
Patterns of Comments by Online Readers of the Electronic Version of Vanguard and the Punch Newspapers (April—June, 2017)

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Abstract

This study identified and analysed the patterns of comments adopted by online readers on the electronic version of the Vanguard and the Punch between April 1 and June 30, 2017. Four objectives guided the study, from which four research questions were formulated. Three theories: Media Technological Determinism, Agenda setting and Social Responsibility theories were adopted as framework for the study. A total of 182 issues of the electronic version of the two newspapers formed the population of the study, with a sample size of 126. The content analysis research design was adopted for the study. Findings showed that 3,189 readers posted comments on the news reports of the two newspapers and that more persons commented on the Vanguard than The Punch. The study further found out that 52.56% comments were positive, 43.17% were negative, while 4.33% constituted zero comments. Amongst other recommendations, the researchers stated the need for the electronic newspapers to sustain the online platform to provide opportunities for more participants to engage themselves in discussions which is a critical role that the mass media play in any democracy setting, and that The Punch should improve on its comment platform to attract more participants

Key words: *Patterns of Comment, Electronic Newspaper, News Reports, Online Readers*

Introduction

The newspaper which is a component of the print media just like the electronic media had continued to add impetus to their primary responsibility of disseminating mass media messages to their large heterogeneous audience. Originally, the newspaper was known for its conventional paper version until the introduction of the online newspapers which are now accessible online through the Internet.

The advancement in the use of the Internet thus, provides the cyberspace for readers to easily access newspapers and magazines online, with additional advantages of affordability and instantaneity. About 91.6 million people use the Internet in the Nigeria's telecommunication network in June 2017, according to the data released by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC). It therefore, follows that a large number of users could avail the opportunity of the Internet to read news online. Benkler (2006) in Zamith and Lewis (2014) points out that the evolution of the Internet which came with its wide array of digital media tools, platforms, and spaces contributes in broadening and deepening public deliberation, as well as expanding the traditional boundaries of discourse by giving more people a public voice.

With the availability of the comment platform on the electronic version of newspapers,

readers now engage themselves in analysis and discussion of topical issues on the comment-thread of news reports. Comments by online readers also provide a civic forum where citizens exchange ideas. It is a forum where journalists and their readers converge to interact on issues of importance as reported by the newspapers. In such interaction, the newspapers influence public opinion and vice versa (Strandberg and Berg, 2013; Rowe, 2013; Llewellyn, Grover and Oberlander, 2014).

Since the advent of electronic version of the newspapers, the comments on them have been interesting. Noci (2013) traces the history of electronic newspaper and online news at the international level to The Wall Street Journal. Noci explains that:

...One of the first newspapers offering its services on CompuServe was The Wall Street Journal...In the 1990s, some important North American newspapers took up this system, which was clearly a prelude to what was shortly to be journalism of the World Wide Web, then in a phase of gestation. In 1994 the first newspapers were published on the WWW: the Palo Alto Weekly dates from January that year. Some months before, at the end of 1993, the University of Florida launched the first website on journalism. 1995 is a key year, as there were already 150 newspapers on the www, and the magazine Editor & Publisher dedicated a monographic issue to the news phenomenon (p.258).

In the United Kingdom, the Star-Telegram was recorded as the first to run an electronic version in 1982. The newspaper originally owned by Amon G. Carter was a merger of Fort Worth Star and Fort Worth Telegram founded in 1906 and 1909, respectively. Star-Telegram runs a popular phrase on its masthead: "Where the West begins." The newspaper was sold to Knight Ridder in 1997 and later acquired by McClatchy in 2006.

In Nigeria, Kperogi (2013), submits that Post Express started the electronic newspaper:

The defunct Post Express, under the direction of the late Dr. Stanley Macebuh, is widely acknowledged as the first Nigeria newspaper to migrate its content to the Internet in 1996...Like many newspapers at the time, the Post Express merely recycled its print content to the Web. By the early 2000s, almost all the legacy newspapers in Nigeria had some Web presence... (p.446).

From the early newspapers in Nigeria that embraced the online technology by uploading their paper contents online, others including the ones published by some Nigerians in the diaspora later joined the trend of online journalism. This research focused on electronic newspaper which is slightly different from online newspaper, even though both terminologies share similar characteristics. One of such characteristics is that both the electronic and online newspapers could only be accessible online through the Internet.

Sajjad (2013) defines electronic newspaper as "a self-contained, reusable and refreshable version of a traditional newspaper that acquires and holds information electronically," (p.133), while online journalism according to Pannu and Tomar (2010) is the "reporting of news or facts when produced and distributed via the Internet," (p.137). Deductively therefore, while electronic newspaper is the version of the paper content published online to complement the traditional newspaper for online readers, the online newspapers are journalistic reports published by an online news organisation for online readers only. The reports are online-only publications.

Citing Deuze (2003), Kperogi (2012) identifies three features of online journalism which are also central to this study. They are the features of interactivity, multimediality and hypertextuality. The feature of interactivity particularly, seemed to be most significant to this study. According to Kperogi, interactivity provides the platform for the audience or readers to react to or interact with and even adapt to news contents through the comment section of online content. The World Editors Forum (2013) notes that in many parts of the globe, online comments have become an essential ingredient of a thriving news publication as readers feel that they have a right to make their contribution in an online environment that is becoming increasingly more dialogue-based than one-way broadcasting. The ability to comment on news articles or in discussion forums offers readers the chance to indulge in debate on hot topics hosted by their favourite news organisations with other readers from all over the world.

The World Editors Forum (2013) further posits that for news organisations, online comments can be an extremely valuable resource as they provide additional detail and insight to articles from informed readers who are passionate about the subject, offer a wide range of supplementary opinions and give newsrooms a window into how their readers see both their journalism and the world around them. Their feedback and perspectives can also broaden the publication's coverage from their vantage point, inspire new stories and provide possible sources or ways to address an issue.

Zamith and Lewis (2014) submit that the deliberation of diverse views has long been viewed as an essential component of strong democratic societies. Dahlberg (2001) adds that: "...there is now a rapid growth of online political projects and Internet democracy experiments being carried out by government, corporate interests and citizen groups," (p.615).

Espousing on the potentials of the online readers' comment platform to enhance democratic engagements, Zimmermann (2014) asserts that:

One way to engage people in digital public discourse is represented by readers' comments. Readers' comments embody an important gateway for civic engagement via public debate and supporting the democratic process...Readers' comments are attached to articles on online news-websites what leads to higher visibility of the contributions than on most independent forums. This gains particular importance because the high amount of digital voices tends to fragment public attention. Moreover, news consumption and self-expression become more instrumental and interactive activities with a wider online-audience," (p.100).

Silva (2015) relying on Hille and Bakker (2014) further submits that: "Readers' comments can be therefore understood as civic forums, where citizens exchange ideas and where civic talk can take place. Thus, user comments are an interesting subject for investigation in the context of audience participation in journalism," (p.33).

The civic forum as espoused by Silva (2015) is a forum where citizens exchange ideas to promote their common goals. The civic forum is synonymous with public sphere which Habermas (1989) explains as a domain of social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed and accessed by all citizens. Habermas (1989) had argued that: "Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicise their opinions freely," (p.231).

The foregoing is of the submission that the civic forum provides a medium for the exchange

of ideas and that comment platforms on electronic newspapers offer readers and users the interactive platform to express themselves and forge a form of democratic participation.

To this end, attempts are made to examine whether news stories uploaded on the electronic version of Vanguard and The Punch with comment platforms provide further medium for exchange of ideas for democratic participation by the readers or do they abuse the tenets of freedom of expression to post inappropriate comments in form of offensive and unguarded speeches, as well as other patterns they may adopt.

Silva (2015) also observes that comments by readers could contribute positively to journalism and to a healthy democratisation of discourse, as well as pose several challenges to journalists and newsroom, due to the presence of inappropriate speech, such as hate speech, racism, defamation, abusive comment, incivility, or linguistic errors.

In as much as studies have been done about the patterns of comments on online newspapers abroad, not too much if ever, had been done on Nigerian newspapers. It should be noted that earlier studies on patterns of comments by foreign researchers had established that though comment platform provides forum for robust discussion to enhance democratic participation by readers, some users abused the opportunity provided by the platform to engage in sentimental comments by posting both positive and negative emotions. Most of the studies therefore, recommended moderation on the part of the readers who post comments.

The researchers for this study are concerned about how readers of electronic newspapers comment on news reports in the Nigerian newspapers by finding out the patterns of comments on the electronic versions of the Vanguard and The Punch. The justification for the choice of the two newspapers was premised on their towering feats. The Vanguard newspaper was rated as one of the top 50 newspapers in Nigeria in August 2016 by the Online Newspaper Directory for the World obtained at www.onlinenewspapers.com. On the website of the Directory, Vanguard was listed as the first among the Nigerian newspapers, a feat corroborated by another international online platform, All You Can Read which prides itself as a platform for ‘the best selection of magazines and news sites from 200 countries.’ The Platform rated the Vanguard as the number one among top 10 Nigerian newspapers online. The Punch was chosen for the study for winning the Best Newspaper of the Year and Editor of the Year awards, including five Gold medals at the 25th Diamond Award for Media Excellence (DAME) held on December 4, 2016 at Oriental Hotel, Lekki, Lagos.

Furthermore, a study carried out by Patrick in 2015 entitled: “Assessment of Pattern of Readership of Online Newspapers in Selected Nigerian Universities,” aimed at finding out the Nigerian online newspapers that were common among members of selected universities in Nigeria and the factors that affect the readership revealed that the Vanguard was the most read with 76 (75.3%) out of 101 respondents sampled for the study. The Punch got 29 respondents that indicated it was the second most read newspaper in Nigeria.

The visibility of the Vanguard and The Punch online and some of the accolades they earned for themselves which stood them out among the best dailies influenced their choice for this study.

Statement of the problem

The comment platform in online news reports provides a civic forum where citizens exchange ideas on online news stories in accordance with the second function of the media to society as recommended by the Robert Hutchins Commission. The second recommendation of the Commission enjoins the mass media to serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism. It is a forum where journalists and their readers converge to interact on issues

of importance as reported by the electronic newspapers. A cursory investigation of nature of comment assists the newspapers cover future events from a vantage point. The interaction on the comment-thread of news stories of the newspapers also influences public opinion. In the hard paper version of the newspapers, readers react to their contents mostly through writing letters to the editor. On the electronic platform, Disqus which is worldwide commenting system provides the dashboard for people to chat with each other and allows contributions from readers to react to the subjects of news reports. These efforts are to provide feedback to the readers in a bid to complete the communication process.

While the original intent and purpose could be to provide the platform for readers to complete the communication process through interactional engagement, some of the readers avail the opportunity for other reasons such as to ventilate ethnic prejudices, sell products or express any idea that is not in tandem with the news reports. There is the need to examine and analyse descriptively the different reactions of opinions of online readers, taking into consideration the frequency which such comments come and to ascertain their usefulness to journalism.

This raises a lot of questions, such as: What is the pattern of comment on the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch? Do comments on news reports favour those that engage in using abusive and hate speeches? Do the comments advance development of democracy and constructive criticism? These and many other issues formed the basis of this study. Since these newspapers represent some of our best dailies, there is therefore, the need to gauge readers' comments and how they appear in order to know whether such comments will be helpful to our democratic space and practice of journalistic surveillance.

Aim and Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the patterns of comments on news reports of the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch newspapers. The following constitutes the specific objectives of this study. They are to:

1. Ascertain the number of readers who commented on the comment-thread of news reports of the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch.
2. Identify the category of news reports that readers commented on more.
3. Examine the tone of readers' comments in the various news reports of the electronic version of the two newspapers.
4. Find out the frequency of each tone of the comments in the news reports of the newspapers.
5. Ascertain whether the tone of comments contribute to the subject of the news reports.

Research questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What number of readers commented on the various news reports on the comment-thread of the electronic version of the Vanguard compared to The Punch?
2. Which news reports of the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch did the readers comment on more?
3. What are the tones of readers who posted comments on the comment-thread?
4. What is the frequency of comments on each news report of the two newspapers?
5. What frequency of tones of comments on the platforms contributes to the subject of the news reports?

Theoretical framework

The Media Technological Determinism, Agenda-Setting and Social Responsibility theories of the press formed the theoretical framework for this study. The rationale for selecting these

theories hinges on the fact that while Media Technological Determinism theory explains the phenomena relating to the revolution in mass communication through the evolution of Internet and digital mass communication, the Agenda-Setting theory expounds the perception that the mass media shape opinion by setting agenda to engage people in participatory discussion, while Social Responsibility theory deals with the idea of the press providing a forum for exchange of comment and criticism.

Media Technological Determinism theory

The Media Technological Determinism theory was propounded by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 and founded on technological innovations. The basic assumptions of the theory, according to McQuail (2010) are that: “communication technology is fundamental to society; that each technology has a bias to particular communication forms, content and uses, the sequence of invention and application of communication technology influences the direction and pace of social change, and that communication revolutions lead to social revolutions,” (p.103).

This theory is applicable to this study in the sense that with the advancement in media technology, media audience could now access news in the print media online and contribute to mass media messages without necessarily going to the news stand.

Agenda-Setting theory

The modern concept of agenda-setting theory, according to Miller (2002) “is often attributed to Walter Lippmann (1922), who in his book *Public Opinion*, argued that the mass media create images of events in our minds and that policy-makers should be cognizant of those ‘pictures in people’s heads’”, (p.257).

Citing Zhu and Blood (1997), Miller (2002) defines agenda-setting as “the process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues,” (p.259). The agenda setting effect that is of particular importance to this work centres on what Miller (2002) describes as ‘off-cited quote in the development of the agenda-setting literature’, (p.258), while Iyengar and McGrady (2007) describe it as the ‘early statement of hypothesis,’ (p.210), and attributed to Bernard E. Cohen consequent upon his study of foreign policy in 1963 which states that the press: may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read.

Social Responsibility theory

The Social Responsibility theory of the press has its root in a study commissioned in 1942 on the prospects of press freedom in America. The study was led by Robert Hutchins. Patterson and Wilkins (1998) and Day (2000) listed five functions of the media to society, according to the recommendation of Hutchins Commission as follows:

1. To provide a truthful, comprehensive; and intelligent account of the day’s event in a context that gives them meaning;
2. To serve as a forum for exchange of comment and criticism;
3. To provide a representative picture of constituent groups in society;
4. To present and clarify the goals and values of society;
5. To provide citizens with full access to the day’s intelligence.

The second recommendation of the Commission directly relates to this work. Day (2000) writes that: “the press is urged to provide a platform for views that are contrary to its own,

while not abdicating its traditional right of advocacy,” (p.38).

In summary, the Media Technological Determinism theory is applicable to this study for providing access to media audience through the Internet technology to contribute to mass media messages. The Agenda Setting theory applies to this work for the role the mass media play in setting agenda of discourse by leading the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues and sometimes, influence perceptions about what are important issues of the day, while the Social Responsibility theory of the press lists some functions to the press including providing a forum for exchange of comment and criticism. The social responsibility theory also stresses the need for the mass media to exercise their freedom but not without responsibility.

Research methodology

The researchers adopted Content Analysis for this study. Ndiyo (2015) posits that content analysis is, “a secondary source of data collection method that relies mainly on documentary materials,” (p.163), while Ohaja (2003) holds that content analysis is the examination of the manifest content of communication to discover patterns existing therein. Such manifest content could be cartoons, photographs, articles, editorials, and letters to the editor, advertisements and other illustrations in the newspaper or magazine.

The use of content analysis is relevant to this study because the work required the researchers to go through the news reports of the two electronic versions of the Vanguard and The Punch to identify the patterns or tones of comments on them.

The population of this study consisted of 182 electronic editions of the Vanguard and The Punch uploaded daily within a period of three months (91 days) which fell between April 1, 2017 and June 30, 2017. Each newspaper had 91 editions for the 91 days. To determine the sample size for this study, the Taro Yamane sampling technique was employed. The Taro Yamane statistical formula was applied as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:

n= is the sample size

N= is the population size

e= is the level of precision (sampling error)

The formula is applied as follows:

$$n = 182 / (1+182 (0.05)^2)$$

$$n = 182 / (1+182 (0.0025))$$

$$n = 182 / (1+0.455)$$

$$n = 182 / (1.455)$$

$$n = 125.09$$

The sample size for the study is consequently 125.09. It therefore, means that each online edition of the Vanguard and The Punch has approximately a sample size of 63 since there is no half edition. Then the purposive sampling was used to select 126 editions from the news reports of the Vanguard and The Punch. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) state that: “a purposive sample includes subjects or elements selected for specific characteristics or qualities and eliminates those who fail to meet these criteria,” (p.88). The purposive sample technique is a non-probability sample where each unit’s chance for selection is known and in this case based on convenience. Only editions of each of the electronic version that had comment-thread were chosen up to 63 as a sample.

The unit of analysis for this study are the straight news stories from the electronic news reports of the two newspapers and the electronic comments made on them. The straight news stories for this study were categorised into different beats which include: politics, health, education, sports, religion, crime, science and technology, business/economy and sex/entertainment. The straight news stories, by design are factual reports of events as they occurred. They are not known to be opinionated as the editorials and features. The comments as unit of analysis are the opinions expressed by the online readers on the thread on each news reports. Both the straight news story and electronic comments are therefore, used as basis to analyse the opinions of the readers who posted their comments on the news reports of the two newspapers under study. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) explain that: “the unit of analysis is the smallest element of a content analysis but also one of the most important,” (148).

In constructing content categories, Wimmer and Dominick (2003) note that: “at the heart of any content analysis is the category system used to classify media content. The makeup of this system, of course, varies with the topic under study,” (p.149). The content categories for this study are positive, negative and zero comments. They were created in such a way as to produce set boundaries to reflect the objectives of the research. Positive comments are comments that contribute ideas to the subject of discourse without abusing the newspaper, writer and contributors on the comment-thread. Negative comments are those comments that abuse rather than contribute meaningful ideas to the subject of discourse. Zero comments are comments not related to the subject of discourse. The zero comments are also comments that are neither positive nor negative. They are determined by their irrelevance to the post or preceding comment.

The Internet research was the primary source of data collection for this study. The internet research technique was employed to collect the online news items from the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch newspapers. According to Ndinojuo and Ihejirika (2015), Internet research utilises only the Internet and other Internet-related applications for data gathering and collection. Most of the data used for this analysis were printed out to ensure thoroughness, especially the ones that had much comment on them. The study used quantitative technique to analyse the data. The data were analysed using tables, frequencies and simple percentages.

Result and Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What number of readers commented on the various news reports on the comment-thread of the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch?

Table 4.1: Total number of comments

Content Categories	Vanguard	The Punch	Total
1. Political News	592	123	715
2. Health News	564	113	677
3. Education News	82	89	171
4. Sports News	55	53	108
5. Religious News	117	200	317
6. Crime/Law News	356	150	506
7. Science/Tech.	98	44	142
8. Sex/Entertainment	214	104	318
9. Economy/Business	188	47	235
Total	2,266	923	=3,189

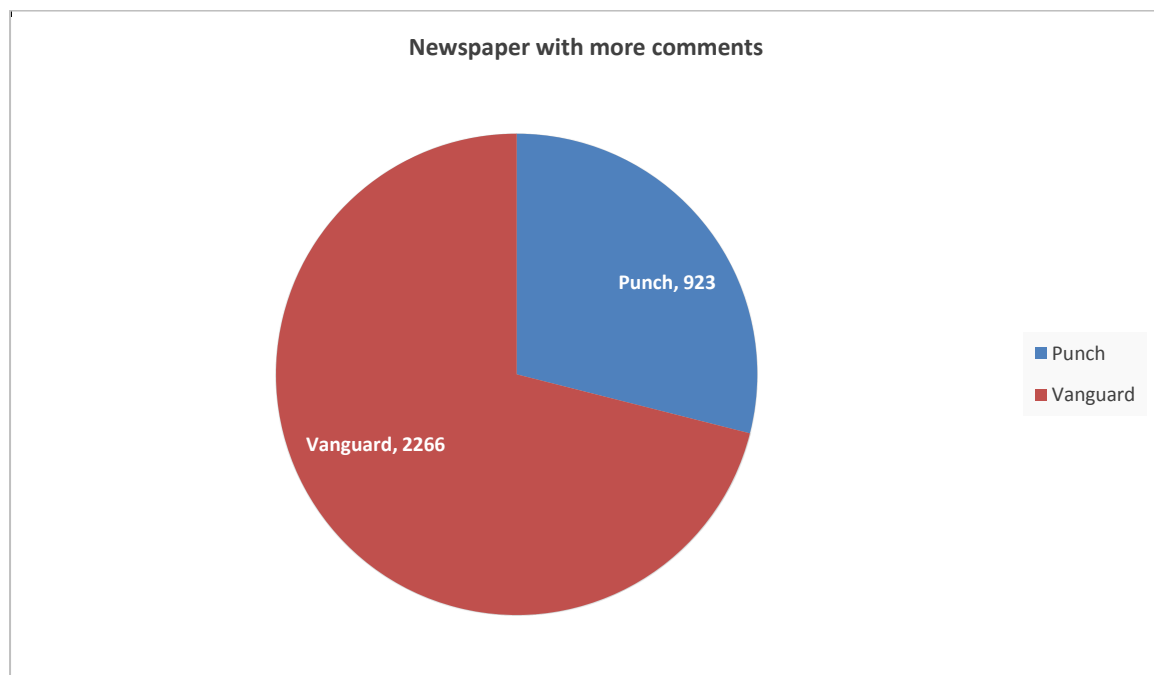
From the table above, a grand total of 3189 readers posted comments that formed the basis of the analysis this study. Out of the number, 715 readers commented on Political News, 677 readers commented on Health News, 171 posted comments on Education News, 108 dropped comments on Sports News and 317 persons posted on Religious News. For Crime/Law News, 506 readers posted comments, 142 posted on Science & Technology, 318 posts were recorded under Sex/Entertainment, while 235 commented on Business/Economy.

Based on the foregoing submission, the number of readers who commented on the various news reports on the comment-thread of both the Vanguard and The Punch were 3189.

Their participation in discourse on the comment platform of the two newspapers was in line with the concept of public sphere which Habermas (1989) explains as a domain of social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed and accessed by all citizens. Habermas (1989) states that: “citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicise their opinions freely” (p.231).

The implication therefore, is that the comment platform of the two newspapers provided a forum for the participants to engage themselves in exchange of ideas capable of forming public opinion. The participants in this study posted their comments on the comment platform of the Vanguard and The Punch without coercion.

Research Question Two: Which news reports of the electronic version of the Vanguard and The Punch did the readers comment on more?



The data coded from the analysis shows that the news report with the highest number of comments was the Political News. It had 715 comments with Vanguard having 592 comments, while Punch had 123 comments. Also, this study found out that readers posted more comments on news reports of the Vanguard than The Punch, with the Vanguard a total of 2,266 comments, while The Punch had 923.

The implication is that issues patterning to politics generate much interest from the populace. Citizens engaged themselves in political discourse to be properly informed of political

developments in order to make useful contributions to the process of governance. It therefore, means that politics influences virtually all segments and people tend to be participatory when it comes to political issues as compared to other genres.

Research Question Three: What were the tones of readers that posted comments on the comment-thread?

Content Categories	Positive	Negative	Zero	Total
Political News	347 (48.53%)	319 (44.62%)	49 (6.85%)	715
Health News	276 (40.77%)	387 (57.16%)	14 (2.07%)	677
Education News	95 (55.56%)	72 (42.11%)	4 (2.34%)	171
Sports News	72 (66.67%)	29 (26.85%)	7 (6.48%)	108
Religious News	167 (52.68%)	139 (43.85%)	11 (3.47%)	317
Crime News	250 (49.41%)	242 (47.83%)	14 (2.77%)	506
Sci. & Technology	118 (83.10%)	20 (14.08%)	4 (2.82%)	142
Sex/Entertainment	193 (60.69%)	101 (31.76%)	24 (7.55%)	318
Business/Economy	158 (67.23%)	66 (28.09%)	11 (4.68%)	235
Grand Total	1676 (52.56%)	1375 (43.17%)	138 (4.33%)	3189

The tones of comments in this study was primarily measured as positive, negative or zero comments. The tones or direction of comments is aimed at finding out whether a comment contributes logically to the subject of discourse (positive), engages participants in offensive and abusive discourse (negative) or conveys unrelated thoughts (zero), respectively.

The tones of comments, according to the table above shows that a total number of 1676 comments representing 52.56% are Positive, 1375 comments, representing 43.17% constitute Negative comments, while 138 representing 4.33% constitute Zero comments.

The analysis shows that more readers engaged in positive comments than others who posted negative and zero comments. The posting of more positive comments could be due largely to the fact that the majority of participants wanted to post their comments with the intention of contributing to the subject of discourse in advancement of democratic participation.

The engagement of citizens in diverse opinion is a fundamental element in participatory democracy as pointed out by Zamith and Lewis (2014) that the deliberation of diverse views has long been viewed as an essential component of strong democratic societies. The implication is that online readers who posted comments on the electronic platform of the two newspapers availed themselves of the opportunity to engage themselves on topical issues to ensure that they were properly informed of events happening around them, as well as attempt to proffer some form of solutions to issues of national importance.

Research Question Four: What frequency of tones of comments on the platform contributes to the subject of the news reports?

Table 4.3: Frequency of Positive Comments

Content Categories	Vanguard	The Punch	Total
Political News	295 (85.01%)	52 (14.99%)	347
Health News	172 (62.32%)	104 (37.68%)	276
Education News	40 (42.11%)	55 (57.89%)	95
Sports News	35 (48.61%)	37 (51.39%)	72
Religious News	50 (29.94%)	117 (70.06%)	167
Crime News	140 (56%)	110 (44%)	250
Science & Tech/Innovation	83 (70.34%)	35 (29.66%)	118
Sex/Entertainment	123 (63.73%)	70 (36.27%)	193
Business/Economy	118 (74.68%)	40 (25.32%)	158
Grand Total	1056 (63.01%)	620 (36.99%)	1676

The 1,676 Positive comments representing 52.56% out of the 3,189 comments constituted patterns on the platform that contributed to the subject of the news reports. Positive comments promote the ideals of the subject of discourse and engage readers in logical debate and sound argument.

By promoting the ideals of the subject of discourse on the comment-thread in sound and logical discourse, the Positive comments further advance rational debate on the platform.

The answer to this research question was provided in Table 4.5. Out of 3,189 comments analysed in this study, 1,676 posts representing 52.56% were analysed as Positive comments. Positive comments promote the ideals of the subject of discourse and engage readers in logical debate and sound argument.

The Social Responsibility theory supports this form of engagement where the mass media provide a forum for exchange of ideas. The Social Responsibility theory, according to Patterson and Wilkins (1998), stresses that the mass media should “serve as a forum for exchange of comment and criticism,” (p.189).

By implication, the comment platform as analysed in this study provided a forum for the participants to exchange ideas in form of comment and criticism to reflect the pluralistic character of the society as recommended by the Robert Hutchins Commission.

Findings

Based on the design of the research questions, the following constitutes the findings of the work. They are:

- i. On what number of readers commented on the various news reports on the comment-thread of both the Vanguard and The Punch newspapers, the study found out that a total of 3,189 comments were posted on the comment-thread of the two newspapers.
- ii. On which news report did the readers comment on more, the study found out that readers dropped more comments on the Political News which had 715 comments with Vanguard having 592 comments, while Punch had 123 comments. Also, the newspaper with the higher comments was Vanguard with a total of 2,266, which The Punch had 923 comments.
- iii. On the tones of readers on the comment-thread as posed by research question three, the study found out that 1,676 comments representing 52.56% had positive attributes, 1,375 comments representing 43.17% were negative, while 138 comments

- representing 4.33% constituted zero comments.
- iv. In response to the research question on the frequency of comments on the news reports of the two newspapers, the study found out that more readers (1,789 representing 56.10%) engaged others on the comment-thread through the reply, while 1,400 comments were posted as direct comments.
 - v. On the frequency of tones of comment that contributes to the subject of the news reports, the study found out that the majority of the comments were positive. The positive comments promoted the ideals of the subject of discourse and engaged readers in logical debate.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that majority of those who posted comments adopted the positive pattern of comments. The researchers observed that the online readers who engaged themselves by reacting to the subject of discourse engaged one another in free speech, which promotes democratic participation.

The study further concluded that there were also compelling cases of negative comments with greater number of readers posting their comments with pet names and without pictures. Majority of those comments with pet names and without pictures constituted the negative pattern of comments as found out in this study.

The study concluded that the comment platform by the two newspapers was a viable platform for feedback which is a critical element in the communication process. The comment platform offered the readers the opportunity to make their comments and criticisms in line with the provision of item 2 of the Robert Hutchins' Commission of 1948.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following constitutes the recommendations of this study:

1. There is need to sustain the online platform to provide opportunities for more online participants to engage themselves in discussions on the comment-thread in furtherance of the role which the mass media play in any democracy setting.
2. The Punch should also improve on its comment platform to attract more participants just as the Vanguard that was highly patronised by readers.
3. The positive pattern of comments should be sustained to foster free speech and reorient the minds of the people to contribute positive ideas for national development. Abuses, name-calling and prejudicial posts should be moderated on the platforms.
4. The positive pattern of comments contributes to the advancement of democratic values. It is therefore, highly recommended that the news media (Vanguard and The Punch) and policy-makers should avail themselves of the platforms to get feedback from the people.

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