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Influence of Fake News on Public Perception of Nigeria's Online Newspapers

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Abstract- The online newspaper is increasingly taking the place of the hardcopy newspaper. As readers switch to popular online newspapers, it behoves the internet-based medium to live up to, and better play, the very important function to the society carried out by the hardcopy newspapers. But the increasing cases of fake news in the blogosphere seem likely to detract from the credibility which many place on popular online newspapers. When readers apply the Uses and Gratifications as well as the Selectivity Factors theories, this will go a long way in whittling down the influential role of the press in the society. Using the survey research design, this researcher set out to explore the influence which the circulation of fake news has on the perception members of the public have of Nigeria's online newspapers. Drawing the sample size from Enugu metropolis, it was found that while the prevalence of fake news in Nigeria is high, popular online newspapers do not play much role in the dissemination of fake news. It was also discovered that most Nigerians see reports on popular online news platforms as credible and that there is difference between information on online newspapers and those circulated through social media.

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Influence of Fake News on Public Perception of Nigeria's Online Newspapers

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I. Background of Study

The online platform, *Sahara Reporters* had dished out a story which was disputed by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, stating that "no official of the EFCC was authorized to speak with Sahara reporters on the said story or on any issue affecting the investigation of the Paris Club refund". Also, the Senate President, who was at the receiving end of the story, disclosed that the publisher of Sahara Reporters is in the habit of creating fiction and quoting faceless sources. Yet, this is not a one-off development.

Another major instance of fake news which dominated Nigeria's media space was the rumoured death of President Muhammadu Buhari shortly after he began a health leave to the United Kingdom on January 19, 2017. So audacious were the masterminds that they cloned Metro newspaper of the UK or Huffington Post of US announcing in the spoofs that President Buhari has died in London. While "Metro" reported the "death" of the Nigerian president, "Huffington Post" alleged that he was caught "committing suicide". The same picture of Buhari was used on both stories which had the same lines repeated in them. However these contradictions did not stop the spoofs from sending the internet into an overdrive in Nigeria, as the rumoured death of Buhari was lapped up by some blogs and the social media.

In the face of this, little wonder that Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Lai Mohammed, in February 2017 asserted that fake news poses more danger to the country than insurgency and militancy. He catalogued some false reports the Information ministry has had to contend with thus:

> Only recently, we have to refute the fake news that Nigeria today is the most difficult place for Christians to live. There was also the fake report that the armed forces of Nigeria armed the Fulani herdsmen and instigate them to carry out attacks. All these news are unfounded, fake and has the capacity to set one religion or group against the other.
>
> (*Premium Times* 2017, February 21)

Mohammed spoke the same month that the Chocolate City founder, Audu Maikori, was arrested by security operatives for publishing a false report about the violence in the southern part of Kaduna state with the Kaduna State governor, Mr. Nasir El-Rufai stating that "what he posted may have led to killings and we are trying to link the date of the postings to attacks that happened the next day on Fulanis".
(*Pulse.ng* 2017, March 3)

It is in the light of these instances and many like it which show that the practice is assuming a life of its own in Nigeria that this study sets out to find out how the incidence of fake news is detracting from the credibility Nigerians accord popular online newspapers operating in the country. This is bearing in mind the submission by Ekwueme (2008, p. 91) that:

> Your readers want the facts you heard or observed from your various sources, and not figment of your own imagination. Many people believe media messages to be gospel truth and, of course, some of the readers believe either rightly or wrongly that anything that is not carried in the media is not authentic. Since they have that trust in you, you don't betray it. If you betray it, you have betrayed yourself and the integrity of your medium.

II. Statement of the Problem

Motsaathebe (2011, p. 14) posits that "the news media is generally regarded as a credible provider of a realistic view of what happens around the world. In

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composing news, journalists rely on various sources to verify or lend credibility to the Information they put across". Kolawole (2017) writes, "Fake news — that art of concocting stories from your bedroom because you have a smart phone with cheap data — is becoming the biggest thing in town. No, it is not new. It was not invented in this generation of social media. We have been living with fake news most of our lives. The SAP riots of 1989, for instance, were sparked off by fake news."

The assertions above point the how fake news affects not just the media but the society as well. With the advent of the new media, the scourge of fake news is becoming more prevalent that its negative impact on popular online newspapers is very evident. As Allcot & Gentzkow (2017, p.7) said, "The declining trust in mainstream media could be both a cause and a consequence of fake news gaining more traction". If fake news can affect traditional newspapers, then its impact on major online newspapers can only be imagined.

The literacy level in the country has not entirely made the difference between social media and popular online newspaper a common knowledge to all. It is still believed in some quarters that there is no difference between a major online news site and Facebook. To this extent, it is feared that whatever negative impression people have of one is extended to the other.

Well-known online newspapers are too important to the fabrics of the society to be allowed to be smeared altogether by what users post on social media channels. With the hardcopy newspaper believed to giving way for online edition, well-known online newspapers should increasing be playing the role and gaining the acceptance hitherto reserved for the hardcopy newspaper as Thiel (1998) pointed out "Consider the power of the traditional newspaper. In the past, papers were responsible for bringing down a president and starting a war".

According to Asemah (2009, p.37), "The media, whether electronic or print often set agenda for the public to follow; they monitor trends and events in our society and raised their agenda based on what they have monitored ... Whatever issue the media raised becomes an issue of public concern".

"By electronically reproducing the news to cater to a much larger audience than its newspaper subscriber base, online newspapers should be doing a great service to humankind. After all, they are bringing readers more information than anyone has done in history at a time when the value of information as a commodity is greater than ever" Thiel (1998).

Bearing this in mind and the need to sustain that pride of place earlier occupied by the print newspaper in setting the agenda as well as among other roles holding government accountable to the people, the society stands to lose out greatly if popular online newspapers, in the face of disappearing hardcopy edition, loses this influence on account of fake news broadcast on social media channels which are lifted for publishing by some online news sites.

Given that fake news is more likely to be wholly believed in view of their salacious and sensational nature coupled with their feeding in to the sentiment of the public, government and news managers are distracted making the true position prevail over fake news that have been passed off as real. This difficulty cannot be far removed from bullet-like effect which fake news has on those who come in contact with it.

However, the existence of two variant versions of a news item may confuse the reading public and even make them lose credibility in the news medium readily accessible to them. When this happens, the very essential information role which makes the media the fourth estate of the realm are undermined.

Sanusi, Adelabu & Esiri (2015, p.11) wrote the fourth estate of the realm appellation of the media requires it to monitor and report the conduct of the government, adding that as watchdogs, people rely on the media for uncovering errors and wrongdoings by those elected into power. The media was also said to shape and reaffirm attitude and behaviour of people in the society by showing what happens to people who act in a way that violates societal expectations.

In view of the fact that "The most popular newspaper or newsmagazine is the one that has integrity: that rare element of credibility" Ekwueme (ibid), those in power would not lose sleep over the watchdog activities of an online newspaper without a reader base that can take what they read from such online news sites to the bank.

III. Objectives of Study

This study aims to achieve the following as its objectives:

1. To find out how frequent cases of fake news are reported in the country.
2. To discover if popular online newspapers play a part in the dissemination of fake news in Nigeria.
3. To unearth the perception Nigerians have of news reports published in popular online newspapers.
4. To find out if any difference exists between reports published by popular online newspapers and the ones broadcast via social media channels.

IV. Research Questions

Based on the foregoing objectives of this study, the following research questions were drawn:

1. How prevalent are cases of fake news in Nigeria?
2. Do popular online newspapers play any role in the dissemination of fake news?
3. How do Nigerians perceive news reports published on popular online newspapers?

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4. Is there any difference between reports published on popular online newspapers and those broadcast through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whats App, BBM etc?

V. Significance of Study

From this research, online media practitioners would better understand the extent of damage which fake news is doing to their trade. They would get to know why they should rely on credible sources of information rather than embellishing what a user posted on the social media as story for their readers. This study would help readers know the difference between the social media and online newspapers so that the intemperance of the one would no longer mar the other. Society stands to benefit from this work as it is an effort to ensure that very useful roles of the press to the society do not go with the declining popularity of the hardcopy newspapers which has turned journalism more like an all-comers affair. In sum, this paper would restore the image of the pen profession as it will afford other researchers a basis to build upon or a support for their work.

VI. Scope of Study

This study will be focusing on bringing to light the impact which instances of fake news have on the perception people in Enugu metropolis; that is the Enugu state capital, have of strictly online newspapers. It studies the fake news particularly energised by some the social media and juxtaposes same with how Enugu residence perceive online news sites. Given that there are hundreds of online newspapers operating in the country, the use of the adjective 'popular' to qualify the online newspapers being studied is intentional. Popular online newspapers are those ones that occupy top positions on the *Alexa ranking* of websites.

VII. Conceptual Clarification

Influence: This refers to the strong ability to affect or manipulate something, in this case perception.

Fake news: Fake news means "false information deliberately circulated by those who have scant regard for the truth but hope to advance particular (often extreme) political causes and make money out of online traffic. Or it could be false information circulated by journalists who don't realise it's false" BBC (2017, March 12).

Social media: Social media was defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61) as "a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

Perception: This refers to the way human beings uses any of their senses to think about or come to terms with whatever they are exposed to. Pate & Dauda (2015, p. 218) wrote that, "People's perception wield an enormous influence over their behaviour. If people perceive something in a certain way, even if they are incorrect, in their minds, it is that way, and they often base their behaviour on that perception."

Online newspaper: According to Thiel (1998) "Online news is a commodity created through Web pages (which are certainly more fleeting, both physically and mentally, than print news). Web pages, then, exist only at the point of consumption". Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p.177) stated that online newspaper journalism is of two types. They include: solely online newspaper which does not print hard copies, and the conventional newspaper which combines traditional hard copy publishing with online publishing.

VIII. Literature Review

The problem of fake news has become so pronounced that the inventor of the World Wide Web, WWW, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, declared on the 28th anniversary of his invention that the impact of fake news is increasingly concerning, adding that social media sites and search engines must be encouraged to continue efforts to tackle the menace. In an open letter published on March 12, 2017 to mark the www's 28th birthday, Berners-Lee noted that "It's too easy for misinformation to spread on the web". He added that people "choose what to show us based on algorithms which learn from our personal data that they are constantly harvesting. The net result is that these sites show us content they think we'll click on – meaning that misinformation, or 'fake news', which is surprising, shocking, or designed to appeal to our biases can spread like wildfire".

To an extent, the biggest casualty of this misinformation that spreads on the web is the online newspaper. Fake news is a global phenomenon. In July 2016, the now-defunct website wtoe5news.com, which described itself "a fantasy news website" and that most of its articles are "satire or pure fantasy" reported that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump's presidential candidacy. The story was shared more than a million times on Facebook. There was also the fabricated story from the now-defunct website denverguardian.com captioned: "FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leaks found dead in apparent murder-suicide".

Referring to fake news, Allcot & Gentzkow (2017, p.6) wrote:

> One historical example is the 'Great Moon Hoax' of 1835, in which the New York Sun published a series of articles about the discovery of life on the moon. A more recent example is the 2006 'Flemish

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> Secession Hoax,' in which a Belgian public television station reported that the Flemish parliament had declared independence from Belgium, a report that a large number of viewers misunderstood as true. Supermarket tabloids such as the National Enquirer and the Weekly World News have long trafficked in a mix of partially true and outright false stories.

In Nigeria, there have been instances of fake news, some of which had been identified in the background of study. There are however other examples of false stories gaining attention in the Nigerian public space. According to Kolawole (2017), "Heard the latest? The Central Bank of Nigeria has been selling the elusive dollar to some end users at 61 kobo/US$1, while the rest of us are busy buying the stuff at over N500/$1 in the parallel market... Now, I don't need to do any research to know that what you just read is an excellent piece of fake news."

On the third anniversary of the establishment of The Cable, founder of the online medium, Simon Kolawole admitted that the biggest mistake made by the online newspaper was a false report in May 2015 that the Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka made hate remarks against the Igbo in the United States. Kolawole said, "We discovered that it was the interpretation of the reporter at the event and not the actual words of Professor Soyinka. The embarrassment was universal for us, and sadly there were those who stopped trusting our stories after the episode."
(*The Cable* 2017, April 29)

This indicates that there is a relationship between the publishing of fake news by an online newspaper and readers' attitude towards that medium afterwards. Meanwhile, it is believed that fake news in Nigeria also comes from government quarters as Kperogi (2017) revealed,

> The Buhari government is an absolute propagandocracy, that is, a government conducted by intentionally false and manipulative information... the president also has a clandestine hate and propaganda factory called the Buhari Media Center (BMC), which has nearly 40 paid propagandists whose mandate is to smear, demonize, and troll government critics with thousands of fake, foul social media handles. They also flood the comment sections of news websites with false handles and calculatedly duplicitous information, in addition to producing propagandistic social media memes (often with southern Nigerian-sounding names) that appear to come from everyday Buhari fans. The 40 odd propagandists-in-residence at the BMC are paid N250,000 per month.

With the products of these propagandists and other creators of fake news making it to the open space, one can only imagine the impact this would have on the perception which the reading public has towards popular online newspapers.

IX. Empirical Review

Sanusi, Adelabu & Esiri (2015, p.16) in their study entitled: 'Changing roles in the Nigerian media industry: A study of multimedia journalism' concluded that "the emergence of internet and its associated applications have redefined the practice of journalism. No longer are the traditional journalists the sole purveyor of information, it now have to work with the audience as they jointly scan the environment for information of interest." This may be the reason why fake news has crept into the media.

Credibility accorded the online newspaper is therefore threatened as Thiel (1998) wrote that "A recent study conducted by Georgetown graduate student Josephine Ferrigno found that while 80 percent of 60 random newspaper readers surveyed found The New York Times to be credible, slightly less than half found The New York Times Online (which contains the same articles as the newspaper) to be credible."

According to Allcott & Gentzkow (2017. p.6-7)

> The long history of fake news notwithstanding, there are several reasons to think that fake news is of growing importance. First, barriers to entry in the media industry have dropped precipitously, both because it is now easy to set up websites and because it is easy to monetize web content through advertising platforms. Because reputational concerns discourage mass media outlets from knowingly reporting false stories, higher entry barriers limit false reporting. Second, as we discuss below, social media are well-suited for fake news dissemination, and social media use has risen sharply: in 2016, active Facebook users per month reached 1.8 billion and Twitter's approached 400 million. Third, as shown in figure 2A, Gallup polls reveal a continuing decline of "trust and confidence" in the mass media "when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly.

In the course of scouring through relevant literatures, it was very difficult coming across publications related to the topic of study. This research will therefore present the situation in Nigeria as regards how the reading public now perceive the online newspaper courtesy of fake news incidence which is more pronounced in the social media but is been believed to also have dominance in the online newspaper.

X. Theoretical Framework

In line with what has been set out to be studied, the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Selectivity Factor Theories form the fulcrum for this work. Both theories are intertwined as Okunna (1999, p.171) that

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"the decision to practice selective exposure depends primarily on the uses which members of the mass media audience want to make of media messages and the benefits which they hope to derive from using the media".

The uses and gratification theory is about that social and psychological origin of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other source, which leads to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratification and other consequences, mostly unintended ones, Katz (1974) in Ojobor (2002, p.20).

Wogu (2008, p.120) stated that the uses and gratification theory "deals with what the audiences use the media to do, and what gratifications/gains/satisfaction they derive from using the media". Quoting Kunczik (1988, 1976), he stated that the theory believes that: an individual has some needs related to communication; he/she selects the media that appear to satisfy those needs; he/she selectively consumes the content; an effect may or may not occur.

Granted that this theory recognises that there are various media for the audience to choose from, it is then very likely that the public would opt for those mediums which are less likely to present fake news as one of their gratifications to the users. On this basis, online newspapers when lumped with the social media as purveyors of false information would lose the confidence and readership of enlightened users who expose themselves to the media not to be fed with fake news. This simply means that if the public have the perception that online newspapers carry fake news, they would rather use the broadcast media or hardcopy newspapers as their exposure to the media is not to be gratified with fake news. In that circumstance, online newspapers lose the influence of the press.

The selectivity factor theories, on the other hand, include: selective exposure, selective perception, selective attention and selective retention. People expose themselves to things that conform to their preconceived norms, biases and values. But it does not stop at exposing themselves to information as a person can still decide to pay full, partial or no attention to a medium that he or she has been selectively exposed to. In decoding the message after paying attention, previous experiences and current disposition like needs, moods and memories stand in the way. Hence these factors can affect the perception of what is paid attention to. This perception ultimately determines the readers' retention of whatever messages gotten from a particular medium as people remember those aspects of an issue which aligns with their beliefs. Wogu (2008, p.120).

Relating the above postulations to this study, those who believe that popular online newspapers publish fake news would rather expose themselves to more credible media. Even when they visit a popular news site, they may just stop at looking at the headlines without clicking to read any of the stories. But if they reluctantly click on the story, the preconceived idea that the medium publishes false information would undermine whatever aim the writer of the story intends it to achieve in the mind of the reader. The foregoing would all team up to make the reader not to remember what he or she read minutes after leaving the story or the website.

Therefore through the selectivity theories, it become clear how readers' suspicious of the source of fake news can make popular online newspapers irrelevant to the media audience, who of course, wouldn't count being fed false information as one of the gratifications he or she expects from the media.

XI. Methodology

Given the topic of this study, the survey research design was picked as tool for carrying out this work. Residents of Enugu metropolis constituted the population of this study. Enugu is a city which to an extent is cosmopolitan. As the capital of Enugu state, a handful of federal establishments wherein people from other parts of the country work, owing to the federal character principle.

The National Population Commission (NPC), in its 2006 population estimates, puts the population of Enugu at 722,664. Considering that this was derived from a census exercise that held over a decade ago, there is the need to have a population figure that is up to date. Therefore, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimate of 3.2 per cent annual growth rate for Nigeria was used in arriving at the population of the Enugu capital over an 11-year period.

Using the formula, $N1 = N0\ (1 + K\ n)$ where N1= Current population at a given growth rate; N0 = Census figure as at 2006; K = Growth rate and n = Numbers of years after last census, the current population of Enugu state was derived as 975,596.

Having got the population of study, the Sample Size Calculator as developed by the National Statistical Service of Australia (www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.nsf/pages/sample+size+calculator) was deployed with a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 0.05. This yielded 384 as the sample size.

The quota sampling and the purposive sampling techniques were used for this study. On this basis, the instrument for data collection was shared in four locations in Enugu. They include: Ogui layout/Edinburgh, Institute of Management and Technology, IMT, premises, University of Nigeria Enugu Campus, UNEC, and the Abakpa Nike axis of Enugu. Each of these four locations got one-quarter of the instruments, making it 96 apiece.

The questionnaire was used as the measuring instrument to get desired responses from the sample

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size surveyed. Specific questions were asked in the instrument to elicit response from the research subject regarding a particular research question.

Two persons were engaged as research assistants to distribute the questionnaires in the selected locations. The research assistants were told not to give the questionnaire to anybody who says he or she has never visited a popular online news site.

The measuring instrument used in this study evaluates what it is meant to measure and would consistently yield the same answer baring the vicissitude of human response to issues. The reliability of the instrument is assured because it contains structured questions that amply address the research problem and covers the scope of study.

Quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were used to present and analyze data gathered from the study. Aside tables of frequencies and percentages, sentences were also used to buttress whatever data is contained in the tables.

XII. Presentation of Findings

Before going into the presentation of findings, proper, it needs to be pointed out that of all the 384 questionnaires distributed in deference to the sample size, three were unaccounted for. It was also discovered that five others were not properly filled which invalidates the five. Less this number (8), the researcher was left with 376 questionnaires from which to get findings. The 376 responses are presented below in tables of frequencies and percentages.

Table 1: Frequency of rebuttal of reports published by popular online newspapers?

Rebuttal of reports	Frequency	Percentage
Very frequent	154	41%
Frequent	60	16%
Never	162	43%
Total	376	100

Respondents who said that the rate at which they read or hear people denying statements credited to them or people saying that an event reported by an online newspaper did not happen is very frequent made up 41 per cent, those who placed the rate at frequent constituted 16 per cent while 43 per cent of the respondents stated that they have never had an instance where the story they read from an online newspaper was debunked.

Table 2: Subsequent publishing of fake news in other mediums after popular online newspapers broke story

Fake news later in other medium	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	184	49%
No	192	51%
Total	376	100%

Respondents who answered 'yes' to the follow up question: 'Do you get to see such fake news you read in your preferred medium published in other media?' made up 49 per cent while those whose response was 'No' constituted 51 per cent.

Table 3: Respondents' presumption of reports on popular online newspapers as false even before they are debunked

Presumption of online reports as false	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	141	37%
No	220	59%
Not sure	15	4%
Total	376	100%

Those who presume reports on online newspapers to be false even before they are disputed are 37 per cent while respondents who do not have such presumption are 59 per cent. Those who are not sure about having or not having such presumption constitute 4 per cent.

Table 4: Extent of difference between information published on popular online newspapers and those broadcast through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whats App, BBM

Difference between online newspaper, social media reports	Frequency	Percentage
Very different	64	17%
Different	207	55%
Not different	89	24%
Not very different	16	4%
Total	376	100%

Respondents who believe that information published in popular online newspapers is very different from those broadcast using social media are 17 per cent. Those who think they are just different are 55 per cent while respondents who do not see any difference between information published on online newspapers from those circulating on social media are 24 per cent. Meanwhile 4 per cent of the respondents said the information in social media and the online newspaper is not very different.

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XIII. Discussion of Findings

The findings above reflect the thinking of Enugu residents over prevalence rate of instances fake news in Nigeria. They also depicts whether popular online newspapers actually play any role in the dissemination of fake news. Nigerians perception of news reports published on online newspapers is also highlighted in this findings even as the outcome of this research went on to show whether any difference exists in reports published on online newspapers from those broadcast through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, BBM etc?

RQ1: How prevalent are cases of fake news in Nigeria?

Going by the finding that 57 per cent of the respondents (very frequent 41%, frequent 16%) attest to the witnessing instances where the reports they read online were debunked as untrue, it is safe to say that the prevalence rate of fake news in Nigeria is high enough to be the most popular among respondents as found in Table 1. This is more so as only 43 per cent of respondents say there had never been a time when reports they read on online newspapers were debunked. Since, these categories of respondents never got to read these fake stories, the Uses and Gratifications theory as well as the Selectivity Factors theories must have made them avoid news outlets that have qualms running such fake information on their websites.

RQ2: Do popular online newspapers play any role in the dissemination of fake news?

Considering that more respondents (51 per cent) do not get to see the fake news they read in their preferred online medium published in other media, it then goes to show that online newspapers do not play much role in the dissemination of fake news but given that as high as 49 per cent voted that what they read in online newspapers ended up making it to other media, the online newspapers therefore plays a role in the spread of fake news. The online newspaper's slight complicity in the spread of fake can be situated within the complaint by Sir Tim Berners-Lee of the www fame.

RQ3: How do Nigerians perceive news reports published on popular online newspapers?

Despite the prevalent of fake news, this study has shown that online newspapers and their reports are still seen as credible as more Nigerians do not presume online newspaper reports as false even before they are debunked. This means that Nigerians wholly believe what they read in online newspaper which they 'Use' to 'Gratify' their hunger for credible information. The finding for this research question is justified by the postulation of Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) thus: "reputational concerns discourage mass media outlets from knowingly reporting false stories".

RQ4: Is there any difference in reports published on popular online newspapers from those broadcast through social media platforms?

The finding presented in Table 4 provides a two-fold answer to this research question. Adding up the percentages of respondents who voted 'different' and 'very different' to the comparison between information circulated on social media and those published by online newspapers shows that this view is popular by 72 per cent. Little wonder that Nigerians wholly believe what they read in the online newspapers as the "social media are well-suited for fake news dissemination". This finding also aligns with the Selectivity Factor theories in that people would rather selectively expose themselves to, perceive, pay attention to, and remember information published by online newspapers than the ones circulated on the social media.

XIV. Conclusion

Cases of the circulation of fake news are prevalent in the country as it is across the world, but the circulation of false information have not started to have a toll on the perceived credibility of popular online newspapers. Those who because of fake news are cautiously optimistic about the credibility of popular online newspapers were found to be slightly higher than those who have allowed incidence of fake news make them suspect reports on popular online newspapers as not credible. This means that fake news still poses a threat to the perception Nigerians have of reputable online newspapers. As the Uses and Gratification and the Selectivity theories go, those who have the notion that popular online newspapers are purveyors of fake news may switch to other mediums of mass communication or take information passed by online newspapers with a pinch of salt. When this becomes the case, the influence of popular online newspapers with regards to the role of the press to the society is whittled down and hampered, essentially because of the scourge of fake news.

Recommendations

Drawing from the knowledge and finding garnered in the course of this study, the under-listed ideas can be proffered as recommendations through which fake news and its impact on the public perception of online newspapers in Nigeria can be tackled:

a) Online newspapers should adopt the operation model of the conventional newspaper. Stories should written to perfection, subjected to the rigorous scrutiny of the head of the reporter's desk, checked again by the news editor and his team with a strong re-write desk ensuring that the story conforms to a house style; and then a final check by the editor of the paper. (Daniel, This Day April 22, 2017)

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b) Online newspapers should ensure they employ only qualified and well-trained journalists who can validate and can defend whatever story that has their by-line.
c) Granted that running a newspaper requires a huge capital outlay which makes publishers are reporters susceptible to moneybags looking for where to plant stories that would further their interest, online newspaper practitioners should rather rely on international donor agencies which support independent media organisations which funds to enable them better hold the government accountable to the people.
d) Online newspapers must not base their reports on rumours spread on the social media. Whenever they want to report what was post on the social media by newsmakers, they should ensure that the posting is actually on the verified social media account of the prominent personality in question.
e) The government, the Nigeria Union of Journalists and other associations in the media industry should find a means of streamlining the process of setting up online newspapers so as to avert the springing up mushroom news sites which publish false stories that dent the perception of the online newspaper.
f) When a story published by an online newspaper is found to be false, such stories should promptly be pulled down with the same online site publishing a corrigendum and an apology signed by its editor to the readers.

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