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**Information Dissemination: Utilisation Of Social Media By Journalists In Port Harcourt.**

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***Abstract***

*This study analysed how information gotten on social media is utilised by journalists in Port Harcourt considering the credibility challenges inherent in social media usage. Social media promotes a participatory media culture where openness, collaboration and interactivity thrive. Restructuring and redefining the way both individuals and mainstream media communicate; social media have encouraged the phenomenon of citizens' journalism where everybody have the liberty to become a reporter. These characteristics of social media portend grave danger to journalists in terms of information dissemination as the boundaries between the creators of media messages and disseminators are blurred. The Technological determinism theory which holds that communication technologies shapes how individuals in the society behave was used as the theoretical anchor for the study. The survey research design was employed and the questionnaire was used as instrument of data collection. The population of study was two hundred and fifty registered journalists in Port Harcourt. The sample size was determined at 152 respondents. The study found among others that most journalists in Port Harcourt do not regard social media as credible news sources. The study recommends that journalists in Port Harcourt should keep harnessing the positive power of the social media to keep the public abreast with current happenings.*

***Keywords:*** ICTs, social media, information dissemination, false news, citizens' journalism

## **Introduction**

Instances of false news on social media abound. In 2017, there was a news story making the rounds on social media platforms that a bird perched on a high-tension wire around mile 4, Port Harcourt. The bird was said to be electrocuted and it fell off the cable and turned to a body of a woman suspected to be a witch. This news went viral on social media but it turned out to be false (Vanguard online news, 2017, March 30). Also, in 2017, the news of the death of President Muhammadu Buhari was awash on social media. (Chukwu, 2017, May 22). The news came while president Buhari was away on medical vacation. Information concerning his death became so trendy that various WhatsApp messages were forwarded on his death and the cloning of one Jubril from Saudi as the new Buhari. This information went viral with thousands of shares and likes. This information came with detailed explanation all looking real and working on the psyches of some Nigerians that the cabal who are directly benefitting from the system do not want to tell Nigerians the truth that the president was dead since they wanted to keep benefitting. The story looked so beautiful almost confusing some of the elites from discussions that trailed the rumour. Because of President's Buhari's absence, some Nigerians believed the story and still argue that the present President Buhari is not the president they use to know before the medical vacation. Coincidentally, the furniture and some doors in Aso rock, Nigeria's presidential villa were changed on the return of President Buhari from that medical trip abroad. This further helped the peddlers of the information to buttress their point. It was said then on social media that those doors were changed to accommodate the cloned president since his finger prints could not open the doors. This information later turned out to be false.

Most recently, the news of the president taking a second wife in the person of Sadiya Farouq, one of his female cabinet members made rounds. The plot was supplied by Nigeria's vibrant social media and was aided by Mrs. Buhari's cryptic comments. The wedding was supposed to have been held Friday, 11 October, 2019 but the Twitter account of Sadiya Farouq showed she was in the Swiss City of Geneva from Thursday, leading Nigeria's delegation at a meeting of the United Nations refugees' agency. She did not return to Nigeria until Tuesday, based on what she posted on the same account but that did not deter Nigeria's social media users on Twitter from providing the guest list, a venue and entertainment. Some users even designed wedding cards (Nduka, 2019). Whether there was an intention of the President to take a second wife or not, the news of the purported wedding further shows the strength of the social media in information dissemination. In Port Harcourt, some main stream media talked about it. On WazobiaFm radio, 94.1, one of the presenters made mention of it though on a very light note on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October. He was asking the president to make him best his man. On the arrival of the first lady Aisha Buhari, an old video according to her began to trend online on how she wanted to forestall the marriage ceremony. Today, anyone can create and co-create content to the global community as well as report events that take place within their vicinity (Udoudo & Nyekwere, 2018, p.13). This is a blending of public participation that involves bloggers who break the news on independent websites, and citizens who capture newsworthy events with cell phone cameras. The resulting material is often referred to as user-generated content and Websites like YouTube, facebook, twitter and Wikipedia allow people to easily distribute and share such contents (Van Dijck, 2009 cited in Ashong and Nnamdi 2018 p.554). The media landscape as we know it is increasingly slipping away. Citizen journalism seeks to open up the media to the participation of ordinary people. Citizen journalism is thus aimed at de-institutionalising and de-professionalising the practice of journalism (Nnamdi, 2019, p.17). This trend is related to the widespread social media phenomenon, which is a reflection in two long-term underlying trends in communication:

- ❖ A shift in the control of communication media, from the proprietary domain of the traditional providers to the open Internet; and
- ❖ A shift in communication patterns, from one-to-one and one-to-many to many-to-many, collaborative communication. This entails sharing videos, photos and other multimedia contents that substantially enrich the user experience (Den Dam 2012).

Nyekwere (2012, p.1) states that one of the new dimensions to human communication which the new media have brought is the introduction of the social media. Social media have not only revolutionized the way we communicate with others, giving us the opportunity to stay in touch with many more people than has been traditionally possible, they are “undoubtedly shaping and redefining the nature of communication among people all over the world”. One clear difference between social media and traditional media is the change from a broadcast or monologue model to one-to-many to a more dialogic model of many-to-many communication. (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2013, p.240).

### **Statement of the problem**

The last two decades have witnessed a rapid transformation of traditional media into new media that encompasses digital, computerized and networked information and communication technologies. This shift has raised concerns and discussions around the positive and negative implications of the new media and other issues such as: control of information, volume and speed of communication (Eid and Ward, 2009) as well as issues of credibility of these media contents. These changes are also affecting the production of media content as well as dissemination of such content. Unlike in the past when information was gathered in the field, assembled, written and subjected to the scrutiny of an editor before it is published or aired, the technicality of the ICTs made possible by social media platforms have closed the doors to gatekeeping of contents. Information can now be gotten by anybody who has access to the internet, connected to a social media platform and disseminated within seconds. Most times, the information goes viral given the speed of social media. The information may educate, inform, entertain and may also cause confusion or tension in the polity. While some of the information going viral on social media might be sheer falsehood, truth or half-truth, it is not known how journalists in Port Harcourt are grappling with information gotten from social media in news reportage giving the prevailing realities of social media. Social media do not only portend grave danger to journalists as they are no longer in the breaking news business but further heightens the issue of credibility of the information shared on these platforms and hence, forms the major motivation for this study.

### **Objectives of the study**

The aim of this study is to analyse how information gotten on social media is utilised by journalists in Port Harcourt in this era of social media, putting into cognizance the credibility challenge inherent in social media usage. Specifically, this study will:

1. Explore the most preferred social media platform used by journalists in Port Harcourt.
2. Find how social media platforms are potent platforms for information dissemination.
3. Find out if social media platforms are credible news sources for journalists in Port Harcourt?
4. Examine how journalists in Port Harcourt use information gotten from social media platforms? and
5. Determine benefits derivable from the use of social media by journalists in Port Harcourt

### **Research questions**

1. Which is the most preferred social media platform used by journalists in Port Harcourt?
2. Are social media platforms potent for Information dissemination?
3. To what extent are social media platforms credible news sources for journalists in Port Harcourt?

4. How do journalists in Port Harcourt use information gotten from social media platforms?
5. What are the benefits derivable from the use of social media by journalists in Port Harcourt?

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is anchored on the Technological Determinism Theory. This theory was propounded by Marshal McLuhan in 1962. This theory postulates that changes in communication modes largely determine the course of history. This goes to show that the communication technologies shape how we as individuals in the society think, feel, act and how society operates as we move from one technological advancement to another. Explosion in information technology would be followed by change, both culturally, socially and economically. The theory holds that “we learn and feel and think the way we do because of the message we receive through the current technology that is available (Okon, 2017, p.19). He notes further that the “ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions of the theory elucidate seamless adaptation to the prevailing medium, inevitable changes in media forms and values formation as necessitated by media use. Predictably, the theory assumes that with every new system of media technology, society will change and adapt to that technology. Since the theory advocates that technological changes determine media use and adaptation it becomes necessary to ascertain if the use of social media in information dissemination is changing the way journalists in Port Harcourt feel and behave in terms of information dissemination on social media platforms hence, the nexus of the theory to the study.

### **Literature review**

#### **Social media and information credibility**

Social media can take the form of a variety of technology-enabled activities, such as blogging, video sharing, social gaming, social networks, photo sharing etc. In their study of attitude of television journalists in Nigeria to citizen journalism, Ashong & Nnamdi (2019. p.567) opined that credibility of the source was identified as a major constraint to the adoption of citizen journalism reports among television journalists in Nigeria. Studies have shown that if audience perceives a speaker or source to have something to gain by persuading them, the speaker becomes less trustworthy (Hovland, Jainis& Kelly, 1953, McGinnies and Ward 1980). There is also a link between credibility with message acceptance (Chebat, Filiatrault, and Perrien, 2001, Pornpitakpan, 2004). For instance, if the source is a highly regarded medium, the audience may likely view such information as credible. Credibility has emerged as the foremost problem that should be addressed in news operations given charges such as sensationalism of news, erroneous prioritization and other criticisms leading to low credibility of social media news (Bucy 2003). Eid and Ward (2009, p.1) submits that the growth of new media means that journalism ethics is undergoing a difficult transition from traditional, professional ethics to a mixed media ethics. Both professional journalists and citizen journalists struggle to re-invent media ethics and debate whether and how to adapt existing norms, such as accuracy, verification and objectivity, to the new media environment. Because anybody can post information on social media without any form of restrictions, some information posted there is sometimes fabricated. Although some people are of the view that the mainstream media are also biased as they are not truly objective. Also the mainstream media are not totally believed too as some scholars would say that there is subjectivity in every objectivity. Given the fact that the reporter is the gate keeper, down to the editor who is on the news desk, stories can be tilted to support the interest of their cronies.

Perlmutter and Schoen, (2007) listed a number of unethical problems of social media platforms as follows: lack of fact-checking and editorial oversight, lack of logical coverage of topics, rumours and lies dissemination, privacy invasion, plagiarism and copyright violations, lack of accountability, deception, manipulative practices, and undisclosed conflicts of interest. Schweiger

(1998) points out that credibility could become an important heuristic for content selection at a time of information overload.

Other scholars (Lasica, 2001, Araut & Anderson, 2000) in their studies of online news and user-generated contents, have similar concerns over credibility, believability, ethical lapses, news gathering techniques and news presentation of citizens. One of the striking challenges of social media for the communication industry is that before they go to press for the print media or air their stories for the broadcast media, social media users have shared the stories on social networking sites and discussion already on going on the issue (Nyekwere and Nyekwere, 2019). People's identity can be easily stolen, misrepresented and their pictures used for fraudulent purposes. This can be done because people provide personal information on social media platforms to become members of such social media platform, raising issues on privacy. Udoudo & Nkem (2017), citing the Washington Times (2006) report on the project for excellence in journalism report that only 19% of the people who participated in a survey believed "all most" all of the information they read in daily newspapers. Forty percent believed only "a good deal" of what they read. Some of the probable causes of loss of public trust are; journalists caught making up stories, reporting unverified data, plagiarizing, juicing stories and accepting brown envelopes from politicians or top government functionaries (p.7).

### Methodology

The study adopted the survey method with the questionnaire as research instruments. The population for this study comprised journalists in Port Harcourt. The population of registered journalist in Port Harcourt as at June 2021 is 250 (Nigerian Union of Journalist, Secretariat, Port Harcourt.) Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Sample determination table, the sample size was determined as 152. The purposive sampling was employed to administer the instruments to journalists. The purposive sampling is employed when a researcher seeks certain characteristics in his sample elements. The characteristics sought include: knowledge of social media, membership of a social media platform and use of social media. Data collected from survey (questionnaire) were analysed using simple percentages.

### Data presentation and analysis

**Table 1: Most preferred social media platform used by journalists in Port Harcourt.**

Nature of Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Facebook	62	40
Twitter	50	32
WhatsApp	20	13
Youtube	10	6
Blogs	10	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100%</b>

From table one, it is evident that most of the respondents prefer Facebook the more. This is followed by twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and Blogs.

**Table 2: Journalists' response on whether social media platforms are good platforms for information dissemination sources.**

Nature of Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	152	100%
No	Nil	
Not sure	Nil	
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

From the table, all journalists agree that social media are good platforms for Information dissemination.

**Table 3: Journalists response on whether social media platforms are credible news sources.**

Nature of Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	10	6%
No	140	92%
Not sure	2	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the table, it is evident that most of the journalists do not regard information on social media as credible news sources. While a few of them see them as credible news sources, an insignificant number do not.

**Table 4: Journalists utilization of information gotten from social media platforms?**

Nature of Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
As raw stories	Nil	
As verified Stories	145	95%
As unverified stories	12	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100</b>

It can be gleaned from table 4 that majority of the respondents use information gotten from social media platforms as verified stories. While some of the journalists use the stories as unauthenticated stories.

## Discussion of findings

### Research question one

#### Which is the most preferred social media platform used by journalists in Port Harcourt?

From the data on Table 1, it is evident that most journalists in Port Harcourt prefer Facebook as a social platform to the others. In order words, they create and also share content on Facebook and other social media platforms. Although given the power of Tweets in minutes' updates, it was thought it would have been the most preferred social networks.

### Research question two

#### Are social media platforms good platforms for Information dissemination?

The data on table two shows that journalists see social media as good platforms for information dissemination. In a follow up question allowing respondents to advance reasons for their answers, we found out that almost all the journalists applauded the speed with which information is spread on social media platforms. The large number of persons utilising these social media platforms were also stated as part of the reasons why they feel they are a good platform for information dissemination.

### Research question three

#### To what extent are social media platforms credible news sources for journalists in Port Harcourt?

From the data on Table three, most journalists in Port Harcourt do not regard social media as credible news sources. While a few of them accept information their as credible, an insignificant number is not sure. In a follow up question, respondents were asked to advance reasons for their answers. The reasons journalists gave are grouped as follows:

- ❖ That social media platforms are not credible news sources because they do not know how to verify the information most persons post.
- ❖ Social media can be manipulated to suit the manipulators objectives
- ❖ Social media news or information posted most times lack ethical consideration in their approach to reports. People go the extra mile to enhance believability.

They could post gory pictures of an accident scene without recourse to the impact such pictures might have on some individuals. While some acknowledge that only a few of the contents (pictures or videos) on social platforms are covered with viewer's discretion inscribed, majority of the contents are sent as the events unfold. Journalists, who said social media are credible sources of Information to them, explained the following:

- Depending on the information you are looking for as a journalist, social media remains the first point of call to certain information.
- Social media platforms are the ones with the scoop these days and "we rely on them for scoop"
- So if you are a serious minded reporter, you can build on that information to make further investigation.

These reasons further strengthen the technological determinism theory. McLuhan (1962) explains that communication technologies shape how we as individuals in the society think, feel, act and how society operates as we move from one technological advancement to another. The revelations by these journalists further reiterate current literature on the future of the social media. While some journalists see social media platforms as credible news sources because they give timely up to-the minute information, others do not. This does not rule out the fact that others who do not take such stand does not believe in the speed of the social media to report information. One reason we could adduce to journalists' responses is that social media is experienced based, it may account for why certain people feel differently. While social media news might have benefited most journalists to receive first-hand information, others who are afraid of the veracity/authenticity of such information may have to report particular information when it is no longer news but stale. Although if the greatest asset of the social media which is speed of information transfer is employed and falsehood reported, the aim of such information may be defeated when truth is finally unveiled. Udoudo's (2013) submits that "credibility demands that all information is verifiable and the sources are quotable or attributable unless when such information is a potential threat to the life of the source if revealed" (p.27). From responses in a follow up question, it is obvious that some of the journalists agreed that social media are not credible news sources but sure gives a pointer to investigative report. The implication of this is that an individual could do a deeper check into the issues making the rounds.

#### **Research question four**

##### **How do journalists in Port Harcourt use information gotten from social media platforms?**

From the data on Table 4, it is clear that most journalists report information gotten on social media as stories that have been verified. Some of the journalists report the stories as unverified. In a follow up question to ask why journalist verify or not verify stories, it was gathered from the journalists who use the information gotten from social media as verified stories that they must confirm any information gotten from social media from reputable online newspapers or broadcasting stations such as Punch online, Vanguard online, BBC news etc to keep to the code of ethics of their profession. Journalists who said they use information on social media as unverified stories, explained that they make categorical statements that such stories are unconfirmed as at the time of filing the reports. They further explained that they bring the information to their audience as stories making the rounds on social media and do not in any way mislead them by attributing the stories to any source, or stating that the stories are verified. This finding shows that journalism

ethics is undergoing a serious problem and point to the numerous challenges inherent in the use of social media.

This finding also corroborates Perlmutter and Schoen, (2007) assertion of unethical problems of social media platforms such as lack of fact-checking and editorial oversight, lack of logical coverage of topics, rumours and lies dissemination, deception, manipulative practices, and undisclosed conflicts of interest. This then explains that even though a journalist in a mainstream media only mention an information gotten on a social media platform “as news making the rounds on social media” without reporting the stories categorically as confirmed, social media space is changing the way mainstream media operate in terms of ethics. News sources must be reliable so that information received from them does not only have to be accurate but also reliable (Udoudo, 2013). Findings also shows that most journalist in Port Harcourt try to keep to their ethical standard of professionalism. News is a product of truth, as such “the essence of source verification is to establish the truth in the news and the defence of the media house should there be question of the authenticity of the news” (Udoudo and Nkem, 2017, p.10).

### **Research question five**

#### **What are the benefits derivable from the use of social media by journalists in Port Harcourt?**

This question was an open-ended question and the responses varied. From the responses, most of the journalists in Port Harcourt use social media platforms to take a cue on how to handle some reports. Journalists also said that social media platforms are easily accessible and enable them create reportorial groups where they share their interest. With as low as 100 naira data, they can connect to social media and get acquainted with current issues happening on the spot. This is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the social media as information is updated on per seconds basis. Some of the journalists also said that social media have benefitted their media houses in terms of scheduling of assignments and helps them to channel reporters appropriately to quarters that require attention.

### **Conclusions**

From the findings of this work, it could be concluded that journalists in Port Harcourt accept social media platforms as potent tools for information dissemination even though they doubt the credibility of Information gotten from social media sources. One obvious conclusion is that media ethics of truth, objectivity and accuracy is being dragged to the mud as some journalists help in peddling rumours by reporting unverified information gotten from social media on mainstream media. Even though such information is merely mentioned and audience members told they are not confirmed, it heightens the confusion in the polity. Viewed against the foregoing, social media platforms have come to stay. Journalism practice will keep experiencing a mixed-media ethics as creators and co-creators of contents are not relenting. One obvious consolation is that humans are not robots who do not have senses of reasoning. It therefore behoves on users of these social media platforms to use it with caution.

### **Recommendations**

The study made the following recommendations:

- Journalists in Port Harcourt should keep harnessing the positive power of the social media to keep the public abreast with current happenings.
- Journalists from other climes should emulate journalists in Port Harcourt to always verify information gotten from social media platforms in order not to mislead the public.
- Journalists who are in the habit of reporting information gotten on social media without verification should desist from such acts as it is telling negatively on the code of ethics of journalism profession.

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