

Original Research Article

Assessment of Objectivity Levels of News on Social Media Platforms

ABSTRACT

The study assessed objectivity levels of news on social media platforms. The study's objectives were among others to examine the objectivity level of news on social media platforms. The study adopted the Social Responsibility Theory as its theoretical anchor. The survey research design was adopted as the research methodology and well-structured questionnaire was the instrument of data collection. The population of the study was residents of Rivers State and a sample size of 385 was derived for the study using the Sample Size Table from The Research Advisors (2006). The multistage sampling technique was used to reach the respondents for the study. The research found that the level of objectivity of social media news reports are low, that the consumers hold negative perceptions when it comes to news reports on social media and that while attaining absolute objectivity in the media may be difficult, it is however achievable only if the news disseminators shy away from prejudices, personal feelings and ambitions. He must be able to keep his biases in check. Thus, the study among others recommends that the federal government in collaboration with the Ministry of Information should propose a 'social media use bill' to the National Assembly to enact a social media law that would clearly outline the dos and don'ts is for social media users. Also, traditional media with online presence must guard their reputation and credibility, through fairness, truthfulness, accuracy and objectivity in disseminating information to the public.

Keywords: Assessment, Objectivity, News reportage, Social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Serious disputes over journalism practices and adherence to professional ethics have surfaced over time. Many people, both inside and outside of the media circle, have lost trust in and have grave doubts about the journalism profession as a result of these ethically-related scandals. The discipline of journalism involves gathering, examining, confirming, and disseminating news about current affairs, issues, trends, and individuals.

The emergence of social media began with the inception of the internet, which enabled people to share information and communicate instantly with one another [1](Boyd and, Ellison, 2010, p.466; Etumnu & Williams-Etumnu, 2024). Sadly, at inception the platforms used then were not as user-friendly as they were more 'technology intensive and required some level of technical know-how and expertise before use. This feature made the use of social media platform reserved for a limited few. However, with the advancement of

technology, the features of social media were worked on, thus, more people were able to easily access and make use of them without necessarily having any technological background. This marked a turning point in the history of internet and social media usage (Baden, Bender, Spring, Bhattacharjee and Strain, 2009). Andreas & Haenlein (2010, p.46) posits that “social media users can create their own content, share it with others, respond to people, and collaborate with them and many more.” The upgraded friendly user interaction of the social media gave rise to the increased number of social media platforms and also the increased number of users of the various platforms.

Social media platforms have become the main way of coming across news online, surpassing direct traffic to news outlet’s own platforms or access through search engines. Several leading (inter)national news outlets have active presence on Instagram or TikTok, where they increasingly offer designated news content tailor-made for the specifications of the given platforms (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, & López-García, 2022). This ties in with the continued search for viable business models and ways to maintain brand awareness amidst highly fragmented media consumption patterns (Chen and Pain, 2021). Similarly, Hendrickx et al. (2020) posits that, using social media platforms to maintain brand diversity emerges to the forefront of traditional media corporation’s strategy to thwart obsolescence.

Social media even with its advantageous features have, however, caused a lot of controversies in the field of journalism. Ekström and Westlund (2019) were among the first scholars to conceptualise the so-called dislocation of news journalism in which news publishers have become dependent, to varying degrees, on platforms non-proprietary to themselves, provided by social media companies. With news consumption similarly increasingly dislocated, news brands and their overarching organisations invest resources in the production of novel news content types specifically created within and/or for the confined spaces of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which each have their own set of distinct logics, affordances and (tacit) rules (Hermida and Mellado 2020). This practice has been referred to as social (media) journalism (Hendrickx 2021).

One of the major controversies of social media journalism is the issue of objectivity in the news contents on social media. Normally, objectivity in the mass media has long been an issue of discourse in the journalism field and even in the society at large. The emergence of the social media and social; media journalism have increased and worsened the controversies associated with objectivity in the journalism profession. Journalistic objectivity may refer to fairness, disinterestedness, factuality, and non-partisanship, but most often encompasses all of these qualities.

The media derive a great deal of its legitimacy from the fact that it is able to present true pictures of reality. No one would have use for journalism if the journalists themselves asserted that the dissemination of news consisted of false pictures of unreality. Concepts such as 'truth' and 'reality' cannot be separated from the concept of objectivity. Hence, the mass media, social media inclusive has been seen to wield so much influence in the social system. It could engender unity, peace and development as well as create serious security threat, conflict, crisis and other undesirable situation in the society. This explains why some communication scholars regard journalism or mass communication as a double edge sword having the ability to construct and or destroy, 'make and or mar a social system.

News content specifically created for social media consumption, is undoubtedly here to stay. For news publishers, it is a vital way to reach audiences they cannot attract with their traditional offerings as young people's general media usage continues to shift to social media platforms (Okoro, Etumnu, & Okoro, 2019; Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, and Nielsen, 2022). As they grow more powerful and dominant in using algorithms to steer their users towards consumption, media scholars, practitioners and regulators are bound to face enduring challenges around legal, ethical, and epistemic questions about how social media platforms should be tackled from various vantage points. It is to this end, that the significance of objectivity of news reportage on, the media particularly the social media cannot be overemphasized. It is based on this foundation that this study will critically assess the objectivity level of news reportage on social media platforms.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Journalism is a profession which is guided by some legal and ethical codes. These codes direct the practice of journalists and enabled them to distinguish between right, and wrong, good and bad actions. The code of ethics is an attempt to achieve a just balance between freedom and responsibility. He listed some of the ethical codes of journalism to include: objectivity, accuracy, truthfulness or the non-misrepresentation of facts.

Contrarily, with the emergence of social media platforms, and the infiltration of online bloggers and citizen journalists, the objectivity level of the media has been threatened and put to test. This is presumed to be largely due to the fact that most of the individuals disseminating news contents via social media do not know anything about the profession, thus, they do not conform to the ethics of the profession.,

There seem to be plethora of consequences. The consequence of this is the fact that the media are perceived to fast losing their credibility in the eyes of the audience. The audience

consume media messages with a pinch of salt. Their first reaction to news reportage particularly those on social media is met with a doubt and skepticism. Also, the lack of objectivity in the news reportage can result to uproar and division in the society. Therefore, it is the thrust of this work; to assess the objectivity level of news reportage via social media platforms.

1.2 Research Questions

The study is set out to answer the following questions;

1. To what extent are subscribers exposed to news on social media platforms?
2. What is the objectivity level of news on social media platforms?
3. How do subscribers perceive the objectivity of news on social media platforms?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Responsibility Theory shall be used as the theoretical framework for this study.

Early communication administrators such as Robert Hutchins (head of the Commission on Freedom of the Press) expressed concern over communication ethics in libertarian media cultures. Early followers of the theory believed that mass media should contribute to societal improvement. SRT has been widely recognized by media practitioners and scholars since the Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947. The Committee on a Free and Responsible Press (1947) expressed the view that the press should provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. The underlying principle of the social responsibility theory of the press is that the press should be free to perform the functions which the libertarian theory granted it freedom to perform, but that this freedom should be exercised with responsibility. If the media fail to meet their responsibilities to society, the social responsibility theory holds that the government should encourage the media to comply by way of controlling them.

The Commission on Freedom of the Press which formulated the Social Responsibility theory while noting that the press does not fulfil her basic societal roles of providing information, enlightenment, serving as watchdog, advertising, entertainment, and self-sufficiency, called on the media to:

- Provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's event, in a context which gives them meaning.
- Serve as a forum for exchange of comment and criticism
- Project a representative picture of the constituent groups in society

- Be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.
- Provide full access to the day's intelligence.

According to social responsibility theory, for the benefit of society as a whole, the media must accept moral and legal accountability for all they publish. This theory creates a platform to make media reporting truthful, accurate and objective at all times. Credibility is the foundation of this theory, and to be credible, media practitioners try as much as possible to be socially responsible, fair and balanced, transparent in reporting while respecting the dignity, privacy and rights of all. The social responsibility theory obligates media to highlight injustices within the community and enlighten people on their rights and privileges.

The relevance of this theory to the study rests on the fact that the media particularly those that disseminate news to the public ought to be socially responsible to their audience by disseminating news contents that are free of bias and personal opinions, simply put their news content must be highly objective in nature.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The Concept of Social Media

Social media as a concept has been explained in various ways by different social media scholars. According to Dewing (2012), social media are terms that refers to a wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allows users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content or join online community,. Social media users are no longer passive media consumers but very active, which is largely due to the fact that they have gone from been consumers to producers as they have become generators, creators and disseminators of information. News content specifically created for, disseminated, and consumed via social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook are rapidly entering a crowded content market. Hendrickx (2023) holds that, the rise of social journalism can signal the advent of an entirely new form of journalism that breaks with previous (tacit) rules and conventions in terms of production values, style, topics, ways of engagement and consumption.

Social media have created a platform for its users to interact and recycle information within them. Simply put,-social media are groups of Internet-based application that are built upon the ideology and technology of web 2.0 and allow the generation and exchange of its content. In a nutshell web 2.0 is the foundation of social media, which has given birth to innovative, interesting and interactive applications of the web for sociability.

Social networking is evolutionary developments of online, participation where people of common interest communicate share and contribute content on the social cyberspace. It is a viable tool for cooperation and sharing of knowledge in an open access platform. According to Computing Dictionary (2011), social networking is designed to allow multiple users to publish content of themselves. The information may be on any subject and may be for consumption by friends, mates, employers, employees just to mention a few.

3.2 The concept of Objectivity

Journalistic objectivity may refer to fairness, disinterestedness, factuality, and non-partisanship, but most often encompasses all of these qualities. The journalist must report only the facts and not a personal attitude toward the facts. While objectivity is a complex and dynamic notion that may refer to a multitude of techniques and practices, it generally refers to the idea of “three distinct, yet interrelated, concepts”: truthfulness, neutrality, and detachment. Objectivity in journalism aims to help the audience make up their own mind about a story, providing the facts alone and then letting audiences interpret those on their own. To maintain objectivity in journalism, journalists should present the facts whether or not they like or agree with those facts. Objective reporting is meant to portray issues and events in a neutral and unbiased manner, regardless of the writer’s opinion or personal beliefs (Clark, 2014, p.3).

According to Calcutt and Hammond (2011), the first approach to objectivity which is truthfulness is a commitment to reporting only accurate and truthful information, without skewing any facts or details to improve the story or better align an issue with any certain agenda. Secondly, neutrality suggests that stories be reported in an unbiased, disinterestedness, even handed, and impartial manner. Under this notion, journalists are to side with none of the parties involved and simply provide the relevant facts and information of all. The third idea, detachment, refers to the emotional approach of the journalist. Essentially, reporters should not only approach issues in an unbiased manner, but also with a dispassionate and emotionless attitude. Through this strategy, stories can be presented in a rational and calm manner, letting the audience make up their minds without any influences from the media.

Associated conventions of journalistic objectivity include: authoritative sources, such as politicians must be quoted (in this way the journalist is seen to, distance him- or herself from the views reported, by establishing that they are someone else’s opinions); ‘fact’ must be separated from ‘opinion’, and ‘hard news’ from ‘editorial comment’; and the presentation of information must be structured chronologically, with the most important bits coming first, at

the ‘top’ of the story (McNair 1994). Any journalistic comment comes from ‘specialist’ correspondents who are quoted as experts by the reporter in the same way that a scientist might be. The news reporter refrains from such comment. These conventions perpetuate the impression that reporters are simply conveying the ‘facts’ and not trying to influence how people interpret them. The ideal of objectivity gives journalists legitimacy as independent and credible sources of information.

Finding the truth has little to do with objectivity in journalism, until it comes down to correctly reporting what other people have said. This is in opposition to the idea of scientific objectivity, which holds that opinions should be supported by empirical data in the pursuit of the truth. Paradoxically, journalistic objectivity hinders the pursuit of facts; instead, it frequently substitutes opinion weighing for journalistic inquiry.

3.3 Objectivity Level in News Reportage on Social Media

Nigeria is a developing nation, and at different times in her history, has seen press that were partly Totalitarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility type, Authoritarian. In Nigeria, private and publicly-owned media operate side-by-side and there are varying degrees of ‘privateness’ and ‘publicness’.

Due to the fact that there was once a time when Nigerian governments alternated between military and civilian rule, objectivity in the media is a relative concept. Even the administrations of the people have continued to show a changing political base. As a result, the Nigerian journalist may only be considered objective in his reporting to the extent that he is or has been free from prejudices, media owner control, and censorship (by either the national or state governments).

Social media are very broad terms that includes a wide variety of media vehicles. It is the “how” of how we socialize on the new Web 2.0. It is the vehicle individuals/online news platform use to share information and news with our social network, and it includes all social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, etc. These are among the most popular social media sites. .

As of September 2021, Facebook reported having over 2.89 billion monthly active users and over 1.93 billion daily active users. This makes Facebook one of the largest social media platforms in the world with a vast reach. Additionally, Facebook's family of apps, including Instagram and WhatsApp, have billions of users as well, further expanding its reach. There are many other social media sites and they use a wide variety of formats. For example, Blogger and WordPress are two of the most popular general/blogging sites. The possibilities

are endless depending on the information being exchanged and the intended audience. Social media cover all the tools we use for social networking.

Each platform, from videos on TikTok to podcasts on Spotify, has its own key characteristics and constraints that poses additional challenges for content creators. Social journalism requires different angles and approaches for every individual platform, which creates additional workloads and burdens on journalists which are progressively expected to be present on all content carriers at the same time. This is rapidly and profoundly altering traditional journalistic norms and values, including more personal forms of news content such as podcasts, where journalists themselves become part of the news (Nee and Santana 2021). According to Hendrickx (2023), the first studies on social journalism even go as far as indicating a move away from news all together: a content analysis of posts from 234 international news and television program TikTok accounts only labelled 41.3% as news content, with “funny and silly things” constituting 24.5% of the research sample (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022). This again ties in with the previously discussed separation of news from journalism proposed by (Steensen and Westlund 2020) and corresponds with the finding of (Larsson 2018) that social media users prefer lighter news topics and modes of interaction.

Due to the fact that the various social media platforms are very easy to access, news and information dissemination via social media platforms have become a very common phenomenon practiced by a large number of individuals. The news contents disseminated on social media range from personal to societal news stories. Most individuals use social media platforms to announce events and issues happening in their lives. On the other hand the advent of social media has given birth to citizen journalists. Citizen journalists are individuals who majorly use social media platforms to disseminate and report eye witness report or other issues that are of societal interest.

The practice of citizen journalism is presently on a tremendous increase thanks to the availability of social media. However, this easy accessibility of the powerful social media platforms has altered the ethics of the journalism profession as most people who engage in online dissemination of news do not know anything about the profession, hence; they fail to adhere to the ethics of journalism. Social media platforms have reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional news media (Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, & Müller, 2021; Welbers and Opgenhaffen 2018). Under social journalism, professional journalists daily vie for attention both with and from ordinary citizens and their media content, while also having to win the favour of black box algorithms typical for social media (Reviglio and Agosti 2020).

Traditional news brands have lost all control over the way audiences engage with their content across platforms. As a result, their gatekeeping power is very weak.

This trend, has posed a lot of challenges to the credibility of the news media, as most news contents on social media do not abide by objectivity, fairness, accuracy and even balance. They are filled with a lot of sensationalism to draw people's attention to the news content. Another challenge this trend poses to the news media is that a lot of fake news is being disseminated at an alarming rate. Consequently, what this does is that it reduces the credibility of traditional news media in the eyes of the public.

4. METHODOLOGY

In gathering data for this research, the survey research method was adopted. The population of this study comprises of social media users resident in Rivers State in Nigeria. However, due to the fact that there is no specific figure for this, the entire population of Rivers State which according to the 2006 census is 5,198,716. However to determine the current population of Rivers state in 2019, the researcher, applied Owuamalam (2012) population projection calculation with a projection rate of 3.2% as recommended by the United Nations Development UNDP. Hence, the population of this study based on the 2022 population projection for Rivers state is put at 7,476,800. Given the population, the research sampled a total of 385 respondents. This figure was derived from Sample Size Table from The Research Advisors (2006). The study's data were gathered using the instrument of the questionnaire. The multistage sampling technique was used to reach the respondents for the study. In the first stage, the researcher clustered the twenty-three Local Governments Areas that made up the state into the three senatorial districts; Rivers South-east, Rivers East, Rivers West. From each of these three senatorial districts, four LGA council headquarters was purposively selected, bringing the total number of LGAs sampled to 12. In the second stage, the accidental sample was employed to get to the respondents needed from each of the twelve LGAs used to represent the entire Rivers State population.

4.1 Data Presentation

Three hundred and eighty four (384) copies of the questionnaire were distributed, however, only 340 were correctly filled and retrieved. This represents a success rate of 89% retrieval of the questionnaire, adequate enough to represent the sample size. Thus, the 340 questionnaire retrieved will form the basis of the data analysis.

4.2 Data Analysis

This section deals with the presentation of the data collected for this study.

5. RESULTS

Research Question One: To what extent are subscribers exposed to news reportage on social media?

The response gotten formed the table below.

Table 1. Extent to which subscribers exposed to news reportage on social media

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Rarely	34	10
Occasionally	49	14
Often	87	26
Everyday	169	50
Not at all	-	-
Total	340	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

In table 1 above, 34 of the respondents representing (10%) said they rarely consume social media news contents, 49 representing (14%) said occasionally, 87 representing (26%) said often, while 169 representing (50%) said everyday.

Research Question Two: What is the objectivity level of news reportage on social media?

The response gotten from respondents was presented in the table.

Table 2. Objectivity level of social media news reports

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Very high	19	6%
High	42	11%
Average	94	28%
Low	115	34%
Very low	70	21%
Total	340	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

In the above table, 19 of the respondents representing (6%) said the objectivity level observed in news reports on social media was very high, 42 representing (11%) said it was high, 94 representing (28%) said it was average, 115 representing (34%) said it was low, while 70 representing (21%) said it was very low.

Research Question Three: How do subscribers perceive the objectivity of news reportage on social media?

To answer this question, the response gotten from respondents was presented in the table.

Table 3. Subscribers perception of social media news reportage

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Social media as more accessible and up-to-date compared to traditional media outlets	109	32%
Skeptical of the accuracy and objectivity of news shared on social media	92	27%
News on social media are sometimes bias and sensational in nature	75	22%
Some traditional news outlets on social media strive to maintain high levels of objectivity on their social media platforms	64	18%
Total	340	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

From the table above, 109 of the respondents representing (32%) said that for them social media is more accessible and up-to-date compared to traditional media outlets, 92 representing (27%) said that they are skeptical of the accuracy and objectivity of news shared on social media, 75 representing (22%) said news on social media are sometimes bias and sensational in nature, 64 representing (18%) said some traditional news outlets on social media strive to maintain high levels of objectivity on their social media platforms.

6. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The study first established that the respondents knew what social media is and that they all subscribe to various social media platforms. This is in line with Sofela's (2012) observation that subscriber's knowledge of social media has grown expediently. The study also gathered that the respondents said they access their social media accounts on a daily basis. In relation to this fact, Kadala (2011) noted that an average Nigerian youth spend about 7 hours daily on social media, and some spend all night chatting, tweeting and updating their profiles on different social media, which is made easier and more convenient with the mobile phones and other handheld devices. All these responses culminate in the fact that the respondents' level of exposure to social media platforms is very high.

Analysis made in this paper revealed that the respondents use social media to get news contents. The kind of news they got ranged from general, political, social, entertainment to business, sports and economic news. Social media provides a forum for subscribers to be

exposed to news reportage, just like Mckcague (2011) revealed in Eke-Okpala, Omekwu and Odoh (2014), that subscribers use Facebook and other social media channels to develop their identities beliefs and stance on various issues such as politics, economy etc. The study found out that majority of the respondents consumes social media news on a daily basis and that subscribers' exposure to social media new content is to a great extent.

After ascertaining that the respondents knew what journalistic objectivity is, the paper gathered from majority of the respondents that the objectivity level of social media news contents was low as some social media platforms have a reputation for being biased or sensational in their news reportage. The veracity of this finding is justified based on recent happenings where an online medium published a story about the killing of an INEC staff in Kogi, however, the story was later discovered to be untrue. Similarly, the information about President Buhari marrying another wife which was awash on social media but was later discovered to be untrue is also a case of social media lack of accuracy and objectivity. To this end, the objectivity level of social media news content is low.

The paper revealed subscribers perceptions towards news reportage on social media platforms, majority of the respondents perceived social media platforms as more accessible and up-to-date in terms of breaking news compared to traditional media outlets. This is closely followed by another group are skeptical of the accuracy and objectivity of news shared on social media. Some were of the opinion that news on social media are sometimes bias and sensational in nature.

7. CONCLUSION

Diverse but contentious viewpoints exist about the subject of impartiality. While some people think that journalists should report objectively, others think that since it benefits the public interest, reporters should keep their personal viewpoints hidden in their news reports. Others contend that because of the biases that news consumers, editors, and reporters all harbor on a regular basis, news neutrality is unachievable. According to this theory, subjectivity rather than objectivity is encouraged in the media. Scholars studying media, however, concur that readers of news have a right to a fair, impartial, and truthful portrayal of events. They all agree that a news reporter's first priority should be the interests of the general public. But the real question is: What or who decides whether the general public finds a news article interesting? Does the news event itself serve this purpose, or does the journalist whose job it is to report on the event serve this purpose? In any event, the fundamental problem is that news objectivity is a matter of significant concern, and the existence of social media adds to the complexity of the issue because of its unstable accessibility (Akpan & Onyebuchi, 2012).

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

As gatekeepers, media professionals should take ownership of their roles and use social media to spread news that is truthful, impartial, balanced, and answerable to the public. In the process, they have to make sure that only seasoned and very skilled media workers are hired and given sensitive media tasks, particularly those involving gatekeeping duties.

In order to increase objectivity levels of news reportage on social media, news outlets should fact-check their information before publishing to ensure accuracy and credibility. There is also the need to avoid sensationalism by focusing on reporting facts rather than sensationalizing a story to grab attention.

Due to the increasing trend of commercialization, news outlets should adopt the habit of disclosing their funding sources to prevent conflicts of interest that may influence their reporting. This will go a long way to improve the perception social media subscribers have towards their news contents on social media

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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