

QUALITY OF AUDIENCE PARTICIPATIVE DISCOURSE IN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF PREMIUM TIMES

Fatima I. Abubakre

Directorate of Corporate Affairs,
University of Ilorin

ABSTRACT

Nigerians love to engage in political discussions that will allow them to educate and disseminate information to others in places not unlimited only to buses or trains but also in news organisations' comment sections. Hence, the significance of interactivity in the online civic participative discourse cannot be underemphasized because it is a key element that is central to the proper and effective functioning of a democracy which ultimately has implications on voting choices and political participation. This study, therefore, examines the quality of audience participation in online newspapers in Nigeria by analyzing readers' comments following the Panama Papers Scandal, reported by the online newspaper, Premium Times. Findings from the study showed that the quality of audience participative discourse in online newspapers in Nigeria will be affected by the civility or incivility of participants on the online platform.

Introduction

On April 3, 2016, an influential online newspaper in Nigeria Premium Times published an article with the headline: #PanamaPapers: Giant Leak of Offshore Financial Records Exposes Global Array of Corruption. The story, which was just the beginning of an exposé about the hidden financial dealings of politicians and public officials around the world including influential Nigerians, detailed how big international banks and law firms transact in financial secrecy and create shell companies for concealing assets for its special clients. The leaked records, which came from a legal firm, Mossack Fonseca, based in Panama but with branches

spread in about 39 other countries across the globe was the findings of an investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. The German newspaper *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, and more than 100 other organizations which included the *Premium Times* online newspaper based in Abuja, Nigeria. The Panama Papers scandal, a landmark collaborative investigative report of more than 370 journalists, won the 2016 Investigative Journalism of the Year prize at the Data Journalism Awards in Vienna, Austria. According to a report by the *Premium Times*, the report exposed offshore companies linked to Prime ministers of Iceland, Pakistan, the King of Saudi Arabia, the children of the president of Azerbaijan, the family of Xi Jinping, China's top leader, movie star Jackie Chan, football champ, Lionel Messi amongst many others and brought down some world leaders.

The present study therefore, attempted to examine the quality of audience participative discourse in online newspapers using as a case study, the *Premium Times* newspaper, by carrying out an analysis of readers' comments following the reportage of the Panama scandal by the online medium in Nigeria. Studies on the communication process over the years have described communication as an exchange of messages or information between a sender and a receiver. Hence, this study explores the relationship between the stories published by PT and the interactivity among readers who post comments in reaction to the investigative report.

Premium Times www.premiumtimesng.com

The *Premium Times*, an online media outfit which is based in Abuja, Nigeria, is published by Premium Times Services Limited. According to a statement on its website, the medium was founded in mid 2011. The website which, at first glance, instantly invites readers to taste of the news menu of the day is accessible anywhere with an internet connection. The website layout of the PT is designed to ensure that readers at a glance can quickly capture the information to be conveyed under the news headlines. The major stories of the day which usually is organized in a kind of tripartite arrangement, occupies the most prominent position, followed by top stories in the news section arranged in rows in a straightforward manner. One can also view special reports and investigations undertaken by the online newspaper as well as features and interviews which are complemented with pictures matching the content of the different reports. As with many Nigerian newspapers which tend to organise news on a geographical/geo-political basis in order to ensure and preserve the relevance of such news stories to particular audiences, PT also organizes its contents along measures of 'South West'; 'So

South'; 'South East'; 'North Central'; 'North East' and 'North West'. The website also features multimedia content as readers can view and click on latest videos and pop interviews on issues that interests them. The latest opinion articles and PT editorials are also highlighted ready to click. The online newspaper also has on its menu, Arts & Entertainment; Music and Lifestyle; Arts & Books; Travel and other promoted content. While catering for the informational needs of Nigerians, the online newspaper also provides global news not limited to the African continent, as well as Business interviews, Analysis and Data not forgetting Sports. PT also, routinely conducts opinion polls on matters of public interest from time to time.

Literature Review

The concept of interactivity in media studies research has led to increased interests being developed in the work of Jurgen Habermas and his theories of public sphere and rational communication which arose from the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. In his classic work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas stressed the significance of the social interaction witnessed in as well as the important role played by 18th-century coffeehouses and salons in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989). For him, the public sphere is a sphere where citizens come together to interact and decide on common affairs through debates anchored on reason and arguments for the purpose of constituting and arriving at a valid political will on issues which were deemed important to the life of a nation. In the public sphere, Fraser (1992), observed that "political participation is enacted through the through the medium of talk", noting that, "It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction." Highlighting the distinction between public space and the public sphere, Habermas (1996:361) as cited in Cassegard (2014), notes that, "every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space." The concept of interactivity is one of the hallmarks of the new media because it focuses on the manner in which people in the communicative process transfer information to one another, thus allowing for innovative opportunities for members of the political class, political institutions and members of the public to interact with one another (Dahlgren, 2005; Silvia, 2013). Kaye (2013:295) notes that, "politically inclined individuals now have many different types of online media from which to gather political information, aggregate with like-minded others, influence peers, and debate the issues..." In support, Silvia (2013:176), also states that readers' comments in newspaper's websites constitute a locus for public debate and ideas exchange provided by the

mainstream newspaper. Dahlgren (2005:148) describes this as "communicative spaces" which "permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates, ideally in an unfettered manner." Similarly, Clarke (2010) asserts that the social media has implications for representative democracy noting that, the new media allow citizens to connect with the public, influence decision-makers and hold legislatures and governments to account. The Nigerian government has embraced online or new media as a tool to promote public education and engagement. For example, the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari has a verified Twitter account- @MBuhari made available to the citizenry to promote interaction with the citizenry.

People have different reasons for going online and engaging in posting comments on online platforms. In this wise (Diakopoulous & Naaman, 2011; Mitchelstein 2011) as cited by Leavitt & Peacock (2014:2) in a White paper prepared for the National Institute for Civil Discourse submits that:

Whereas online comment writers are more motivated by a desire to express opinions and information than a desire to engage in discussion, comment readers are motivated by the interaction of hearing from others and understanding multiple perspectives.

Research by communication scholars further asserts that as more individuals rely on particular sources for information, the more such sources become important and the more influence it has on attitudes, beliefs, opinions, values and behaviours (Kioussis, 2001; Greer, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Arendt & Northup, 2015). Shittu (2013:233) conducted a survey on students of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, on their perception of social media advertisements. Findings from the study showed that the students' main social media activities concern information seeking and exchange, maintaining relationships with family and friends as well as entertainment, such as downloading of videos, while the least use was for price search and purchasing products online. Research also finds that majority of journalism students in the University of Lagos participate in social media with most of them on Facebook and a few of them on Twitter (Amobi 2013:103). According to Amobi (2013), "the limited usage of Twitter could be ascribed to their limited understanding of the benefits of this platform and how it works." In Nigeria, the online media was a hot spot for the 2015 Nigerian general elections as major political parties took advantage of the new media to deepen Nigeria's democracy. Some pundits have argued that the political party-All Progressives Congress (APC) which won the 2015 presidential election was able to emerge victorious at the polls largely because the political party was able to

"plug their campaign into the organic anger against the government that has been cooking in Nigeria's social media space for at least 4 years" (Omojuwa, 2015). Nonetheless, Ariel & Avidar (2015:21) aver that the, "transmission of information is not enough to claim for interactivity, but interactivity requires transmission of information to exist." In other words, "information can be spread without producing interactivity." They further held that, "the type of exchange (non-interactive, reactive or interactive) determines the level of interactivity of a platform, and the number of exchanges and users on a platform determine its level of sociability" (2015:26). Likewise, Papacharissi (2002) submits that increased participation in the online discourse does not necessarily yield discussions that encourage democratic ideals because of the overt expression of hasty opinions instead of well-thought out rational discourse on critical matters of concern. Azeez (2013:34), citing Barber (1998) corroborates this when he submits that trivial discourse frequently dominates the public sphere the new media provide and promote. This somewhat aligns with the submissions of Leavitt & Peacock (2014:3) when they state that: "online contexts thus have the potential to make civil discourse harder to achieve." On the basis of the foregoing, seeking ways to improve the digital public sphere becomes a justifiable imperative.

Method

This study examines the quality of audience participative discourse of online newspapers in Nigeria using as a case study, *Premium Times*, which first reported about the Panama Papers scandal in country. This assessment was done through an analysis of readers' comments which were posted on the PT website following the reports about the landmark leak of offshore financial records. The reports of the investigation into the leak, which gained substantial journalistic coverage in both print and online news media outlets in the country was first reported by *Premium Times* on April 3, 2016. *Premium Times* published a total of 51 articles on the issue as at September 30, 2016. However, this study has focused only on five of the articles that received the highest number of readers' comments posted on the website of the medium. Of the 51 articles published by PT, 29(56.8%) were straight news items while 22(43.2%) were feature articles. Also, 82.3% of the Panama scandal coverage by PT pertained to Nigeria and Nigerians while 17.7% of the coverage was concerned with other countries and nationalities. The headlines of the articles which received the highest number of comments on the scandal and were chosen for the present study are listed below with the bylines of the reporters indicated as well as the number of comments:

1. Panama Papers: Hidden family assets of Nigeria's Senate President, Saraki uncovered in tax havens, April 4, 2016.

Byline: Emmanuel Mayah and Joshua Olufemi

Comments: 178

2. Panama Papers: I won't resign, Senate President, Bukola Saraki says, April 8, 2016, Byline: Samuel Ogundipe

Comments: 170

3. Panama Papers: Ex Nigeria Senate President, David Mark, illegally operates secret companies in tax haven, April 5, 2016

Byline: Musikilu Mojeed and Ini Ekott

Comments: 166

4. Panama Papers: Documents show hidden offshore assets belong to Senate President Saraki; wife, Toyin, a mere front, April 8, 2016.

Byline: Premium Times

Comments: 166

5. Panama Papers: General Theophilus Danjuma's offshore companies secret account exposed, April 6, 2016

Byline: Musikilu Mojeed and Nicholas Ibekwe

Comments: 146

Cumulatively, a total of 826 comments posted by 266 unique participants were examined for the study; this amounted to 3.1 comments per poster.

Premium Times uses the Disqus networked community platform to support readers' comments on its website. To be able to post comments on the online newspaper, a user is required to register with name, provide a password and an email address to which a link is then sent which is required to activate the user account. A user nonetheless, could supposedly give a false name, nickname or false personal data in opening the account but must however, provide a valid email address. There was no known stated moderation strategic policy adopted by the online news medium to regulate or check the quality of online discussions in the posting of comments by readers on the website.

The following content categories were then devised for the analysis of readers' comments taking mainly into account the research methodology adopted by Silberstein (2013).

1. Conversational response (refers to replies to other posts and comments)

2. Offers neither reasons nor
3. Offers reasons and
4. Expression of ideas
5. Critique to another
6. Respect for other's
7. Avoidance of discussion
8. Personal attacks
9. Other behaviours

Table 1

Content	Categories
Conversational response	
Offers neither reasons nor	
Offers reasons and	
Expression of ideas	
Critique to another	
Respect for other's	
Avoidance of discussion	
Personal attacks	
Other behaviours	

Discussion

The Conversational response among the content categories of readers of the online newspaper comments online for the level of political engagement discourse. Moving from the dominant

accountability and transparency in governance and the declaration of assets by political office holders; the demand for effective governance and stronger institutions in the country. The next category which was also frequent was the Personal attacks category (232 references) which comprised of threats to individuals, social groups and institutions; calumny, insults, defamation and non-cooperation. It is important to state here that, four of the five articles which received the highest number of comments on the Panama leak scandal on the PFI website had to do with former and serving officials of the Nigerian Senate specifically relating to Mr David Mark who served as Senate President from 2007 to 2015 and his successor, Dr Bukola Saraki who is the incumbent Senate President. Both political office holders and the institutions which they represented were constantly attacked and denigrated and their reputation defamed through malicious posting of comments by antagonists who may be difficult to address or prosecute because such readers may have concealed their true identities (anonymity) in the use of the online platform. While the Nigerian President, Mr Muhammadu Buhari, his cabinet members and influential members of the ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) also got their fair share of the same treatment from the online commenters, the media and the medium itself, *Premium Times* which first reported on the Panama scandal in Nigeria was also not spared as some commenters' accused the online medium of pandering to the wishes of the government of the day and for failing to report the hardship in the land. One commentator, Kabiru J., tagged it "*a conspiracy of silence*." The judicial system, Labour and other corruption-fighting institutions also had their fair share of the personal attacks category. Also present in this category were comments which contain ethnic and religious slurs and stereotypes posted by readers Southwest Vs Southeast, South-South Vs North; Islam Vs Christianity. The import of which encourages polarization of the discussion along ethnic and religious fault lines, as well as, across the length and breadth of the country. According to Silvia (2013:186), the persistence of a considerable amount of insults and libel could be linked to the absence of a pre-moderation by websites that, could avoid the presence of non-polite language and disrespectful behaviours. In his study on new media and political participation in Nigerian democracy, using an analysis of the experience from the oil subsidy removal, Azeez (2013:48) wrote that, many Nigerians used the new media platforms to make "incoherent, irrational and evil statements on the important issue, rather than using the platforms to contribute meaningfully to the debate on the issue...thereby they purposively limited their discussions with those that shared their beliefs and ideas, rather than being tolerant to opposing arguments that could facilitate informed and rational accord." From the present study, and as evident from the Table, it is obvious that

The Personal attacks category was one of the most frequently coded categories coming in the second position after the Conversational response class which prompts Coe, Kenski & Rains (2014:3) to define such incivility as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants or its topics." The use of the term "wailers" or "wailing wailers" coined by Mr Femi Adesina, a spokesman for President Muhammadu Buhari is a social media slang to refer to critics of the Buhari's administration while those critics often refer to supporters of the Buhari administration as "zombies" especially in online posts. While commenters often extend support for fellow users who share their opinions, findings from this study found that participants in the online discourse were more likely to express disagreements on issues rather than supporting an idea.

1001 references were recorded for comments which offered reasons and arguments for the stance taken, while there was also a considerable amount of comments which did not offer reasons nor proffer arguments for the position taken (56 references). Readers' comments many a times tended to suggest that some level of the government was responsible for the problems facing the country and they make effort to justify their position with reasons. 43 references were recorded under the expression of ideas and information extraneous to the debate category. Discussions sometimes diverged from the Panama papers investigative report, to focus on the ongoing trial of the Senate President, Dr Bukola Saraki at the Code of Conduct Tribunal. While some view it as an obvious case of witch-hunt, others argue that supporters of the former Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan who lost the 2015 presidential elections in the country were still smarting from the defeat at the polls hence, the negativism towards the incumbent, Muhammadu Buhari's fight against corruption which was a major cornerstone that brought him to the highest office of the land. Also, it was observed that supporters of the two politicians pay solidarity to their respective political bases and their ideologies. Another deviation from the main discourse was in the line of the interaction which bordered on the alleged extra-judicial killings of the Shiites in the northern part of the country and members of a secessionist group- the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the southeast of Nigeria. Yet another theme of discussion also identified here, bordered on the debate over the challenge of effective governance and ineffective governance which Pate & Bashir (2012:33) summarized thus that:

the threats to the democratic process in the country today are incompetent leadership at different levels, poverty, structural weaknesses of public institutions, abuse of procedures and regulations, undemocratic tendencies,

massive stealing of public resources, insensitive and desperate conduct of politicians and the personalization of state power coupled with the rising level of public frustration.

56 references were recorded for critique to others category which consisted of criticism of fellow commenters; while respect for other viewpoints category had 49 references respectively. Avoidance of disagreements was the least category with 14 references under the overall categories. Other behaviours which comprise the use of all-caps, use of irony, and sarcasm, had 45 references. Although readers from their comments appreciated the investigative power of the online newspaper, the medium PT was also criticized for the manner of some comments selected for publication. As one user with the name, Omooba Adekunle Orafade puts it: *"Why is Premium Times so fixated on the Sarakis? How about pursuing the Buhari as regards forgery and perjury with one millionth of the zeal with which the Saraki's are being harassed?"* Yet, another commenter with the name Omooba A. toes a different line with his post when he noted that, *"This is the best investigative journalist write-up ever presented by any Nigerian newspaper that I ever read. Thanks for being so thorough with this report. With write-up like this, why should the prosecutors in the country lack evidence to prosecute alleged crimes."*

Furthermore, another identified theme that was also significant in the analysis of readers' posts was that of Morality which was examined first, from the perspective of the call for the resignation of the Senate President, Mr Bukola Saraki from his position because of the allegations bordering on asset declaration leveled against him and morality in terms of the alleged partisanship and failure of President Muhammadu Buhari to prosecute notable members of his political party, the Progressives Congress (APC) like Messrs Ahmed Bola Tinubu; Atiku Abiodun; Babatunde Raji Fashola; Rotimi Amaechi amongst others for alleged cases of corruption. The Nigerian President had also been accused of witch-hunting members of the opposition. Although online media platforms through the enablement of the internet have led to increased participation in the public discourse, it can be described as a highly divisive sphere because of the pervasiveness of special interest groups. As one commentator that goes with the identity of "soyo" alleged, some contributors to the online discourse engage in "pay-per-post" with the support of a certain political party whose identity the present researcher has preserved for anonymity sake. Soyo then concluded by stating that "readers should save their energy and engage them less on social media because you are not dealing with a free-minded beings but jobbers."

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that there was a deliberate discourtesy or rudeness widely distributed
readers who posted comments on issues which, may not relate directly to
Investigative report, but rather anchored on matters based on
differences, religious or ethnic diversity.

composition of this study that the quality of audience participative discourse of
newspapers in Nigeria can yield fruitful discussions on matters of public
however, the quality of interaction on such issues will be consistently
by personal attacks and uncivil behaviour of participants on the online
Nigerians love to engage in political discussions that will allow them to
and spread information to others which is not limited only to buses and
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in the online civic participative discourse cannot be
emphasized because it is a key element that is central to the proper and
functioning of a democracy which ultimately has implication on voting
political participation. Therefore, by observing the interaction shared
of the public, the Nigerian government, both at the central, states and
governments' levels as well as political representatives, can understand
needs of Nigerians and their interests and formulate policies to fulfill
This paper enjoins online media organizations in Nigeria to strengthen the
apparatus of their websites in order to curb impolite language and
behaviours exhibited by readers through comments posted on the
news organisation's comment section.

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