability on the three variables to be tested in the readers' comments gives 0.92 mean reliability coefficient within the range of 0.86 to 1.0, which is within the recommended intercoder reliability coefficient value for the liberal index employed (Lombard et al., 2002).

Opinion survey of 200 online-newspaper readers was conducted using self-administered questionnaire as a data gathering instrument on systematic randomly selected sample among certain age and education criteria of online users. Data were elicited on variables concerning the perceptions and influence of online-newspaper readers' comments on the audience political decisions. Both major variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale (From – 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) with a reliability coefficient of the scale items above $\alpha=0.70$ minimum recommended.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQI focuses on how the readers' comments were framed (structured) to influence the readers and co-commenters or to spawn further comments. Two parameters were used to understand the content of the comments – the message direction (percentage distribution) and the message quality (analytical significance) as portrayed in table 1.

Table 1
Structure of readers' comments in term of directions and qualities

Comment Direction/Framing		Comment Quality		Total
		Analytical	Non-analytical	
In favour of Buhari/ APC	Count	189	300	489
	% within Comment Direction	38.65%	61.35%	100.00%
	% of Total	16.48%	26.16%	42.64%
In favour of Jonathan/ PDP	Count	62	179	241
	% within Comment Direction	25.73%	74.27%	100.00%
	% of Total	5.41%	15.61%	21.02%
In favour of other aspirants/parties	Count	5	31	36
	% within Comment Direction	13.89%	86.11%	100.00%
	% of Total	0.43%	2.70%	3.13%
Challenge Media/ Stories credibility	Count	35	31	66
	% within Comment Direction	53.03%	46.97%	100.00%
	% of Total	3.05%	2.70%	5.75%
Noise	Count	8	211	219
	% within Comment Direction	3.65%	96.36%	100.00%
	% of Total	0.69%	18.39%	19.08%
Neutral	Count	34	62	96
	% within Comment Direction	35.42%	64.58%	100.00%
	% of Total	2.96%	5.41%	8.37%
Total	Count	333	814	1147
	% within Comment Direction	29.03%	70.97%	100.00%
	% of Total	29.03%	70.97%	100.00%

Based on the message direction, above two out of every five comments on the selected news stories are favourable to Buhari or his party, APC (42.64% of the total comments) while an approximately one-fifth of the total comments support Jonathan/PDP (21.02%). Accompanied a news report titled "Buhari promises to end terrorism in Nigeria" in the December 22, 2014 edition of Online Punch, for instance, are comments:

> **excel** • *2 years ago* "PMB has shown that the boko haram are not invisible. and they are defeatable,

soon enough the final onslaught will be carried on the boko haram and the issue of insurgent will be thing on the past once we elect him"

> **favourtalk** • *2 years ago* "PMB will be the good thing that will happen to Nigeria in 2015, we should bless God by electing him, he will really shows d the way in winning the deadly bokoharam that is giving Jonathan nightmare"

> **ParallaxSnap** • *2 years ago* "Shai Baba"

Almost equivalent percentage of comments in favour of Jonathan dwells on character assassination, abusive and offensive comments against co-commenters, as well as posting of adverts and other irrelevances. These are considered Noise, and accounted for 19.1% of the aggregate comments. More than eight per cent of total comments did support any candidate or political affiliate but rather constitutes a balanced presentation of arguments while the remaining 5.8% of the comments criticise the credibility and objectivity of the media reports. Based on the quality of the comments approximately 39% supported Buhari/APC were analytical. This proportion beats the quality of the comments in favour of Jonathan/PDP, where about one-quarter (25.73%) of the comments were analytical in content.

The analysis of readers' comment is seemingly justifying the results of the March 2015 presidential election, in which according to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), APC/Buhari has 52.4% of the total vote cast and the major contender, PDP/Jonathan polled 43.7% (www.inecnigeria.org) if compared with the margin ratio in Figure 1. The association between the overwhelming direction of the readers' comments on media reports of presidential election and the actual results of the election signifies the flux in agenda-setting as well as gatekeeping roles. Rather than commenting on the news angles that were mostly emphasised in the reports, online media audience most often deviate by commenting on issues that are not even discussed in the reports on the news page or platform.

However, the overwhelming number of comments are merely one-word; short-phrase or short-sentence contributions just to support or against the earlier comments or the news story itself. About one-quarter of the comments are analytical – analyse key issues in the news story or related issues and earlier comments by raising cogent points, quoting sources, giving fact and figure and establishing justifications for a standpoint. Approximately one out every twenty comments accused the media of running afoul of one journalistic principle or the other while reporting the news stories. Readers' exuberance for objective and balanced media reports causes comments to be critical in the interest of establishing authenticity. Challenging the gatekeeping role of the media are issues the mass media has to contend with to protect the profession (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010).

Analysis of Opinion Survey

The demography of the respondents shows that there is age distributions bias as the segment that were disenfranchise during the election on the bases of age were not considered as respondents. Respondents within age 18 and 38, which are considered as youth constitutes 70.5% of the 200 respondents sampled while the respondents within (39-59) and (above 59) age bracket constitutes 24% and 5.5% respectively. Respondents education attainment was also considered relevant as it affects online audience ability to read, understand and

comment on the news reported. Only the respondents with minimum of secondary school education were considered. The education distributions of the respondents are: 15.5%, 64% and 20.5% of secondary, tertiary and post-tertiary education levels respectively. All the respondents claimed that their level of internet/online literacy could afford them to search and read and comment on reports in online newspapers with more than 60% access the newspaper through their mobile phone.

Table 2
Respondents' assessment of readers comments

Perceived Readers' Comments	Level of Agreement* (%)							
	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD	Over all (%)
Interesting	8.0	14.5	13.0	32.0	32.5	3.66	1.29	73.2
Factual	15.0	25.5	9.5	27.0	23.0	3.18	1.42	63.6
Analytical	21.0	22.5	7.5	23.0	26.0	3.10	1.52	62.0
Persuasive	8.5	15.0	17.0	32.5	27.0	3.54	1.27	70.8
Credible	16.0	29.5	13.0	29.5	12.0	2.92	1.31	58.4
Objective	24.0	26.5	11.0	26.0	12.5	2.76	1.39	55.2
Total						3.19	1.37	63.87

*Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree (1-20%), 2=Disagree (21-40%), 3=Slightly Agree (41-60%), 4=Agree (61-80%), 5=Strongly Agree (81-100%)

The survey analysis focuses on audience assessment of the readers' comment on 2015 presidential election online reports as well as the influence such comments had on their political behaviours to answer RQ2 and RQ3 respectively. Out of the six items used to measure how the respondents perceived the comments, there was higher percentage of agreement among the respondents that the comments are interesting and persuasive. The respondents slightly agreed on the credibility and objectivity of the comments, while their percentage of agreement on how factual and analytical the comments were just a bit higher than its credibility and objectivity qualities.

Table 3
Perceived influence of readers' comments on audience behaviours

Perceived Influence on Audience	Level of Agreement* (%)							
	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD	Over all (%)
Political Interest	3.0	16.5	24.0	32.0	24.5	3.58	1.12	71.6
Political participation	5.0	18.5	20.5	47.0	9.0	3.36	1.04	67.2
Sympathy for Political party	10.0	28.0	25.0	34.0	3.0	2.92	1.07	58.4
Sympathy for Aspirant	3.5	16.5	27.5	32.5	20.0	3.49	1.09	69.8
Voting Decision	11.5	21.5	25.5	34.0	7.5	3.04	1.15	60.8
Total						3.28	1.09	65.56

*Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree (1-20%), 2=Disagree (21-40%), 3=Slightly Agree (41-60%), 4=Agree (61-80%), 5=Strongly Agree (81-100%)

The results also show that respondents did not strongly agree on the comments influence on any of the five measurement items although the comments had much more influence on the political interest of the readers and the co-commenters than other measurement items with 71.6% level of agreement among the respondents (M=3.58, SD=1.12). They also agreed that the comments influenced the readers' sympathy for party aspirants (M=3.49, SD=1.09), readers' political participation (M=3.36, SD=1.04), and readers' voting decisions (M=3.04, SD=1.15). But they slightly agreed that the comments had considerable influence on the readers' sympathy for political parties (M=2.92, SD=1.07).

CONCLUSION

Commenting on the online-newspaper reports by the readers is more of a benefit than a challenge to professionalism status of online journalism in Nigeria like others across the globe. The anonymity of the commenters (which in many studies is considered a hindrance) can cast doubts on professionalism and intelligence. It should be noted that media audience do not evaluate the professionalism of media reports by the pedigree of the journalists, but rather by the quality of their reportage. The comments serve as a check-and-balance on media excesses.

As the readers' forum in online-newspapers grow, media audiences are finding relief in the analyses of the media agenda and political discussions. This may induce politicians to find high potential in using this medium to actualise their political interests.

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