



Knowledge and Use of Fact-Checking Tools in Sourcing Online News among Journalists of Select Media Outlets in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: The proliferation of online news platforms has transformed the media landscape, enabling rapid dissemination of information. However, this development has led to the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Fact-checking has emerged as a critical tool in verifying the accuracy of online information. Fact-checking tools such as: snopes (link unavailable) and Africa Check have been developed to help journalists, policy makers and the general public distinguish fact from fictions.

Objective: This study investigated knowledge and use of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news among journalists of select media outlets in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Method: The descriptive survey research design was adopted and purposive sampling technique was used. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire which had a consistency or reliability coefficient of 0.85. Analysis were done using descriptive statistics and summarised using frequency tables.

Result: There was significant high level of knowledge but low level of use of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news among journalists of select media outlets in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the level of knowledge could not translate to level of use of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news among journalists of select media outlets in Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Unique Contribution: The study provides practical recommendations for journalists, media organizations, and policymakers, enhancing the quality of online news reporting and promoting media credibility in Nigeria. By addressing these knowledge gaps, this research contributes to the development of effective fact-checking strategies, ultimately promoting the integrity of online news reporting in Nigeria.

Key Recommendation: Based on this, the study recommends that media outlets in Ebonyi State should collaborate with independent fact-checking organisations to organise a workshop for their staff as to boost fact-checked news gotten from online and also create dedicated fact-checking desk in each media house, among others.

Keywords: Online news, Ebonyi state, Fact-checking tools, Media outlet



INTRODUCTION

The advancement in mass media technology has continually resulted in the growth of information dissemination worldwide. Dittmar and Seabold (2019) note that the success of the mass media is widely attributed to the invention of the printing machine by Johannes Guttenberg in 1447 (Nwafor, 2019). This first movable type printing press enterprise established in Mainz, Germany by Gutenberg and his business partners was shielded from the public but soon, the technology diffused to cities across Europe as it was adopted by firms. Since then, the mass media, especially starting with newspapers, have helped create social awareness and also provided people with an easy way of living life. Although the era of newspapers thrived, the speed at which technology grows brought about significant advances in the Internet which enables more access to information while simultaneously liberalised the business of mass media. People who have access to the internet and social media platforms may no longer be termed as just consumers of news as they also have access to create stories and publish news. With such enormous power comes abuse and so, fake news, which is unverified and probably untrue, and non-factual (nearly fictitious) reports now pervade the media space with a lot of misinformation on key issues in society (Nwafor, & Odoemelam, 2012).

There have been global efforts to counter this trend of misinformation. Most conventional media platforms and investigation-oriented online media are adopting the ‘Fact-check’ strategy to dissect fake news and re-inform readers and audio-visual audiences about the subject matter. Stencil (2015), Mantzarlis (2016), Stenceland Griffin (2018), and Graves and Amazeen (2019) are among the numerous scholars arguing the definition of fact-check. They posit that fact-checking is about verifying facts or information that have been reported towards accrediting such pieces of information or discrediting them completely. This then helps the consumers of such information to have a grasp of the real idea and make inferred judgments. Fact-checking has grown in relevance and has spread around the world following the global surge in ‘fake news’. A burgeoning area of research has tried to measure the effectiveness of various kinds of fact-checking interventions in countering misinformation and promoting accurate beliefs. Despite the importance of fact-checking, there is a gap in knowledge of the extent to which journalists in Ebonyi state, Nigeria understand and use fact-checking tools in sourcing online news. The available conversations on the subject appear scanty and grossly undocumented. Others such as ICIR, (2020), Juneström, (2021) and Bakir & McStay (2017) have focused on different geographical locations, leaving a gap in knowledge of the situation locally. Attempt at filling this lacuna has prompted this study.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are discussed thus:

1. Investigate the level of knowledge of fact-checking as a tool for combating misinformation and disinformation among journalists of select media outlets in Ebonyi State.
2. Access the level of the usage of fact-checking tools in combating misinformation and disinformation among journalists of select media outlets in Ebonyi State.



REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Concept of Fact-checking

Fact-checking is the process of verifying the factual accuracy of questioned reporting and statement. Fact-checking can be conducted before or after the text or content is published or otherwise disseminated. Meanwhile internal fact-checking is such checking done in-house by the publisher to prevent inaccurate content from being published; when the content is analysed by a third party, the process is called external fact-checking (Okoro, & Nwafor, 2013).

Research suggests that fact-checking can indeed correct perceptions among citizens, as well as discourage politicians from spreading false or misleading claims. But first, a reminder that fact-checking is the basis of good journalism. A journalist must always carry out fact-checking before publishing a story. Until a few years ago, it mainly involved verifying politicians' statements. But due to the explosion of misinformation, often created on the internet and massively distributed via social media, fact-checking is becoming an increasingly important part of news media all over the world.

According to *journalists' insight newsletter*, there are now more than 4.5 billion internet users in the world, so the mass of published content makes you dizzy. Here are the figures: in one minute, almost 42 million messages are exchanged on WhatsApp, 500 hours of videos are published on YouTube, and 500,000 comments appear in Facebook publications. The advent of the Internet, especially via mobile phones, has allowed ordinary citizens to become casual reporters by posting photos and videos of events they witness (Nwafor, K. A. 2019). The problem is that among all the content shared on the net, there is false information, or information that deserves to be substantiated. And even if it's a tiny fraction of what people publish worldwide, the verification work is colossal. The situation is the same in every country in the world: misinformation affects the United States as much as it does African countries; it spreads as much in Europe as it does in the near and Middle East. The situation has some peculiarities in the Arabic-speaking world, where media, although very diverse, remains dominated by authoritarian governments hostile to press freedom. The population, already reluctant to trust the media in general, has nevertheless benefited for some years now from satellite television channels with stronger professional ethics. And the Internet has let many players emerge, including sites specialising in fact-checking (Chibuwe, & Nwafor, 2012).

Fact-checking is also a grueling task and can be repetitive, but it is essential: misinformation has a negative impact on society. From anti-vaxxers that refuse essential treatment to the most far-fetched conspiracy theorists, misinformation and its dissemination are at the heart of what some experts call "the post-truth era". This refers to an evolution of our societies in which emotion takes precedence over reason, and where established facts are constantly being challenged by part of the population who use social media to make themselves heard. Some politicians play with it, ignoring the facts and the need to submit their arguments.



Fact-checking Tools and their Uses

Several fact-checking tools exist. Notable among them include: Snopes.com which started in 1994. It specialises in verifying and debunking misinformation on the Internet that are emanating from the urban areas. It uses the old fashioned way with human fact checkers to verify news topics and online information. Another one is FindExif.com. This specialises more on image verification. It allows one to take the first step in trying to determine if the image one has is original or is wrapped in fake location tags, backdated or hiding something. Here, one need to just input the image on URL through the tool and one can extract the data to take a closer look and cross-reference those details with other sources online to pin down when, where and in what context the photo image was taken.

InVID is yet another fact-checking tool. InVID is a Chrome plugin that helps you to verify and debunk videos. Once installed, this plugin lets you do a number of things to start digging into digital videos. The one major benefit is that this tool lets users do their own basic video forensic investigation without having to invest a lot of time in acquiring major skills. Another one is Reverse Image Search (TinEye). This tool is another quick way to verify an image. The tool is essentially a dedicated reverse image search engine that can be used to see if the image you have has been taken from somewhere online. There is also the Hoaxy. This is an online tool that allows you to “visualise the spread of claims and fact-check it. The tool was developed to study how information is diffused on social media. In other words, you can ultimately see the spread of a hoax or claim and its corrections as it gets shared. Africa check is yet another. It publishes in-depth fact-checking reports on claims made by public figures, institutions and the media.

Level of Journalists’ Knowledge of Fact-checking as a Tool to Combat misinformation and disinformation

Fact-checking means an investigation to establish whether or not a statement is factually correct. It is also the process of verifying the factual accuracy of questioned reporting and statements. The effort to tackle the spread of fake news is what has given rise to fact-checking. Just as the very foundation of the media which is truth, is being questioned, journalists are beginning to see more threat to the credibility of their profession (Okoro, & Nwafor, 2013). By holding political figures accountable for what they say and committing to assessing claim s rather than simply reporting them, the fact-checking movement aims to revitalise the “truth-seeking” tradition in journalism (Graves, Nyhan and Reifler, 2016).

Okoro and Emmanuel (2018) posit that to curb the onslaught of fake news in the post-truth era, media publishers and journalists globally are deploying more truth as the best defence. One way in which they are doing this is by news publishers employing journalists who are specially trained to fact-check news reports suspected to be fake. More mainstream journalists are getting more onsite and virtual tools to equip themselves to become ‘Fact-checkers’ in their respective beats and organisations. A study of US journalism indicated that professional motives within journalism, rather than market demand, are the key driver of the growth in fact-checking seen in the last two or three years (Graves, Nyhanand Reifler 2016).



Level of Adoption of Fact-checking as a Tool for Journalists to Combat Mis/Disinformation

There have been global efforts to counter the trend of misinformation. Most conventional media platforms and investigation-oriented online media are adopting the 'Fact-check' strategy to dissect fake news and re-inform readers and audio-visual audience about the subject matter. While addressing fake news in the public domain is undoubtedly a noble cause, it is also challenging. In the United Kingdom, fact-checking is largely conducted by public service broadcasters, namely BBC and Channel 4. While fact-checking was originally devised as a tool to evaluate political claims and hold politicians to account, it is gradually becoming the cornerstone in the fight against false and deceiving content on social media (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020).

Empirical Review

Numerous studies have investigated the knowledge and use of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news among media outlets globally. However, few studies have focused on Nigeria context and even fewer on Ebonyi State specifically. One of such existing studies is a study by Graves (2016) which found that fact-checking tools are effective in reducing misinformation, but journalists' lack of training and resources hinder their use. Similarly, that of Bakir and McStay (2017) discovered that fact-checking tools can mitigate fake news, but their effectiveness depends on journalists' critical thinking skills. This concurs with that of Oso (2019) which indicates that Nigerian journalists rely heavily on social media for news sourcing, increasing the risk of misinformation

Locally, Eze (2020) investigated the impact of social media on news consumption in Ebonyi State. The study shows concerns about misinformation as a major issue to consider. Also, Nwankwo (2019) investigated the role of traditional media in Ebonyi State, emphasizing the need for fact-checking.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Gatekeeping theory as developed by Kurt Lewin (1947). The theory posits that information flows through a series of gates or checkpoints, controlled by gatekeepers, before it reaches the public. Gatekeepers, such as journalists, editors, and media owners, decide what information is newsworthy, how it is presented, and what is omitted. It is suitable theory for the topic "Knowledge and Use of Fact-checking Tools in Sourcing Online News among Media Outlets in Ebonyi State" because:

1. **Information Control:** Gatekeeping Theory highlights the control that media outlets have over the information they disseminate, which is relevant to the topic of fact-checking and online news sourcing.
2. **Selection and Filtering:** Media outlets in Ebonyi State, like elsewhere, act as gatekeepers, selecting and filtering information to determine what is newsworthy and what is not.
3. **Fact-checking as a Gatekeeping Function:** Fact-checking can be seen as a gatekeeping function, where media outlets verify the accuracy of information before disseminating it to the public. The process by which media outlets in Ebonyi State select, filter, and present online news to the public,



influenced by their knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding fact-checking tools. This theory believes that Media outlets with higher knowledge and positive attitudes towards fact-checking tools are more likely to use these tools in sourcing online news, as well media outlets that use fact-checking tools in sourcing online news are more likely to perform an effective gatekeeping function.

Again, organizational culture, journalistic training, and technological infrastructure moderate the relationship between media outlets' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding fact-checking tools and their gatekeeping function.

METHOD

The descriptive survey research design was adopted and purposive sampling technique was used. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire which had a consistency or reliability coefficient of 0.85. Analysis were done using descriptive statistics and summarised using frequency tables.

RESULT

Table 1: Demography of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	9	30.0
Female	21	70.0
Total	30	100
Media	Frequency	Percentage
Salt FM	9	30.0
Unity FM	4	13.3
Legacy FM	5	16.7
Glorious FM	5	16.7
NTA	7	23.3
Total	30	100
Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Ph.D	0	0.0
Ms.C/M.Phil	4	13.3
Bs.C/HND	19	63.4
ND/NCE	7	23.3
O Level	0	0.0
Total	30	100
Experience (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
1-5	6	20.0
6-10	8	26.7
11-15	13	43.3
16-20	3	10.0
Total	30	100

Source: Field survey 2024



Table 1 shows the demography of the respondents with the majority of them being female (70%) journalists. The respondents were picked from five media outlets in Ebonyi state with more journalists responding from Salt FM and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) with the least respondents from Unity FM, Legacy FM and Glorious FM. In terms of qualification, most of the respondents were Bachelor of Science (B.Sc)/Higher National Diploma (HND) certificate holders followed by National Diploma (ND)/Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) holders, then Master of Science/Master of Philosophy (M.Sc/M.Phil). None of the respondents is with O level, and Doctor of Philosophy (P.hD) certificates. For experience, the highest were those with eleven to fifteen-year work experience followed by others who have six to ten years work experience and just three respondents with sixteen to twenty years work experience. Base on this the study believes that the respondents are in position to average knowledge of the concept of fact checking and online news which has been trending in the past few years.

Table 2: Fact checking tools which journalists are familiar with

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Snopes	6	20.0
Africa check	13	43.3
Link unavailable	8	26.7
Others(specify)	0	0.0
Total	30	100

Source: Field survey 2024

Table 2 shows that the participating journalists are more familiar with Africa check in sourcing online news, followed by link unavailable, having snopes as the least tool the journalists’ uses. This implies that more journalists uses Africa check (Link Unavailable) to source online news as to combat mis/disinformation.

Table 3: Journalists usage of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news

Level of usage of fact-checking tools	Frequency	Percentage
Always	13	43.3
Often	6	20.0
Sometimes	8	26.7
Rarely	3	10.0
Total	30	100
Online news usually sourced	Frequency	Percentage
Politics	9	30.0
Entertainment	7	23.3
Sports	5	16.7
Business	5	16.7
Others (specify)	4	13.3
Total	30	100

Source: Fields survey 2024



As indicated in Table 3, the adoption rate of fact-checking as a tool to combat mis/disinformation is high based on the high adoption rate response from a majority (43.3%) of the participants. While a significant response shows that the participating journalists sometimes use fact-checking tools with the adoption rate (26.7%) of fact-checking, just as the rare adoption rate has the response (10.0%).

On the type of online news normally sourced online by journalists, politics took the highest percentage of (30%) followed by entertainment news of (23.3%), sports and business news having the same rate of (16.7%) each. 13.3% respondents did not indicate.

Table 4: Challenges journalists do encounter while sourcing online news

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of training	3	10.0
Limited resources	8	26.7
Time constrains	5	16.7
Complexity of online information	12	40.0
Other (specify)	2	6.7
Total	30	100

The data in table 4 shows the type of challenges which the journalists face while using fact-checking tools to source online news, the most annoying challenges the journalists encounter is the complexities of online information which has (40%), with limited resource as the second most ranked challenges, having (26.7%), followed by time constraints which has (16.7%), the journalists who specify other challenges were (6.7%).

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the major findings of the study based on the review of the literature and extant empirical studies around online news and fact-checking and as well responses from thirty (30) journalists. The data obtained and analysed for this study reveal much about the knowledge level of journalists about the fact-checking tool which they can use to battle the proliferation of mis/disinformation. It further presents the rate at which fact-checking is being adopted in Ebonyi State and as well the challenges which the journalists encounter while sourcing online news.

Online News and the Knowledge of Fact-checking by Journalists

A summation of the various reviews of literature and empirical studies around the subject matter of online news and mis/disinformation has proven that the spread of fake news has dire consequences on society. By providing unlimited access to a large amount of information, people can share different beliefs and values. The researcher found literature in support of the fact that social media platform providers should ensure that there is continuous monitoring of online activities triggered by the spread of mis/disinformation and also ensure periodic upgrades of fact-checking technologies to tackle new tricks and strategies used in cascading fake news in society. The result of the primary data analysed in Table 1 indicates that most of the journalists who



participated in this study have a fair knowledge of the concept of online news and fact-checking. Precisely, the cumulative affirmative responses (See Table 2) indicate a higher understanding of the concept of fact-checking among journalists in tackling the menace of fake news.

Adoption Level of Fact-checking tools

Following the use of a descriptive survey and the results of notable literature and empirical studies that were reviewed by the researcher submits that fact-checking and verification of any form of news would help to curb the spread of mis/disinformation. Furthermore, the adoption of fact-checking practices by news publishers is in line with the Gatekeeping theory which posits that information flows through a series of gates or checkpoints, controlled by gatekeepers, before it reaches the public. Gatekeepers, such as journalists, editors, and media owners, decide what information is newsworthy or not.

Responses obtained from sampled journalists and editors show that the level of adopting fact-checking as a tool to combat the spread of mis/disinformation is already high in Ebonyi State. This is exemplified in the results of data presented in Table 3 on the level of usage of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news as journalists frequently use these tools. There was a cumulative response of 43.3% which is almost half of the respondents showing the constant usage of fact-checking tools in Ebonyi State, with another 26.7% respondents that uses these tools sometimes. This is enough evidence to buttress that there needs to be more affirmative action to push for the penetration of fact-checking practices in the Ebonyi State media sphere. This result obtained from the Ebonyi State scenario although is coming up a bit is still contrary to the growth of the practice in Western countries and Asia. Several studies show that the press in the Asian continent has largely adopted external fact-checking techniques while collaborating with established fact-checking organizations to promote the verifications of information. The findings also show that political related news is the one mostly verified as it obtained 30% responses followed by entertainment news which has 23.3%.

More so, Table 4 presented the challenges which journalists face while fact-checking online news, specifically the complexities of online information is the major challenges journalist encounter having 40%, followed by limited resources which has 26.7%, this implies that media outlets in Ebonyi State should organize more training for journalists as to acquaint them with tools to break the complexities of online information in other not to disseminate wrong information, they are to also make funds available for journalists to use the fact-checking tools accordingly as to get the desired results.

However, to promote effective fact-checking, journalists and editors must increase the use of internal fact-checking tool, which involves thoroughly fact-checking reports and claims by newsmakers obtained from the field by reporters before such news are disseminated. Studies reviewed also proved that readers needed to get more exposure to the media content for fact-checking techniques while collaborating with established fact-checking to thrive, adding that the success of fact-checking is only attainable if audiences are exposed to, pay attention to, and ultimately engage with the fact-checking content- accepting its conclusions and participating in further communication.



CONCLUSION

From the discussion of the results of the descriptive survey and reviewed empirical studies, this research concludes that misinformation/disinformation has extremely negative effect as it affects societal value. Findings show that journalists in Ebonyi State have a fair knowledge of fact-checking and its use in combating mis/disinformation. While usage of fact-checking tools in sourcing online news is in line with Gatekeeping Theory of the Press, the research found that the use of fact-checking tools is at the moderate level in Ebonyi state as compared how it's used in the Western/Asian countries.

Thus, this study recommends that media houses and independent fact-checking organisations should tailor deliberate campaigns on fact-checking information and raising public awareness on how to verify news to promote the detection of fake news. Media houses can set up fact-checking desks and ensure that rather than make such a seasonal activity, especially during political tempos, it should be a routine desk just like every other beat – energy, finance, defence, etc. They should train more reporters and editors as well as invest in AI-based tools to promote fact-checking while the government should create grant funds accessible to journalists to support fact-checking and integrate it into school curricular.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in the study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes and that their participation was voluntary.

Sources of funding

This study was not funded by any agency or group. It was done purely as research work with all the expenses borne by the authors.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest whatsoever in producing this piece of research.

Authors' contribution

Alo, Ruth Ngozi conceived the study, including the design, she also collected the data and wrote the manuscript. Nwalieke Mercy helped in editing and reviewing the manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript for publication in this current form.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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