Comparative Study of Social Media, Television and Newspapers’ News Credibility

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Abstract
The advent of social media as a news platform and its patronage daily by people to know what is happening around them has elicited several comparative studies on the news credibility on social media, television and newspapers. This study conducted a comparative investigation of the news credibility of social media, television and newspapers. The study in its research design used both focus group discussion and the survey method. The researcher employed source effects model as the theoretical framework for the study. Findings of the research revealed that level of education and knowledge of internet have influence on the selection and believability of news by respondents. Likewise, most people rely on another media after their exposure to their preferred choice of media in other to authenticate the truthfulness of a news story. The study also revealed that those who placed television and newspaper news as higher on the credibility scale than the social media did so because news in the newspapers and on television are produced by well trained personnel and there are institutionalized ways of filtering news stories to ensure their accuracy and objectivity.

Introduction
Every day people receive information that is far more than they can possibly use. Information from the mass media, friends, books and lately the internet influences people in their decision making process and their perceptions of event and happenings around them. The mass media particularly has become an important organ through which people make meaning out of their lives, social activities and issues within the society.

People regularly stay glue to their television and radio set for information and flock the newspaper and magazine stands for same purpose. Even, in a situation where information is spread around in a society; it does not carry any iota of credibility until such information is confirmed by the media. For several decades, the mass media especially television, radio, newspaper and magazines has been a major source of information dissemination such that it assumed the pivotal role of the ‘fourth estate of the realm’ and also, a societal watchdog.

The news content of the media especially in developing countries like Nigeria where the government at both state and federal levels dominates ownership has been dogged by questions like whether the news content is accurate and true or a reflection of the government position. Similarly, the private media organizations do not fair better as market compulsions and profit making objectives raise such pertinent questions like whether the media should be accountable to private interests or the society. This has continued to generate controversies and arguments about the blurred distinctions between news and views, news and advertisements and propaganda and information. Also, profit motives and ownership often influence news managers to manipulate content (Bakshi and Mishra, 2010). This therefore makes the credibility of media content a concern especially with the mass of information that is available daily for consumption.
In recent years, new communication technology and the rise of the internet have opened up a new vista of information dissemination that has never been experienced before. It, especially the internet, has penetrated people’s daily lives in ways that hitherto are unimaginable. According to Fogg et al (2001), the growth of the internet since the 1980’s has been faster than the growth of any other communication medium. The emergence of a new medium often affects existing media (Liu, 2003) in several ways such as audience base, credibility and production process. The internet provides an alternative space for expression by citizens against the limited access provided by the mainstream media of television, radio and newspaper where length of freedom and space are determined by the government and/or ownership interest. The news media has transformed people from being passive and at the receiving end of one way mass communication to becoming producers and transmitters of information (Creeber and Martin, 2009; Bennett, 2003). With this phenomenon, the internet and the news media have assumed great importance and popularity in the society as people are free to create their own news comment on issues and get the other side of a story (Rosenstiel, 2005).

As the new media platforms assume an important source of information dissemination and expression of opinion, the level to which people place trust and credibility in both the mainstream media and the news media becomes an issue of concern and investigation. It is not all information that is useful and credible and this explains Griffin (2009)’s argument of source credibility as one of the three major ways through which speakers convince audience members. Against this background therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the perception of the news credibility of social media, television and newspapers.

**Literature Review**

**Credibility**

Kaufman et al (1999) explains that the credibility of the news sources is important to audience members. It is so because it plays a big role in the way the audience interprets and understands information. The study of media credibility is often approached from two dimensions. These are medium credibility and source credibility. The source credibility dimension investigates the expertise and trustworthiness of the person who initiates the message or communication (Holland and Weiss, 1951; Kiousis, 2001; Seif, 1996). The medium credibility stream on the other hand evaluates the credibility of media channels the communicator uses in sending a message (Graziano and McGrath, 1986; Metzger, 2003). Burgoon, Burgoon, & Wilkinson (1981) point out that credibility is anchored on believability, trust and perceived reliability. Slater and Rouner (1996) argue that the perception of source credibility by audience can be influenced by the aesthetic and internal characteristics of messages. Similarly, Chartprasert (1993) contends that the writing style of a news source whether simplistic or complicated also influences credibility and perception. One major problem however in credibility research is the question of distinguishing between source, message and channel credibility.

**Social Media**

Social media are the various internet based applications that build on the technologies of web 2.0 which allows for the creation and exchange of user generated content. Pew Research (2010) reports that social network sites such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter are now
some of the foremost online communication platforms. Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) posit that gathering and sharing of information as well as maintaining and making friendships are some of the emerging dimensions of social media. Gangadharbatla (2012) in his study on social media using the survey method concludes that young adults are more likely to obtain their news information from social media more so than from the traditional media sources. Johnson and Kaye (1998) in their study of the usage of the internet for political information by individuals found that online media are more highly credible than traditional media. However, concerns and scepticism have been raised on the credibility of social media and online news content because of the questions of professionalism, anonymity of sender location, etc. (Hilingoss and Rieh, 2008; Fogg, 2003; Kiousis, 2001).

Another factor in the discussion of the credibility of news on social media is whether the definition of what is news on the mainstream media is the same as the concept of news on the social media. Also, does the news pass through the filtering (gatekeeping) process of the mainstream media and if it does, is there any platform of attributing the source of news to a particular person?

**Television and Newspapers**

Long before the appearance of the internet and the social media, there has always been the question of which of the two- newspapers or television- carries the higher level of credibility. The various credibility studies conducted by Roper Institute up till about 1961 saw the newspaper as more credible than other forms of mass media (Self, 1996).

Similarly, Wesley and Severin (1964), using demography and psychographics as parameters argue that literate people prefer newspapers while television appeals to those who read less and radio is for people in farmlands. Newhagen and Nass (1989) using the survey research method in their study concluded that audiences rate television news higher on the scale of credibility than newspapers. They based their argument on the fact that respondents in the study rated news credibility on television higher because the news presenters on television are familiar and could be identified while newspapers are a faceless, unchanging structure that does not permit individual variation. Carter and Greenberg (1966) postulate that television is more believable when it comes to conflicting news but describe newspapers to be more dependable. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) in their findings concluded that people’s stands on newspaper and television credibility were related to their attitudes toward press freedom. Schweiger (2000) asserts that both internet and non-internet users rated the credibility of newspaper news and the news on the internet to be similar.

The theoretical framework for this study will be situated within the Source Effects Model with particular focus on the source credibility strand of the model. The source effect models “…posit that certain perceived characteristics of a communication source may have a positive effect on the audience’s reception to the conveyed message” (Erdogan 1999: 297). The source credibility strand of source effect models explains that the acceptance and favourable response to a message depends on the perception the audience have about the expertise, trustworthiness and knowledge of the source (O’ Mahony and Meenaghan, 1988; Erdogan, 1999). It is also about the
communicator’s positive characteristics that can influence the receiver’s acceptance of a message (Ohanian, 1990). Goldsmith, Lafferty & Newell (2000:16) argue that source credibility is the “extent to which the source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject”. Hovland and Weiss (1951) confirmed that the “credibility” of a communicator reflects the public perception of the communicator’s fairness and factualness.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this study;

RQ1: What type of news media- television, newspaper and social media- is the most credible?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between demographic antecedents and news credibility?

RQ 3: What are the criteria for evaluating news credibility?

**Methodology**

This paper has as its objective to comparatively investigate social media, television and newspaper news credibility. The study therefore used the triangulation method by employing focus group discussion and survey methods in its research design. For the focus group discussion, three sessions were conducted with the sample population drawn from the students’ population of Plateau State University through the purposive sampling technique. A total number of 24 students participated in the focus group discussion.

Questionnaires were administered to 100 respondents for the survey component of the study. Respondents for the study were selected through simple random sampling technique and the population comprised of academic staff of Plateau State University, Journalists and readers at newspaper vendor’s stand. For the analysis, the data collected from the field survey were analyzed using the simple percentage. The return rate of questionnaire administered was 100% as all the respondents duly completed their questionnaire and returned the same.

**Results**

The researcher conducted three sessions of focus group discussion with each session having 8 participants. All the participants for the three sessions are students of Plateau State University. Morgan (1998) argues that focus groups are characterized by the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group. Participants were initially asked about their understanding of credibility and their responses tallied with the operational definition given by the researcher for the study which is the extent to which a receiver sees the source as having relevant knowledge, skills, experience and trust to give unbiased and objective information. The following questions were developed to serve as a guide for the discussions:

1. Do you listen, read or watch news?
2. What is the frequency of carrying out the action in question 1
3. Do you have easy access to the mainstream and online media?
4. On what media platform do you access your news?
5. Of radio, television and online news, which one do you prefer?
6. After your first exposure to news from your media choice, do you still rely on another media platform for authentication or verification of the story?
1. All the 24 participants in the three FGDs conducted agreed they all expose themselves to news media at different times of the day. They also responded that because of their academic activities, they spend less time watching television, listening to radio or reading newspaper. Rather, they access most of their news on their mobile handsets connected to the internet.

2. 82% of the respondents in the three groups were of the opinion that news on the social media and the internet are more credible than those sourced from the mainstream media. They said unlike the mainstream media, the internet provides links through which any information received that is in doubt can further be verified. A hyperlink according to 82% of the respondents is not only to display another document but actually helps in ascertaining the veracity of a story. When the contents of various pages opened share similarity with the initial story, the truthfulness of the story is not in doubt. 18% however think news from the mainstream media is higher in credibility because the gathering, processing and dissemination of the news involve professional who will not like to jeopardize their image and social acceptance. They were also of the opinion that news on the mainstream media is more trustworthy and credible because there are ethical guidelines that guide their operation unlike the social media platform where anybody without organization or industry instituted restraints can publish anything.

3. 83% of the discussants in the three sessions accepted that the news accessed most of the time on the mainstream media largely reflect the elite and the ruling class and very often, the news is slanted to tow the line of the owner of such news organization. However, the social media and the internet offer a participatory platform where contributors of news are not obliged or restrained by any ideological or economic underpinnings.

In summary, the participants obviously because they are of the younger generation and more in tune with information technology prefer news on the social media and the internet to the mainstream media.

Survey

100 questionnaires were administered to respondents that included practicing journalists, academic staff of Plateau State University and readers at newspapers vendors’ stand. All the questionnaires distributed were completed and returned which made the return rate of the questionnaire to be 100%. The average age of respondents for the survey component of the study based on the data collected from the field is 35 years and 25% of the sample population are female while the remaining 75% are male.

Table 1: Comparison of News Credibility on Television, Newspaper and Social media

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73
Television news is more credible than other media source 28 27 45

Newspaper news is more credible than other media source 29 30 41

Social media news is more credible than other media source 29 32 39

**Source: Field work, 2015**

According to this data results from the survey, 45% of respondents believe news on television is more credible than other media source. They attributed this to the fact that news on television are often accompanied with video which makes such news believable. According to respondents, news on television are more trustworthy because most often, people that are involved in a particular issue are invited and before the public view allowed to state their positions. 41% agreed that newspaper news is credible. They attributed their responses to the fact that newspaper reporters are well trained and they have an institutionalized way of determining and verifying news before publication. Another reason is that newspapers separate for their readers facts from opinion hence such page like “opinion page” and also identify the source of a story through attribution. 30% do not agree or disagree on whether newspaper news is more credible. However, 29% disagree and based their responses on the reason that news content on newspaper sometimes does not reflect reality as the influence of the owner or the ideology standpoint of a newspaper organization could influence how news is reported thus questioning the concept of objectivity.

39% of respondents agreed that news on social media is more credible. They based their response on the reason that most of the news on the social media are news that have already been disseminated on the traditional media hence, there is no much difference. They argued that social media provides a platform for people to express their opinion on issue that has already been disseminated by the mainstream media in which the latter may not have provided or bring to the public all the angle to such issue. Social media therefore provide a space for people to discuss exhaustively on the issue and through that, verify the authenticity of the news. 29% of the respondents however do not agree that social media news is credible.

To them, verification of news and source is difficult on the social media. The news does not pass through any institutional filtering mechanism and most of the people that post news on the social media are not trained for such purpose. One interesting observation from respondents is that all the respondents that disagree with the credibility of social media news are not computer literate and does not use their phone for social media activities like chatting on Facebook even though their phones have the facilities.

**Table 2: Media platform on which respondents access news**

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From the data analyzed all the respondents’ access news from television and newspapers. They all agreed that one of the two media served as their first point of accessing the news while the second serve as a platform for confirming what was reported in the first. They said that when the news reported on their first media choice is reported by their second media choice, it indicates that the news item is credible. 39% percent of the respondents however access news from the social media. 95% percent of respondents that access news from the social media are academic staff which shows that literacy and knowledge of the internet are factors that influence news credibility.

Conclusion
This study revealed that young adults exposed themselves more to news on the social media and as such rate news credibility on social media higher. The participatory and hyperlink features of the social media allows for people to investigate and confirm the authenticity of news. The study also concluded that level of education and knowledge of internet influence the choice of media and ultimately, how credibility of news is rated. The researcher also concluded that findings support O’Mahony and Meenaghan(1988) and Erdogan (1999)’s assertion that acceptance and a favourable response to a message depends on the perception audience have about the trustworthiness of the source. Similarly, comparing news credibility between newspaper, television and social media is influenced by the credibility is influenced by the public perception of the news platform’s fairness and factualness.

Reference:


