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ONLINE READERS' COMMENTS AND NATIONAL UNITY

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CHAPTER
NINE

**ONLINE READERS' COMMENTS
AND NATIONAL UNITY**

Abubakar Jibril & Targema Tordue Simon

Introduction

“The growing presence of technology lets consumers connect with newspapers in a way not previously possible. Newspapers' websites often allow users to comment on any article or repost it via social networks” (Everett 2011:108).

Journalism in contemporary times has witnessed a migration to the internet. A platform where the traditional media outfits converge in the business of satisfying the information needs of the people. In this sense, the internet presents a hub of communication activities, as it creates new avenues for information dissemination, in addition to the mainstream platforms. This development has indeed revolutionised the process of communication, evident in the ease of obtaining or accessing information, immediate dissemination of information, and interactivity in the process of communication among a myriad of other benefits (McQuail 2005, Nwabueze 2014).

The process of communication which was, hitherto, characterised by 'delayed inferential feedback' (Baran 2002) has been reversed, as feedback in mass communication nowadays is immediate. Through phone-in programmes on the broadcast media and readers' comments on online pages of media outlets, the audience actively participate in the process

of information dissemination. Feedback, from antiquity to the present times, remains a very important element of the communication process, as it allows the communicator, in the words of Sambe (2008), to ascertain the effectiveness of the communication endeavour. That communication is effective or otherwise depends largely on the feedback which the sender receives from the decoder. Feedback therefore, leads to adjustment of the message to minimise noise (technically speaking), and increase the efficacy of the communication effort (Sambe, 2008; Asemah, 2011; Nwabueze, 2014; Bittner, 1989; Baran, 2002). There is no gainsaying therefore that the interactivity which characterised online news websites is indeed a significant development to the process of communication.

It is also axiomatic that the new media has revolutionised journalism by providing platforms for easy access to, and immediate dissemination of information and active participation by the audience. This revolution confers a level of freedom to interlocutors in their interactivity with the media, minimising the gatekeeper chain and paving the way for uncensored and unedited contents to float. This development has greatly undermined the essence of editing in communication; especially from the audience whose status has been elevated to enable them participate actively in creating and sharing content through readers' comments and other avenues.

A careful observation of the nature of comments on online news websites generally convinces one that this excessive freedom is indeed a conundrum, as it allows for negative comments to pass through, which encourages the existence and prevalence of outright denigrating and hate comments. It also buoys up participants most likely to use pejorative adjectives and engage in war of words with co-participants on issues in the news.

Denigrating comments have adverse effects on the deteriorating relationship between and among the various segments of the country, which is grappling with the challenges of national unity and cohesion as well as harmonious coexistence. Divisive tendencies such as religion, regionalism, ethnicity etc. characterise the Nigerian state, and the task of forging a national agenda that will benefit all and sundry has never been an easy one, as these divides always manifest, making nonsense of the agenda, no matter how encompassing it is (Oluniyi, 2014; Salawu and Hassan, 2011; Osinubi and Osinubi, 2006; Oluwole, 2014 and Iruonogbe and Egharevba 2015).

Nigerians are all witnesses to the stiff opposition during the 2015 Presidential elections that almost polarised the country into the APC-north and PDP-south scenario. Religion, ethnicity, and regionalism manifested in the race the divides that earned both Buhari and Jonathan negative images from the states that belonged to the opposite camp.

The internet gave room for cartoons and other forms of illustrations of aspirants which tend to cause chaotic reactions where divides are openly expressed. Online news websites were

turned into daises where the audience openly expressed their antipathy for each other by engaging in war of words, attacking each other using demeaning and pejorative adjectives, and saying all sorts of negative things against the personalities of the presidential candidates whenever they were mentioned in the news. Although these divides were employed mainly to secure votes during the polls, they never left with the polls. Nigerians still hold on to the divides despite the fact that the polls are over and Buhari is the president.

Much has been written on online readers' comments but from the perspectives of journalistic professionalism, accountability, social responsibility, accuracy and ethics (Vision Reporter, 2015; Nielson, 2015), however, there is a dearth of literature on online readers' comments and national integration in Nigeria. Using Benoit's (2007) functional analysis of political discourse to ascertain the manners in which online readers comment (acclaim, attack, defence) on President Buhari's Maiden Media Chat, this study seeks to find out the implication of online readers' comments on national unity.

Objectives

This study generally aimed to explore and analyse the comments of the readers of online news sites on President Muhammadu Buhari's Maiden Media Chat, findings of which may serve as a benchmark and vital tools for assessing the roles of reader-participation on national unity. This was achieved through the application of the Benoit's functional analysis of political discourse, with slight moderation. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following:

1. To identify online comments that are acclaims of President Buhari as reflected in readers' interaction patterns;
2. To identify online comments that are attacks on the President;
3. To identify online comments that are defenses of the President;
4. To examine the implications of the online readers' comments on national unity and cohesion based on how they manifested in the selected online news sites.

President Buhari's Maiden Media Chat

Muhammadu Buhari became the president of Nigeria at a time the country was faced with a myriad of challenges ranging from terrorism and deteriorating security situation to pervasive corruption, abject poverty, youth unemployment and poor state of the economy. As expected, the maiden presidential media chat which took place on the 30th December, 2015, about seven months after assumption of office of the administration, highlighted the major issues that the administration had been contending with since its inception.

The continued detention of former National Security Adviser (NSA) Col. Sambo Dasuki (rtd) and leader of the Independent Peoples of Biafra (IPoB), Nnamdi Kanu provided the leading issues in the discussion (Vanguard news 2015). Dasuki who is facing trial for

allegedly diverting and sharing to politicians and cronies money meant for arms procurement for the anti-Boko Haram crusade was held in detention by the State Security Service (SSS) after he had been granted bail by three different courts in the country. Kanu, who was spearheading the quest for an independent nation of Biafra, was earlier granted bail by a Federal High Court sitting in Abuja, but was rearrested by the SSS, which slammed a fresh charge of 'treasonable felony' against him (Street Journal, December 2015).

This was perceived by members of the public as outright disrespect for the rule of law. However, President Buhari maintained that the two detainees cannot be allowed to enjoy any form of freedom due to the 'enormity' of their offences. Another issue discussed in the chat was the issue of the Shi'ites killings. A clash between this Islamic group and the army in Zaria, Kaduna State on 13 December 2015, over what the army regarded as 'threats to national security' left about 20 members of the group dead and several others with varying degrees of injuries. The controversy that trailed the aftermath of the clash made it a matter of national concern. Reacting on this in the chat, President Buhari said he was awaiting reports from investigations by both the army and Kaduna State government to determine his course of action (Premium Times, December 2015).

Buhari also talked about his disapproval of the National Assembly's move to purchase exotic vehicles for use by its members worth 4.7 billion Naira. In his words: "... I think I have to hold a closed-door meeting with the National Assembly regarding the cars they are trying to buy. I hope they haven't bought them yet... I can't see the National Assembly paying 4.7 billion Naira to buy cars after collecting transport allowances..." (Nairaland, December 2015). On the war against corruption, President Buhari noted that due process had to be followed in executing the anti-graft war, as those who are suspected of perpetrating corrupt acts are 'innocent until they are proven guilty.' He noted however, that:

Money has been recovered but the fact that whatever we recover, we have to end up in court because Nigerians are entitled to know the truth and the truth will be what the court has discovered by submissions made to them in terms of documentation, including the bank statements, where it was lodged, how it was lodged, whether it was petrol money from NNPC or money from customs, or money directly from Central Bank... (Street Journal, December 2015)

The issue of devaluation of currency also arose, where the president maintained that devaluation will not be in the best interest of the country's economy; while on the challenges people face in accessing foreign exchange, the President said foreign exchange will be made available to the productive sector of the economy, and not for luxury items. Commenting on the issue of the missing Chibok schoolgirls, Buhari said he could not boast of any cogent intelligence report with regards to their safety, but that government is still making efforts to

see “if a credible leadership of Boko Haram can be established and they tell us where those girls are, we are prepared to negotiate with them without any preconditions...”

On the issue of perceived marginalization of the South-eastern region dominated by the Igbo people who are among the three major ethnic groups in the country in the present administration, Buhari reacted that the Igbo people have a fair share in his government. In his words: “The Igbos should explain what they mean by marginalization. Who is marginalizing them? If they feel marginalised, who is the minister for labour; what about science and technology...?” (Vanguard, December 2015). Reacting to the issue of paying 5000 naira allowances to unemployed youth which was part of the campaign promises of the APC, Buhari said the unemployed youth will be given the money, even if it means sending them to farm to earn it (Summary, 2015).

These are the major issues that were discussed in the maiden presidential media chat. The issues generated a lot of reactions from the public, and online platforms provided good avenues for airing the reactions.

Pluralism and the Nigerian State: Interrogating the Unity in Diversity Question

That Nigeria is a pluralistic society is not debatable. Salawu and Hassan (2011) note that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with cultural differences between its component ethnic groups. This pluralistic nature of the country constitutes an issue which has continued to interfere with the smooth running of the country from the colonial era to date. Arguing in this light, Salawu and Hassan (2011) assert that this diversity results into two major problems namely: problems arising between the larger ethnic groups and the hostility that derives from competition between peoples for wealth and power. The 1954 independence move that saw Chief Anthony Enahoro and legislators from the southern region debating with representatives from the northern region, where the latter prevailed and succeeded in delaying independence to a later date, presents a clear instance that multiplicity has, right from the beginning, been an obstacle to the course to achieve a common goal in the country.

Sir Ahmadu Bello (the then Premier of Northern Nigeria) remarked that 'God did not create Nigeria, the British did'. Justifying this position, Orji (2011) avers that prior to the incursion of the British explorers and merchants, the area now called Nigeria was inhabited by various ethnic nationalities which interacted among themselves. These groups were organised and governed on the basis of the principles of kingship, family and age. Kingdoms such as the Opobos, the Jukuns, the Sokoto Caliphate, the Kanem Bornu, Oyo, and Benin Empires existed in the pre-colonial Nigeria.

The 1914 amalgamation exercise saw the merging of these ethnic groups into one entity Nigeria. These independent entities that were not prepared to federalise were thus 'coerced' into forming a federation, giving rise to issues such as power rotation and quota system

among the various regions and ethnic groups, the ethnic minorities' marginalization and domination question, and resource control and revenue sharing issue in a federation with uneven distribution of natural resources, etc. (Egwu, 2014). Several measures have been adopted to address these issues, prominent among which include state creation that allows for minority fears to be allayed to a large extent.

Although the idea of turning this pluralism into a good potential for development exist in the minds of almost all the leaders that ruled the country to date, the reverse seems the obvious case, as deep rooted biases, hatred and animosity are not only conceived in the minds of citizens, but are being openly expressed, paving the way for serious national issues to be perceived or viewed with the lenses of ethnicity, regionalism and religion. Caught in this circumstance, the unity in diversity ideal remains a mirage (Salawu and Hassan, 2011 Orji, 2011). This is a big problem which Nigerian leaders from independence to date face in their quest to integrate the various ethnic groups.

Of particular concern to this study is the fact that, the mass media have a big task, and have been at the forefront in the struggles to achieve unity in diversity, in the country (Okoro, 2013, Okwuchukwu, Ngozi and Emmanuel, 2014). Radio Nigeria network news for instance has as its slogan the message “Radio Nigeria: uplifting the people, and uniting the nation” together with series of other efforts to promote national unity. NTA stations are never left behind in spreading the gospel of unity and harmonious coexistence among the various ethnic groups and other divisive margins in the country, and sensitizing the masses on the need to appreciate their differences and forge ahead as one people to achieve a common goal.

Moderation in the pattern of interaction on the traditional media platforms also helps a lot to checkmate and minimise the prevalence of messages that will deepen the divides and sow seeds of discord among the masses. Unfortunately, this virtue, which forms part of the social responsibility role of the mass media is lacking in new media and the avenues it provides. Messages, contents and utterances that are detrimental to national unity, peace and development flow freely on its various platforms (Wanapia and Targema, 2015). Even on the traditional media platforms that have migrated to the internet, moderation is minimal as interactions on their online readers' comments sections are usually chaotic and detrimental to national unity.

Readers' Comments: A Review

The practice of online reader comments has generated a lot of controversy in the literature over the years. While some scholars perceive it as a positive development that has allowed for interaction and encourage instant feedback in the media industry, others perceive it as a chaotic and unorganised platform that drags to the mud the integrity of online journalism. Vision Reporter (2015:1) notes that the positive role of online readers' comments is fast

diminishing as a result of 'nastiness'. In their words:

The internet was supposed to facilitate better exchange between the public and news media, but vile and hateful comments changed all that in the face of using vitriol- attack, bigotry and general nastiness... news organisations are increasingly throwing in the towel on online comments...

Nielson (2015:1) submits that inviting readers to participate anonymously and instantly has challenged firmly held journalistic norms of accountability and accuracy. Results of her study 'newspaper journalists support online comments' reveal that journalists dislike the verbal 'free-for-all' and personal attacks in these comments. Accordingly, only 35% of the surveyed population in the study said they frequently or always read online comments on their stories.

Hughey and Daniels (2013:1) note that many newspapers in the U.S.A have abandoned the practice of allowing comments. Online news sites have adopted a variety of strategies to deal with offensive comments, including turning 'comments off', not archiving comments and adopting offensive comment moderation policies.

The situation described above captures what obtains in online readers' comments which are most times negative in nature. Exploring women's responses to online media coverage of weight loss surgery, Champion, Glenn, Berry, and Spence (2015:1) discover that "because of the aggressive and anonymous nature of readers' comments in response to online news stories, the participants did not feel comfortable leaving comments themselves on the news sites". This study which employed FGD was able to ascertain how participants feel or perceive online readers' comments.

Wolchouver (2012), arguing from the psychological point of view, avers that "these online comments are extraordinarily aggressive". Quoting Art Markman, Wolchouver explains that several factors come together to engender the rudeness and aggression seen in the comments' section of the web pages. First, commenters are often virtually anonymous and thus, unaccountable for their rudeness. Second, they are at a distance from the target of their anger, and people tend to antagonize distant abstraction more early than living, breathing interlocutors. Third, it is easier to be nasty in writing than in speech, hence, the now somewhat outmoded practice of leaving angry notes.

Konnikova (2013) who writes on 'the psychology of online comments' argues that online comments, particularly, anonymous ones undermine the integrity of science and leads to a culture of aggression and mockery that hinders substantive discourse. In his words: "even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader's perception of a story". The author notes that most of the online readers' comments particularly, anonymous ones are

usually uncivil, aggressive and negative in nature.

Ajiboye (2013) studied the comments on online reports of socio-political crises in Nigeria. The study which purposively sampled 201 online readers' comments on two socio-political crises in Nigeria from ten Nigerian online news websites within 2011 and 2012 discovered that actor description and polarization, (the former which is a strategy that is used to portray 'actors' or agents in either positive or negative lights, while the later refers to a categorization strategy that constructs the in-group 'us' positively and the out-group 'them' negatively), generalizations (neglecting the facts in order to formulate prejudices and emphasise negative characteristics), lexicalisation (deliberate choice of words that project intended meanings and at the same time, using hyperboles to amplify meanings) among others are some of the strategies employed by Nigerian online readers to attack each other. Intensive discussions on these practices made the research to conclude that: "... ideological differences are very likely going to continue to feature within interactive feedback comments on online reports of socio-political crises in Nigeria".

Coe, Kenski and Rains (2014), who examine the pattern and determinants of incivility in newspaper website comments employed content analysis to study 6400 comments on local news websites in USA. They discover that there is a substantial amount of incivility in the comments. According to them:

Overall, more than one in five comments (22%) contained some form of incivility, 55% of the article discussion contained at least some incivility. Of the five varieties of incivility examined (name calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, pejorative speech), name calling was by far the most common...

Similarly, Ende and Dzurkogi (2012) examine the relationship between verbal terror and online news readers' comments using qualitative and quantitative content analyses to study 11,091 comments from five Nigerian newspapers over a period of six months. The study discovers that comments deemed as offensive employed hate speech, threats, abusive language and assassination of character. Words such as illiterates, ewu (goat), thief, murder, almajari (street urchin), bastard, scumbag, etc. were freely used to describe other comment writers. Findings of the study indicate that verbal terror attacks were directed at individuals, ethnic groups, religious institutions and regions, as stereotypes were used to describe those involved. Moderation also seems to be lax on these sites. According to the authors:

A notable finding of this study is that moderation is very low on these sites, though all the sites claim to moderate comments before display, the rule seems to be observed [in] the breach... the study has found some basis to conclude that online media platforms which offer ease of interactivity and sometimes guaranteed anonymity serve as avenues for verbal attacks

In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, the effects of this unfortunate trend can best be imagined than described.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the argumentativeness, aggressiveness and verbal assertiveness theory. The theory explains much of a person's message-sending and message-receiving behaviour. Propounded by Infante (1982), the theory states that highly argumentative individuals enjoy arguing and will eagerly and readily attack others' position and defend their own position on issues. While, people low in argumentativeness often feel uncomfortable about arguing because of lack of motivation, desire and skill to argue.

Individuals high in argumentativeness view arguing as intellectual challenge and have been found to view competence attacks, character attacks, ridicule and threats as less hurtful than those who are low in verbal aggressiveness. They tend to be highly emotional when it comes to arguing and always feel anxious to argue due to their level of competitiveness. While individuals low in argumentativeness generally avoid talking about controversial issues. They tend to be low in emotion when it comes to arguing and feel little or no anxiety about engaging in an argument. In some cases where they argue to defend their positions, they tend to do it in a socially acceptable way.

According to the theory, verbally aggressive individuals often do not provide as much evidence to support their argument. In many cases, these individuals possess verbally aggressive traits because they lack the skill to argue rationally and effectively, and therefore use verbally aggressive messages as their defence mechanism. Thus, they often see violence as their only alternative (Infante, et al 1984).

The tenets of this theory manifest in the behaviour and nature of interaction of online readers in Nigeria. Individuals well versed in arguments enjoy commenting on issues in the public domain, using their prowess and argumentative skills to discuss the issues. Those who are not versed however, exhibit high sense of aggression in their comments and resort to the use of insults and verbal attacks to counter positions held by co-commentators. It is in this regard that the tenets of this theory are found to be relevant to the study.

Method

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The content analysis was employed because the study seeks to explore manifest content of the Online Readers' Comments of selected online newspapers on President Buhari's maiden media chat in December, 2015. Content analysis involves the systematic, objective and quantitative (including qualitative) study and analysis of the manifest content of the recorded information.

The population for this study is the total number of online readers' comments on President Buhari's maiden media chat held on December 30, 2015 as published by Sahara Reporters, Premium Times, Vanguard and Naij.com news sites.

It will be a futile effort to study the many newspapers that publish online in Nigeria, especially where time, cost and energy are considered as constraints. Therefore, four online news sites were purposively selected for this study based on their consistency and strong online presence, wide online circulation rate, determined by the number of followers they have (see www.onlinenewspapers.com), and researchers' discretion.

Systematic random sampling technique was adopted in choosing the comments; elements were methodically selected at a fixed interval after selecting the first element at a random point. A total of 896 online readers' comments, comprising 182 from Sahara Reporters, 263 from Premium Times, 280 from Vanguard, and 171 from Naij.com newspapers, were obtained as sampling frame.

To draw a sample from the population, the researchers decided to study 10% of the population, resulting to a sample of 89 online readers' comments from the four selected online news sites. For each of the newspaper to be fairly represented, 10% of the total stories for each newspaper were selected. To select the 89 elements, tables of random numbers were used for each of the online newspaper to pick the elements until the last element was selected, which resulted in selecting 18 from Sahara Reporters, 26 from Premium Times 28 from Vanguard and 17 from Naij.com

Units of analysis in research, according to Keyton (2006), are standard observable units that offer 'a consistent way of dissecting and analysing texts. It could be a single word, a theme, a symbol or an entire story. In this context, the units of analysis are the comments on President Buhari's Maiden Media Chat by online readers. The comments were identified based on the functional analysis of political discourse by William Benoit (2007).

In conducting content analysis, a researcher needs to define and categorise the contents into which units of analysis are grouped, which must be naturally exclusive and exhaustive. For this study, the content category is based on Benoit's functions of utterances (comments in this context), which are: acclaim, attack and defence.

- a) Acclaim:- portrays the subject in question (the president) in a favourable light, focusing on his strengths and the good virtues of his personality.
- b) Attack: - attacking the subject/target or portraying them in an unfavourable light and identifying their weaknesses.
- c) Defence:- response to a prior attack on the president or subject in a previous comment or an attempt to justify an action by the president.

However, another category was found in this research and was classified as “Others.” Comments classified under the “others” category constitute about 17% and some do not relate to the subject of discussion, typical examples include adverts and commercials/promos of services and products that featured on the platform and happened to get selected in the sample.

Comments were also considered under the “others” category when there was no clear distinction as to whether the comments were “acclaim,” “attack” or defence.” Such comments might have commended and condemned on equal proportion, and their authors employed a high sense of rational judgement and objectivity. Such comments are constructive in nature, and can be credited to people who are neutral and versed in argument. These commentators do not base their comments on sectional differences or sentiments, but on facts, statistics and records. Their tone is devoid of the “north-praise and south-criticise” trend.

Data were collected and analysed into themes and each theme was coded for and categorised based on the established content categories.

Findings

The procedures described above yielded the following result:

Table 1: Distribution of Comments by the Online Newspapers

Newspapers	No. of sampled comments	Percentage
Vanguard	28	31.5
Sahara Reporters	18	20.2
Naij.com	17	19.1
Premium Times	26	29.2
Total	89	100

From the table above, it is evident that out of the 89 comments analysed, Vanguard newspaper has the highest number of comments with a little less than one-third of the total comments; it was closely followed by Premium Times with above one-fourth sampled comments. Sahara Reporters has one-fifth while Naij.com has a little less than one-fifth of the total comments.

Table 2: Comments on the online sites Based on the Content Categories

Comment Categories	Online Newspapers				Total
	Naij.com	Premium Times	Sahara Reporters	Vanguard	
Acclaim	6	3	5	1	15 (16.9%)
Attack	7	8	8	14	37 (41.5%)
Defence	2	11	4	5	22 (24.7%)
Others	2	4	1	8	15 (16.9%)
Total	17	26	18	28	89

The table above indicates that comments that attacked the president (41.5%) constitute more than two in five of the total comments, which equals both the acclaim and defence comments put together. More than one-third of the total attacks came from Vanguard and slightly above one-fifth each came from Sahara Reporters and Premium Times, while Naij.com had less than one-fifth of the total attacks. A little less than one quarter of the total comments came under the defence category, half of which came from Premium Times and less than one-tenth came from Naij.com while Sahara Reporters and Vanguard were fairly represented by nearly one-fifth each. Comments under the “others” category equals the acclaim comments and constitutes slightly above one-sixth of the total comments, more than half of which came from Vanguard.

Discussion

The research findings present an overview of the nature and pattern of comments prevalent in the comments sections of selected online news sites in the country. As seen from the tables above, the comments have been coded on the basis of acclaim, attack, defence and others.

Comments considered under the acclaim category were basically assertive in nature and express optimism in President Buhari and his “change” agenda. Such comments constituted 16.9% of the total sampled comments. The comment below by Artful Dodger Dawood fall under this category:

“I will give it to Buhari over Jonathan any time any day. The man did fantastically well. For the sake of caution and not jumping the gun Buhari was very calculative in most of his answers. That counts for wisdom!”

Attacks were comments that are directed, often aggressively, at the president or his supporters. The attackers expressed open hatred, verbal attacks and insults injurious to the

discussion on the platform. These comments were capable of creating an atmosphere of rancour on the platform. Such comments constituted 41.5% of the total sampled comments. The comment below by Braun fits into this category:

Nigeria is in deep soup. This old man knows nothing about a modern economy. He dodged and failed many questions about the forex restrictions. A storm is coming and a lot of business people, both young and old, who rely on this form of transactions, are not going to take the end of their source of their honest livelihood to 'go to the farm'.

The deliberate disobedience of court orders, ethnic and religious bias were very heavily displayed in this interview. A shame really that even graduates voted this cattle rearer for president. You've learned your lesson. Next time vote a brick layer.

Another of such comment by Rockson Wilson reads as follows:

"It's such a shame that Nigeria truly does not have someone we can call 'President of Nigeria' at the moment. Buhari is such aloof. He has no idea what is going on in Nigeria under his watch, including Nigeria's battered economy, foreign exchange problems etc. It was just sickening to watch"

As could be expected, such comments elicited further attacks and counter attacks from subsequent commentators, most of whom went wild, resorting to name-calling, insults and verbal bullying as reactions which set the pace for war of words between commentators, a trend that degenerated into polarising the commentators into the north and south.

Defensive comments on their part were reactions to previous comments. They were posted by individuals, who commented previously, or by commentators who wished to defend the president. Defensive comments had the potential of being neutral, favourable or unfavourable. The tone and choice of words were what qualifies them to belong to any of these categories. However, their main mind-set was to defend a claim, the president or an individual that had come under attack. Defensive comments constituted 24.7% of the total comments sampled. Typical example of this kind of comment was by James Grim who wrote:

What rubbish. Jonathan transformed 50 people to billionaires nothing more. What we have now is the report card of Jonathan. Nigeria is importing fuel and rice and last three months, PALM OIL came into the country. Youths are unemployed; the Niger Delta is finished, polluted and looted. Universities are a mess, the boys are in cults and the girls are all prostitutes. If that is transformation then this sentimental trash you posted above is just three

words. You people cannot even tell lies to save yourselves.

As stated earlier, comments classified under the “others” category either did not relate to the subject of discussion or were just neutral. Typical examples included adverts and commercials/promos of services and products that featured on the platform and happened to get selected in the sample. These constituted 16.9% of the total sample.

It is clear that all the categories of contents based on William Benoit's functions of utterances manifested in the comments. What worries one however, is the high rate of attack and denigrating comments on the platform. This leaves one to wonder if at all, the avenue provided for readers to comment portends any good for the unity of the country. With the way commentators are polarised along regional lines in their comments, the realization of the much desired unity and national integration via this platform is obviously far from reality.

Nigeria has been in a constant condition of crisis of varying degrees and nature. With the divisive nature of online comments, the possibility of perpetual disunity is very high. Though this division is rooted in the multicultural, heterogeneous and pluralistic nature of the country, it is not unconnected with the kind of media messages we consume as individuals and the interpretation we give to those messages. People's minds are conditioned to receive and interpret messages in line with their geopolitical and ethno-religious leaning.

The online media platform has offered opportunities for media audience to be active participants in the media making process; a viable and powerful access that has no regulation, which renders the gatekeeping process a very weak one. Concerns here are on the inappropriate use of the media by the active audience to disseminate hate messages, lies, insults and other messages that are destructive to the much sought after unity of the country. These negative penchants of destruction by some irredentists and ill-informed Nigerians, by implication, define the followership as one lacking in loyalty, mutuality, national interest and unity, which by extension threatens more the already fragile unity. It is based on these that recommendations were made.

Conclusion

Online readers' comments platform no doubt creates avenue for the audience to react to mass media messages. This platform provides readers the opportunity to interact and discuss issues published in the media, thus putting such issues into proper perspective. This is indeed a positive development. However, the way readers were polarised along regional lines in their comments, posting negative and injurious comments, has the capabilities of reducing the platform into a chaotic and indiscreet battlefield where readers engage in war of words. This can further weaken the already epileptic unity of the country. Given the

nature of the readers' comments that the presidential media chat received on the online news sites, this paper submits that the platform has the potentials of intensifying the divides that characterise the Nigerian state. The realization of the much desired unity in diversity in the country via this platform is not only far from reality, but also endangers national peaceful coexistence.

Recommendation

The quest for unity in diversity is a dire one as far as the Nigerian state is concerned. It requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, the mass media especially, to achieve this lofty goal (Pate 2015). Online readers' comments sections provide the best avenue for the audience from different parts of the country to meet and discuss issues bothering the unity of the country. Though the freedom associated with the platform is commendable, however, excessive freedom is always prone to abuse; hence it becomes pertinent to monitor how the audience interact on the platform. In cases of outright abuse of the platform, moderation is required by the gatekeepers to enable the platform serve its intended purpose optimally.

It also behoves readers to exhibit the highest degree of maturity while commenting on issues on the platform so as to avoid hurting others. This if adhered to, will enable society appreciate the role of this platform in charting a path to the progress of the country, and paving the way for the much desired unity and national integration.

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