

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURE OF COMMENTING: YOUTUBE USERS SENTIMENTS OF “MISINFORMATION” ON INTERNATIONAL NEWS MEDIA SPHERE.

Ong’ong’a Daniel Oloo¹

Abstract

In the 21st century, the Internet has continued to play a role in breaking news and especially in emergency situations. Social media as an alternate public sphere provides users a platform to seek out clarification, debate, and spread information. Information that might be perceived to be misinformation has become a challenge in both the local news and the international media sphere. Although different scholars have debated this aspect, a review of the relevant literature indicates that few scholars have explored this issue in line with the culture of commenting. The culture of news consumers in the digital age shapes the development of news stories as they seek to find a credible source of information for consumption. This study recognizes that the assumption of misinformation is a very complex problem that is subject to diverse cultural analysis and incessant discourse among experts. Therefore, this study explored the sentiments of YouTube users in the international media sphere in regards to perceived misinformation and the social media culture of commenting. The study investigated YouTube as a communicative platform through the analysis of the content of YouTube channels owned by the media. The study utilized ExportComments.com, a data extraction tool to extract both quantitative and qualitative data from the YouTube channels, and conducted a thematic content qualitative analysis of the comments. This study contributes to the overall public sphere theory. It is imperative for the media to adapt to pro-truth while audience engagement and news media literacy are vital in the age of fake news.

Key words: Internet Culture, Misinformation, China, media literacy, Social Media, Public Sphere, YouTube.

Background

The rise of misinformation in the internet age is a global concern as institutions continue to face this problem. Social media users have adapted to the cyber culture

¹ Ong’ong’a Daniel Oloo, ORCID number: 0000-0002-9587-6210, Email: oloodaniel2@cuc.edu.cn, Institute of Communication Studies- Communication University of China

of using the Internet to communicate, get entertainment, as well as seek information and spread this information in the networked society. The Internet, through its various platforms, has revitalized the world, making agenda setting and information transmission dynamic. The facts are continuously mingled with half-truths, creating untruthful, factitious information that blends and spins to support a specific ideology (Zubiaga et al., 2016).

Misinformation has a long history of representing inaccurate information and beliefs and posing a threat to individuals (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). On the other hand, social media avenues have continuously played this role while media institutions have fallen prey. Because misinformation can lead to poor decisions and judgments about important issues, it can be difficult to correct; thus, there is a need to demystify such information (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Nickerson (2019) notes that misinformation is very difficult to correct, having a lasting effect after its disapproval. People persistently continue to make casual references based on the available information about a given outcome or event. Consequently, it continuously strives to influence the beliefs and attitudes of a group of people both online and offline, even after it has been deconstructed, debunked, and replaced with alternative casual explanations (Harsin, 2018).

Consumers of news now rely on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, to name a few, to keep up with breaking news and subsequent updates. As the narrative progresses, local and worldwide hybrid media have adopted the use of social media for information sourcing and dissemination, which is often published in pieces (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Such a strategy creates and encourages rumours, which in most cases go unverified after their point of the announcement (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Social media platforms today play an essential aspect in the event of a crisis. The news about Covid-19 pandemic, epidemics, disasters, and tragedies are shared, re-shared, liked, commented, posted, and tweeted concurrently in the online sphere (Mutua & Ong'ong'a 2020). Waisbord (2018) posits that the coverage of such events is always reported both positively and negatively by the social media platform users. The same social media platform has been effectively used by the authorities to manage disaster as well as used by malicious entities to mislead the news consumers.

Lazer et al. (2018) argue that the use of social media platforms to consume news has become a double-edged sword. Because it is low in cost, easily accessible, and rapidly disseminates information, it has led people to seek and consume news (Guo et al., 2019). Despite these factors, it acts as a highway for the spread of misinformation to its consumers because of its ability to offer space to individuals to produce low-quality, unverified information and sometimes false information (Ong'ong'a, 2021). The authenticity balance of the news ecosystem is broken when the media publicizes misinformation on social media platforms. The extensive spread of such information has the potential for extremely negative impacts on both society at large and individuals (Zubiaga et al., 2016).

Consequently, in line with this, Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand (2018) argue that tremendous attention to misinformation detection on social media platforms has emerged as a research area that needs to be further exploited. These scholars claim that reading a news headline once could be sufficient to increase an individual's perception of its accuracy, while familiarity with the news sources plays a vital role in the belief of news (Ong'ong'a & Demuyakor, 2020). Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) confirm this statement and argue that false stories spread faster and broader than real news stories. Journalist's Resource (2019) asserts that scholars in this area are still trying to comprehend how misinformation on social media platforms travels and why, today, people nevertheless seek and believe in disinformation.

Recently, there has been news going round the social media platforms - on the issue reported by the global hybrid media stations - on the alleged death of "39

Chinese" citizens who were illegally migrating to the United Kingdom and died as a result of suffocation in the truck. The Guardian, The Sun, and China Global Television Network (CGTN) carried out this story. The media published the same story on their various social media news outlets. This reporting brought about the debate on the authenticity of the news reported and published by these dominant media on the social media platforms by the members of the public, especially the social media users. In the aftermath of this event, it turned out that the alleged individuals who perished in the airtight refrigerated truck were not Chinese citizens but Vietnamese citizens. Consequently, this event created a motive for this study to explore the Internet culture of commenting by analysing YouTube users' sentiments on misinformation in the international media sphere.

Literature review

Social media culture has emerged recently, with scholars exploring it through the lenses of the distribution of messages that are distanced from their original intentions. These cultures have become more popular in today's age (Zittrain, 2014). The space created by the social media platforms (Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 7–30) allows users to adopt a culture of posting, creating, downloading, tweeting, sharing, and commenting on other people or organizations' pages as well as blogs. Consequently, this has generated a new culture that has opened the doors for both positive and negative influence on the world at large. A study carried out by Sheldon et al. (2019) suggests that there has been an invention of a new culture in the social media sphere that does not only focus on hashtags but also on criticizing comments that generally come from news sources or industrial players. The criticism is influenced by the development of a space to seek more information or clarification about a topic or a phenomenon. As pointed out by Fuchs (2014, pp. 54–57), social media's positive aspects have made societies and cultures more democratic, allowing people to meet on the Net, form collectives, and share and create content. Social media users who practice these cultures sometimes find themselves sharing information that is inaccurate or misleading. Therefore, the social media platforms offer a community that collaborates, shares, and communicates messages that reach a wider geographical location (Ong'ong'a, 2020; Yanqiu and Ong'ong'a, 2021).

Misinformation has been recently documented and drawn attention to in a political context (Lazer et al., 2018), while topics such as nutrition, vaccination, and food are covered widely. The credibility (Guo et al., 2019) of the misinformation is damaging in a way that is parasitic on the standard news outlets. The objectivity and balance of news are vital for any journalistic practice, which therefore alleviates the sense of negative propaganda. The sustainability of these norms was distributed and created by local dominant and national oligopolies in the 20th century. The rise of the Internet has lowered the rate of access to news players. This has rejected the usual norms of public trust and credibility, which have undermined traditional news sources. Such a context has made it possible for a mass audience to be attracted to misinformation. Bennett and Livingston (2018); Nickerson (2018); and Zubiaga et al. (2016) have argued that false information spreads quickly and easily on social media platforms like Twitter, where people frequently retweet inaccurate information on topics like politics.

The credibility of information is questioned by individuals when it violates their cultural preconceptions. People are likely to perceive sources of news as credible if others who use the same source see them as reliable. Therefore, this indicates that the references are treated credibly when there is insufficient existing report to access the accuracy of the source. However, with the various platforms readily available, online users migrate from various sources simultaneously to access the information. Hence, information may be accepted uncritically if it aligns with an individual's beliefs with the norms, culture, and values of their society or community (Zubiaga et al., 2016). Such information confirms the pre-existing suspicions more persuasively than established bias, thus making one inclined to accept information that is desirably biased.

Social media users favour receiving information that endorses their current opinions. These social biases, or misinformation, are perceived as real and truthful by users. Misinformation is accepted as previous prejudiced and philosophical viewpoints without fact-checking of a news story. Repeating the misinformation has the risk of increasing an individual's likelihood of receiving it as accurate, even when the facts have been checked. It is hard to correct a cultural facts have been checked. It is tough to correct cultural misperception once it has been formed.

Guo, Cao, Zhang, Shu, and Yu (2018) argue that when misinformation is corrected by the presentation of accurate and factual information, this is not useful to reduce misperception. Still, in most cases, it may increase the misconception further, particularly amongst groups with the same cultural ideology. Concurring with Vosoughi et al. (2018), the repeating of misinformation increases the perception of truth, even if the misinformation is paired with a valid retraction. In the 20th century, the failure of the news media led to the rise of norms and practices of journalism that are imperfect in their striving to provide objective and credible information (Lazer et al., 2018).

Misinformation from social media platforms that is later proven as false has had a diverse effect on the individuals' cultures and societies that consumed it (Vraga et al., 2020; Creech, 2020). Breaking news with unverified facts tends to destroy the credibility of the news source, henceforth spreading to a broader spectrum of influence, perceptions, and events (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Harcup and O'Neill (2017) point out that journalists are required to work to predefined deadlines to produce news. While the newsrooms are the sole entities responsible for what and when the stories will be published (Domingo et al., 2008). The value of their news, therefore, affects the extent to which the coverage of the stories can be shared. Thus, the report is categorized according to its importance to the consumer. Such news includes conflicts, stories that are perceived as significant if several people are involved, and the one subject that is already in the report.

Furthermore, Domingo et al. (2008) state that the journalist now receives instant feedback on whether their news selection, decisions, and presentation mode are aligned with the large number of online consumers. The consumption process is shifting from a mediated form mediated by journalists to information-seeking by consumers have been provided with the new paradigm of data created by social media platforms (Clayton et al., 2019; Vraga et al., 2020). User-generated content has become more significant in news production decisions with the rise of digital and online media platforms. Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2018) reflect that the topicality and autonomy of misinformation coverage are divergent. The focus on the emerging new media should be responsive to the agendas of misinformation since the audience of online participation has continued to be viewed as politicians and debaters for the evolving current events. Consequently, this focuses on the interpretation stage, where they are allowed to give comments on the news story (Domingo et al., 2008).

The spread of social media platforms as a public sphere has persistently provided a new powerful tool for data collection and sharing of information. The study of misinformation in a naturalistic setting takes on a new spectrum with the advent of the Internet. Social media posts are used by people to share their opinions and express their emotions (Guo et al., 2019) and stage reactions to misinformation. The possibility of extracting posts-based features helps to examine misinformation via responses from the general public, as shown in posts (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). The unique features, such as stance or viewpoint, indicate the user's opinion towards a piece of specific information on a social media platform.

While the media face the new challenge (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019) of retracting news that they have no facts about, self-correction has been seen as slow to take effect with the misinformation connected with a wider conventional of newsworthy stories or incidents (Domingo et al., 2008; Vargo et al., 2018; Zubiaga et al., 2016). This has managed to discredit information, and hence the appearance of later corrections of such stories diminishes the diffusion of misinformation.

YouTube, as a social media platform, is both prosaic as well as narcissistic during the commercial break, dressed up as democratized media (Keen, 2007). Real-time collection of an individual's cultural perception of misinformation has proved to be difficult traditionally. Misinformation in itself is not a problem, but the media ecology has been invigorated from old newsprint to the current social media platforms and online news environment. Therefore, it is from this backdrop that called for the need to explore the Internet culture of commenting by analysing the user's sentiments on the international media sphere in the online social media-YouTube.

The following theory is established to investigate the sentiments of misinformation in social media as a public sphere by focusing on YouTube channels from the literature reviewed.

Communicative theory by Habermas

To further investigate this discourse, the study applied Habermas' public sphere theory. This theory is based on studying the emergence of public informal debates that are coined in different cultural and political contexts (Bosch et al., 2020). Social media users can be termed as individuals who are privately found in the common podia discussing matters that affect them. The discussions going on social media can be presupposed to be deliberate on the issues affecting the wider public. The sphere comprises formal or informal institutions and people, whether physical or virtual. Therefore, this characteristic fits generally all social media platforms that tend to provide a platform for commenting, liking, sharing, posting, and reposting, as well as twitting and retweeting (Ong'ong'a, 2020).

According to Habermas, the public sphere is not only a political sphere but also a place that is free from private ownership and censorship (Habermas, 2015, p. 36). Consequently, this theory guides the participation of users on social media platforms since most are free from censorship by different players (Fuchs, 2014, p. 181). Social media platforms offer people a reason to speak freely and demonstrate their sentiments openly. Supporting this theory, Bosch et al. (2020) and Fuchs (2014) acknowledge that social media platforms comprise an extension of the original public sphere. Besides, this offers a space for social media users to form uncontrolled public opinion towards governments while becoming a platform for users to engage with other users on different issues that they may perceive as inconsistent and inappropriate. Fuchs (2014, p. 182) encapsulates how marginalized and minority groups express their diverse individual or political views through social media platforms. In this regard, the study incorporates Habermas' theory and views social media platforms, and YouTube in particular, as a sphere for public opinion which allows users to express their sentiments concerning a multiplicity of issues.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative content analysis to deconstruct the various aspects of the online news media users' comments on the YouTube channel of media reporting on the issue of "the death of the 39 Chinese in a truck" in Essex. Content analysis has been used on media data on circulation, viewers, readership, and listeners in the study of media evaluation and analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). Consequently, this allows for a more structured and, subsequently, restricted form of generating valuable information from the media (Harold Lasswell, 1927). The only disadvantage of these methods is that they limit the researcher's ability to quantify data. Since this study was qualitative in nature, it was imperative to code and analyse data that only strived to address the research objective. As a result, it adds to the larger body of knowledge on how to conduct research in the big data era, as well as the use of sophisticated data collection methods.

A purposive sampling of the YouTube media channel was done with the criterion of the position of reporting the story as "the death of 39 in a truck" on the 25th of September to the 2nd of December 2019. The media that did not report or use this as their breaking news headline on their YouTube channel were disregarded. One media YouTube channel was identified—The Guardian. To analyse these comments, Export Comments.com, online free software that has the capability of data collection and extraction, was used to export data in standard formats that included the date, name of the person posting, likes, shares, and comments by the user. The 500 most recent comments from the YouTube channel were exported. The Guardian had 869 likes on its top comment with a total of 2308 comments. The study drew 150 sample comments from the total dataset of 500 comments for the thematic qualitative content analysis based on the study criterion.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from this study revealed that Internet culture plays a part in establishing a space for the discussion of issues by commenters. Therefore, this study supports Habermas's (2015) theory that indicates that the audience is key in finding solutions to their problems through public discussions. This view is established by the top comments obtaining the most likes (867).

Why are none of the news outlets keen on reporting that Mo (the driver) has been released without charge? He was the one that found the bodies and phoned police. The guy had only been in possession of the trailer for 35 minutes. You'll crack this case soon! Just keep on assuming in the comments, guys. (30/10/2019).

Audience engagement on news development

Furthermore, the study has revealed that the audience on social media plays a crucial role in the event of any news; these sentiments are also supported by the study done by Belair-Gagnon et al. (2019), who argues that today's news consumers have become the generators and act as the watchdogs for the media. The time where the media used to influence a particular aspect of the story is currently slowly diminishing with the advent of the internet and diverse integrated social media platforms as a public sphere. The power of the audience, as argued by Cherubini and Nielsen (2016), in the 21st century has shifted from dormancy, hence making news verification and veracity a critical continuum for the discussion. This is supported by the following sentiments from users' comments:

One thing I do not like about British news is that they tell you all this and never show you the bodies, which makes the story unappropriated. Also, when many other bad things happen, they do not show you, which is a very bad news broadcast (30/10/2019).

Journalists should be simple communicators of news. Still, lots of western journalists deliberately turn into report selectors, distorters, or even participants themselves, serving the western governments, totally breaking the basic principle of journalism. That's why so many people have been misled and brainwashed. In some sense, those journalists have become hate spreaders and chaos makers. They are evil criminals rather than news reporters (30/10/2019).

Pro-active audience

This study found out that the majority of the comments offered both criticism and solutions to the media. The study supports Belair-Gagnon et al. (2019), who agree that criticism is a form of audience engagement in the development of a story by the media. Consequently, this shows how the audience influences the consumption of the news as postulated by Nelson (2019). Besides, today's audience and consumers of the story are not passive; they seek different channels to verify and confirm any news report that they consume in whatever medium that is at their disposal. The following comments support the above sentiments:

People, there is no point in arguing before all the bodies are identified. If the media did report false info without confirmation, then they are embarrassing themselves and los their credibility as news media (30/10/2019)

What a piece of fake news! It spread so much false information throughout the world that we lost trust in the media; is there another news agency that can provide us with the truth as we follow this case? (29/10/2019).

Online community grouping

It is interesting to note that, apart from following a particular channel to satisfy their news needs, social media users form a community (Tandoc, 2019) of online discussions. This community can be assigned to Habermas' ideology of the public sphere. The discussions then follow a specific topic until an agreement is reached and an overall conclusion is reached. Participants who were cynical about the story, for example, saw their comments followed by negative comments, and vice versa.

The time has progressed, but the news reports have regressed. It is too disappointing to report the news without correcting the rest. And it seems that no one sympathizes with those who died and is fully committed to politics. Correct title: 39 individuals aspired to be... nationals (03, 11, 2019).

Fake news spreader! Take your responsibility as a news agency! How dare you deceive the audience! What a shame on your conscience! Using the death of 39 people as a great chance to attack without any evidence is the thing you are supposed to do? (02,11,2019).

Judging stories through headlines

On the other hand, the media, which used a particular headline that was perceived to be inappropriate (Nelson, 2019; Thornton, 2000), the audience judged the authenticity of the story based on the headline frame used in telling the story, even though the story might carry some element of truth in it. Moreover, this study exposed that the use of a particular word and a phrase in the headline made the story judged and believed to be a hoax; false or fake news.

Yet another botching of their journalistic responsibility. That "it emerged" that these were.....nationals are just another way of citing rumour, innuendo, or agenda and are in no way equitable with silly things like "evidence" or "proof." They seem to thrive on pure sensationalism, and this is slanted to serve a particular ideological agenda. It has now been "evidenced" that at least some of the victims came from a farming community. The news media is no longer trustworthy, and we need to be willing to think with far more than just our "primitive brain" (feelings and emotions) when seeking to understand the truth of events in the world (30/10/2019).

Can't comment on the false report from this media, which stated that all of them are [...]. Where are my rights to democracy and free speech? You made me feel sick, not the first time, and probably not the last (30/10/2019).

What's more, inaccuracy in reporting in the situation of disasters, epidemics, or tragedies makes the media use catchy story headlines that invite the reader to engage with it. In this situation, the study aligns with Pate et al. (2019); Pennycook & Rand, (2017) and Thornton (2000) on the influence of catchy headlines to draw audience attention. But in reality, such a strategy is viewed otherwise by the audiences who read the headlines (Mar-Chi, 2012; Pennycook & Rand, 2017) and conclude as if they have read the entire story.

After all, this evidence established that they are Vietnamese; are you still claiming that they are [...]? said they are Chinese. How do you know this? Please show the evidence, and otherwise please delete your title words! (30/10/2019).

After a week of investigation, a new source was quickly confirmed to be a liar and a fake! And everybody will not believe what it says. Its biased opinions and ability to make up stories show that this new channel is not trustable, professional, serious, and even moral about the true news. All employees at [...] should be ashamed!!!ask themselves, is it the right attitude to chase the truth and report the news? They are making themselves into cheap jokes! If I were the investor or advertiser, I would seriously question the negative effects on my business or products (03:11, 2019).

Media configuration for the post-truth era

Verification of the truth is a critical function of the media as it is a measure of its relationship with the public. The contestation of this in the post-modern ecosystem constructs a novel vista against the media that must play on. Thus, this begs the question as to how the media, in general, can configure their practices in the post-truth (Lazer et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018b) environment. The responsibility of the media is confined to the facts and expert opinions and not consigned to the side-lines in the public discourse. Shifting from a problem (Harsin, 2018; Hermans & Drok, 2018; Yanqiu & Matingwina, 2018), to a solution with rigorist elements that focuses on empowering the audience to appreciate the fuller picture of truth with media ethics in mind, enables the audience to cure misinformation.

In recent times, there has been a diversion of the original mission of the media to click-baiting headlines (Benson, 2018). The use of particular phrases or words in the headlines (Harsin, 2018), as indicated above, confirms the diminished element of responsible journalism. Commenters felt that the media was not accountable, and such a claim erupted in different sentiments from the comments. Even though there is a capitalistic backbone in the overall media eco-system, there are metrics in advertising for editorial economic sustainability as evidenced in some aspects of the story. The coercion behind this is to provide massive amounts of poor quality, unverifiable content for faster consumers. This sometimes leads the media to conduct a little in-depth (Mast et al., 2019) investigation that is often far from the truth, which favours readers' clicking on adverts that pay for the contents. The rush to report a particular phenomenon only because it could be leveraged based on economic gain beats the logic of social responsibility in journalism (Bro, 2019; Waisbord, 2018b). The bias of the new media today increases the tabloidization and sensationalism of news, which could be limited by productive investment in construction journalism. You-Tube, like any other social media platform, gives a podium for different users to generate information and share it within and without their networks.

On the other hand, the use of this platform by the media is an approach to provide audiences with fair, contextualized, and accurate information to view the world around them. The simplification and overemphasis of negatives in society creates a conflict between the media and its users. Hence, this allows news consumers to generate an ideology of society's being elusive and stereotyping particular aspects, regions, and even people. This is evidenced in the way participants viewed and interpreted the story in question by labelling certain media.

Conclusion

This study established that social media, in general, offers a public platform for the media to diffuse and convey information fast. Simultaneously, it empowers users to demand accountability, accuracy, and facts from media that may be perceived to spread misinformation. This is not limited to YouTube channels subscribed to by various local, global, and international media. Users have developed a social media culture and tend to receive optimized and create sensational messages in these podia for their own needs as well as for community belongingness. Although the blame may go to the media, there is a growing problem of inaccurate information spreading within the sphere that misleads users of social media about the news. In light of this, it is imperative for the news media literacy program for users of these platforms to identify minute tenets of the operations of the media in general. This strategy will allow users to appreciate and evaluate how the media works, but with proper scrutiny of the successful diffusion of misinformation. The pro-truth aspect adapted by the media to open up critics, accept responsibility, and correct an already damaged reputation is critical to gaining back control over their news consumers. The findings of this study have revealed that new media platforms offer an avenue to explore different academic discourses. The challenging issues that the study has encountered include the extent of the prioritization of comments by an algorithm. Social media platforms have a tendency to create some content to be more useful than others. For instance, this study only sampled the recent comments triggered by the algorithms. Although this study faced this challenge, it tried to limit such sampling by using a sampling method that was vigorous. Future studies should focus on other social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook in order to find out whether the results of this study may be different or the same, and if so, why? This is vital because online users tend to follow multiple media channels simultaneously. Therefore, this study opens the door as indicative to other studies in terms of how social media studies could be conducted in the ever-changing digital space.

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