



A Textual Analysis of Online Newspapers Readers' Comments on the Coverage of Chibok School Girls Kidnap

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the comments of online newspapers readers' comments on the Chibok secondary school girls' kidnap. Public Deliberation Theory, an offshoot of Habermas concept of the 'public sphere' was adopted as the theoretical framework for the study. The researcher used Mckeess post-structuralist approach and made educated guesses about the contextual meaning of the comments. Online versions of two newspapers, Daily Trust and Vanguard were used as the stimulus for the study. Data for the study were compiled over a three week period through purposive sampling technique. Findings revealed that online comments are often influenced by ethnic, religious and cultural affiliations. Also, banality, frustration and hostility are present in the tones of commenters.

Keywords: Internet, Public Sphere, Commenters, Online Newspaper, Mainstream Media.

Introduction

THE emergence of the Internet has brought about changes in the way people access and communicate with each other. It has also changed the entire nature of mass media landscape from the notion of the audience as passive to one in which they now play an active role in the entire process of news gathering, dissemination and

feedback. The internet has brought about a new phenomenon in which the media industry is witnessing a shift from print to online format. This explains why Rosentiel and Olmstead (2010) argue that the internet has surpassed newspaper and radio broadcasts as a source of news consumption with only television still exceeding it in popularity. The

opportunity offered by the internet is enormous as people use it as a source of information and interaction in building a virtual community.

One of the features of the online news articles is the feature it offers readers to immediately comment on any news story or article. This is similar to the mainstream print media space for *letters-to-the-editor*. Overtime, the comments section of online newspapers have transformed into spaces for debate and discussions by the readers. Purcell et al (2010) explain that most readers visit or follow online news because they enjoy talking to others about what is happening in the world. This study therefore is a textual analysis of readers' response to online newspaper coverage of the Chibok girls kidnap.

Statement of Research Problem

The contents of newspapers largely reflect the editorial policy and the philosophical standpoint of its owners. This explains why two newspapers may report the same issue from two parallel perspectives. Also, the mainstream media give little room for feedback/comments from the audience on a particular issue and where these comments run contrary to the philosophy of the news organization, they are hardly published. As a result, many readers are denied the opportunity of

expressing their opinions on issues such as the kidnap of the Chibok girls by the Boko Haram sect. This abduction has assumed an international news prominence.

There are debates as to whether online media has what it takes to galvanize a public sphere of rational debate (Al-Saggaf, 2006). Another snag is in the evaluation of discursive trends of comments within the social norms of host sites and their users or social norms of independent and academic contexts (Witschge, 2008). Since online newspapers give commenters the power to post comments on news stories, react to comments immediately or what can be referred to as spontaneous spur-of-the-moment reactions to posted stories or comments; the civility of comments is often in question.

Also, the Boko Haram insurgency mostly in the North- East States of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa in Nigeria has made newspaper availability scarce in these areas hence, the reliance on online version of the newspaper for information (Mathew et al 2013).

Research Objectives

This study has as its objectives:

- to find out the prominence given to the Chibok girls kidnap by the *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*.

- to find out whether commenters' comments on the stories of Chibok girls kidnap are objective in relation to the subject matter;
- to find out whether the tone of comments is civil;
- to find out whether comments are influenced by the social norms of commenters.

Research Questions

- a. Do newspapers give prominence to the Chibok girls kidnap in their news report?
- b. Are comments made by commenters on the news stories about Chibok girls kidnap objective?
- c. Are the tones of comments civil?
- d. Are comments influenced by the social norms of commenters?

Literature Review

Several scholars have described online media as a source of public discourse and a platform for social interaction and collective intelligence (Nagar, 2011;

Murugesan, 2009). However, professional journalists are critical of online comments and referred to it as informal and inflammatory (Leung, 2009; Holmes, 2001). In analyzing online comments, studies have suggested close investigation of message content by considering the social and technical context of its surrounding (O'Sullivan & Flannigan, 2003). Pape and Featherstone (2005:166) cited in Mathew et al (2013:232) describe the two different ways readers use online and print versions of newspaper saying:

...readers use the two products in very different ways, dipping into web version to get updates on breaking news stories and buying the printed paper at the end of the week for background information and details.

Some of the reasons responsible for online contribution to news stories are the urge to express personal opinions on public issues and attempt to share knowledge with others (Miloni et al, 2011).

Hlavach and Freivogel (2011) argue that the unstructured and unrestricted format of online comments often lead to offences and abusive discourse. This is so as most commenters are anonymous and hence, cannot be held accountable for their words. The

offensive comments are capable of discouraging potential sources who could give authentic information on an issue from giving his opinion (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Literature also explains why strategies are put in place to encourage unruly deliberative space without tampering with anonymity Nagar (2011) and Diakopolous and Naaman (2011),. This is borne out of the fact that anonymous comments are very important in order to encourage commenters to express or speak their minds freely when they make comments online (Christopherson,2007; Ruggiero, 2000).

The concern over being held responsible for comment made online is greatly because of the anonymity of the sender (Johnson, 2011). The concept of anonymity however has two sides. On one side, commenter may feel so free because his identity is unknown and his comment may become vulgar, abusive and aggressive. On the other side, the liberating experience of anonymity may encourage a commenter to make useful comments without the risk of any social judgement. Liu and Fahmy (2011) explained that the fear of isolation by people who feel their opinions differ from the opinion of the public in the mainstream media based on the spiral of silence theory is reduced in online conversation. The reason for the

reduction can be adduced to the present of various social groups that fit with individual's opinions and beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study is anchored on the public deliberation theory. This theory evolved from Habermas (1989) concept of the "public sphere". The public sphere is a domain of social life in which such critical aspect of the society such as public opinion can be formed (Seidman, 1989). Although, Habermas work was largely on the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere; one of its original outlines that stresses the intellectual space for critical debate can be applied to online deliberative space. Poor (2005) adapting Habermas's idea of "public sphere" identify three elements necessary to form a public sphere. The first is being able to provide a deliberative space for those previously excluded from political discourse. The second according to him is that the public sphere should be formed through mediated discussion while the third says ideas presented should be considered based on merit and not on the social standing of the commenter. The suitability of interpreting online conversation as a "public sphere" has been criticized as some of the comments sometimes are not rational and critical which are part of the Habermasian model of "public

sphere"(Al- Saggaf, 2006). It however possesses the capability of encouraging quality public deliberation on political issues (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009).

Gastil (2008:8) explain that people deliberate when “they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well- reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view”. Also, Chambers (2003: 309) refers to deliberation as “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinion in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information and claims made by fellow participants. Fishkin (1995) describes deliberation from his concept of incompleteness saying:

We can put the ideal speech situation at one extreme of an imaginary continuum and then imagine various forms of incompleteness compared to this ideal- as we think about more realistic forms of deliberation. When arguments offered by some participants go unanswered by others, when information that would be required to understand the force of a claim is absent or when some citizens are unwilling or unable to weigh some of the arguments in the

debate, the process is less deliberative because it is incomplete in the manner specified.

Manosevitch and Walker (2009) in their investigation of online comments identify some criteria for studying deliberative quality of online comments. These criteria are narratives, facts, sources, values, positions and reasons given by commenters.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research method and it conducts a textual analysis of newspaper coverage of Chibok girls kidnap. Textual analysis is concerned with the gathering and critical evaluation of media messages people use to make sense of the world. The research uses McKees (2003:67) post-structuralist view that “educated guesses can be made about the most likely interpretations of texts based on “given cultural contexts.” Online versions of two newspapers namely Daily Trust and Vanguard were selected for the study. These two newspapers were selected for the study purposively. The data or comments for the study were compiled over a three week period in the month of May. A total of 8 news stories and editorials on the Chibok schoolgirls kidnap reported by Vanguard and Daily Trust and

comments made by commenter's as reactions to the stories on this Chibok girls abduction were analysed. Analysis was not restricted to commenters' comments; it also analyses reactions and responses made by commenters to each other on the issue under investigation therefore drawing largely on Fairclough (2003) 'intertextuality' which assesses how texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize, and dialogue with other texts.

Analysis

A total of 8 news stories and editorials of the online versions of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* were selected for analysis and 10 comments were analyzed. The articles and editorials are:

Daily Trust:

- a. Chibok protest or Busy Bodies at work?
- b. Presidency confirms new video of Chibok girls
- c. Chibok girls in video: We're hungry, suffering
- d. F.G can TACKLE BOKO HARAM if...

Vanguard:

- a. 500 lady knights protest kidnap of schoolgirls in Owerri

- b. NGGE faults Chibok schoolgirls kidnap
- c. PENGASSAN boycotts May Day rally over kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls
- d. Chibok girls plead for release in new video

Most of the comments analyzed employed a conversational writing style. Examples are the comments made in reactions to the news story in the vanguard: *PENGASSAN boycotts May Day rally over kidnapped Chibok schools.*

Commenter 1:

“This is politics Nigeria style. The so called Boko Haram are no longer killing innocent Nigerians because APC has diverted that funds to now fund...”

Commenter 2:

“A fool like you should know how to comment on a very sensitive matter that affects the nation. Leave APC out of this.”

The two comments show a form of conversation between the two commenters. Apart from this, a close analysis of the comments reveal that commenters do not care about the correctness of their sentence structure while commenting or reacting to issues online. Also,

commenters' comments on online news stories sometimes may take an angle though still on subject matter but completely far from a particular story they are commenting on. The story here is on PENGASSAN Boycott of May Day rally but commenters brought in issues of politics, APC (a political party) and diversion of funds.

Also, as part of engaging readers to be active in the interpretation of meaning, commenters sometimes employ the techniques of 'partial disclosure' as seen in the first comment thus making deliberations become subjective and open to diverse interpretations.

The deliberation behaviours of commenters' comments reveal hostility, attack and banality in the tone of comments. Analyses of comments reveal a deep frustration as represented in the tones of comments. Such frustrations are influenced by political, cultural and religious affiliations of commenters.

The following comments show ventilation of anger and frustration on each other by commenters on the news story in the Vanguard newspaper with the headline:

500 lady knights protest kidnap of Chibok school girls in Owerri.

Comment 1:

“Useless women, Boko Haram has been slaughtering ur kith and kin all these while and u never deemed it fit to protest.”

Comment 2:

“Idiotic comment.”

The two comments clearly show lack of civility in their use of language. The first commenter exhibits a clear frustration over inaction by people concerning previous violence and murderous acts of the sect prior to the Chibok girls' kidnap. Also, close engagement with the first comment also reveal that the comment has ethnic influence as the commenter expressed disappointment over refusal to act when the kith and kin of the protesters were killed.

This is further buttressed by the fact that the protest took place in Imo state which is one of the states in the South East populated by the Ibos. As a result, the kith and kin referred to here are Ibos.

Buttressing the lack of civility in the pattern of comments online, a commenter reacting to a news story in the Daily Trust with the headline *“Chibok Protest or Busy Body at work?”*

Comments:

“As for the conspiracy theory, tell your Jonathan that there is nothing that will exonerate him so long as he keeps on claiming he is fighting terror when boko haram keeps dislodging villages, raising them and killing innocent lives! I think your ' blood brothers' are not involved, that explains why you second the lackadaisical manner your mentor is handling his so- called insurgency. Chai! There is God oh!

The deliberate space offered in online version of newspapers provides a platform for commenters to question the validity and source of a news story. It also affords the commenter opportunity to look at the credibility of news source. The news story with the headline in the Daily Trust “Chibok girls in Video: We're hungry, suffering” attracts comments from commenters that criticize the source of news stories, its relevance and quality.

Comments 1:

Dail Mail newspaper of London is among the propaganda machinery of the West. It will not be surprising if this sam countries are all the

one that created and are equipping the insurgents with sophisticated weapons and other intelligence gadget. And mak word they will not allow the insurgency to end until they get what they want in our dear loving country, and then leave it in tatters. But the almighty is greater than any being.

Comment 2:

If I may ask, why it is that British news room knows more about missing Chibok girls than Nigerian newsmen? If that the case, there is more great of suspicion than insurgency that is happening in Nigeria. Many people are with their donations to insurgency.

Comment 3:

Have you seen any Nigerian newsmen visited Chibok since the kidnap? Nigerian Newsmen don't take that kind of risk. That is why they never give us authentic news.

Apart from the point that two of the comments raised an issue of conspiracy of the western media which cast doubt on the quality, authenticity and credibility of their

reports; another comment highlights the inadequacies of Nigerian press as it is bothers on taking risk where coverage of crisis area like Chibok is concerned.

Contrary to the argument that most of the comments on issues online are vitriolic most of the time; there are instances of constructive debate in the deliberative space. The two commenters to a news story in the Daily Trust with the headline “*FG can Tackle Boko Haram*” comments:

Comment 1:

Citizens of Nigeria all over the world should be advised to say no to violence and yes to peace and unity. They should stand for what is right at all times as this will help to curb terrorism in the near future.

Comment 2

It has reached the level now that wisdom must be applied.

Conclusion

Online comment forum provides a platform for readers whose voices ordinarily cannot be heard in the mainstream media to comment and debate issues without any fear of

reprimand as the platform most times encourages anonymity of commenters. In most cases judging from the comments analyzed in the study, the objectivity of comments is difficult to establish as commenters comments are largely influenced by certain factors like ethnic, religious and cultural affiliation. There are also evidences of banality, frustration and hostility in the tones of comments. Commenters behaviours and use of language in most of the comments analysed is uncivil and filled with flaming and vitriolic attacks. There are however threads of comments that are constructive and civil in nature.

Also, commenters pay little attention to clarity of language as there are lots of spelling and grammatical mistakes. The style of comment is conversational and this provides an avenue for argumentation and back and forth exchange of comments. Generally, the comment forum as part of online news provides a social space for public deliberation on public discourse which in the long run may exchange the course of events in the society.

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