

Investigating Social Media Role in Crisis Communication: Case of Hoatiti News Reporting of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

Social media has the capacity to inform, educate, entertain and confuse citizens simultaneously because of its deep imbeddedness within communities. This is because social media is readily available to most community members and news production is done surpassing and bypassing filters that humper and debilitate quick production and dissemination of news by mainstream media such as the traditional gate keeping parameters like political correctness and editorial policies. However, social media is regarded with scepticism in some quarters of the news production industry due to its disregard for ethical practice as well as disrespect for sensibilities related to tradition and culture that separate humans from the larger and general animal world. This study therefore sought to investigate the virtues of social media that have elevated the speed and limitless opportunities for Covid-19 news sharing in Lesotho with specific reference to Hoatiti news outlet. The study interviewed news consumers, practising journalists, journalism students and lecturers to establish their views on Hoatiti news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings were presented and analysed thematically.

KEYWORDS: *social media, mainstream media, disinformation, misinformation, Hoatiti news, filters*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has opened up news production and news consumption beyond the traditional newsroom. This effectively means that news production is no longer confined to traditional news production mainstream outlets such as the newspaper and other print outlets, traditional broadcast outlets such as radio and television. Any citizen with a gadget to capture photo footage, audio and video content with access to the internet can gladly do so at minimal cost without adhering to parameters like editorial policy and journalistic etiquette or ethical practice. This, from the liberal perspective of freedom of expression, can be something to celebrate because traditional gate keeping and political correctness has had the effect of diluting news to the extent of rendering it almost worthless. At the same time, some political authorities have made sure they control national

newspapers, radio and televisions in their countries. However, social media platforms have to be approached with caution when it comes to the production and dissemination of news content on sensitive issues like the Covid-19 pandemic due to the realities of disinformation and misinformation campaigns.

Background

Lesotho does not have the luxury of wide and diverse media outlets as compared to the immediate neighbour; the Republic of South Africa. Print news consumers are served news once a week by their favourite newspapers as all newspapers in the kingdom publish only once a week. Some of these newspapers publish daily online, however. Radio stations are on the increase but unfortunately do not command nationwide reach due to the geographical

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terrain of the country. The country also boasts just one television station (Lesotho Television) and it is accessed mainly by residence of Maseru district. The greater population of Lesotho rely on online publications for local daily news updates. For news on the Covid-19 pandemic, Lesotho citizens resort to South African media primarily and global media, for the more affluent citizens. With regards to the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens search for information on how to combat the spread of the virus, how the country is fairing and statistics on infections in the country, in South Africa, the region and globally. This was more so during the successive lockdowns which brought in a lot of uncertainty and anxiety.

Statement of the problem

The dearth of daily newspapers, few radio stations and one television station has led to citizens resorting to diverse, even hastily improvised news outlets such as popular social media news producers. The challenge with such outlets is that they are anonymous therefore cannot be held to account for what they publish in the event that they produce and disseminate or even reproduce information that dangerously misinform society.

Study aim

The study aims to establish the extent to which society perceives the reliability of anonymous news outlets on social media platforms and why one of these outlets; Hoatiti news is popular with youth news consumers in Lesotho as compared to mainstream news media outlets.

Theoretical framework

Since the study is delving into the matter of why youthful news consumers in Lesotho testify to their high reliability on Hoatiti news for their daily news consumption when they have tried and tested news production institutions at their disposal such as newspapers, radio and television, the study is guided and framed by the Uses and Gratification theory. This theory by Blumler (Ruggiero, 2000) talks of an active audience's seeking of the media of communication that satisfies their needs from a wide array of news outlets to choose from. In the age of computer mediated communication, the Uses and Gratification theory stands out in relevance because issues of imposition by media owners, editors and authoritarian states of what news content to produce and how, for consumption is near impossible to maintain on social media platforms. Internet communication has rendered news production and consumption fluid as news consumers can be producers simultaneously, and freedom of choice of what to consume by the populace is now very wide. The study is therefore going to use the focal lenses provided by the Uses and

Gratification theory in interrogating why Hoatiti news, a news outlet whose news producers are anonymous is deemed the news outlet of choice by younger news consumers in Lesotho.

Literature review

The misinformation phenomena, also termed infodemic (Cinelli, Quattrochiocchi, Galeazzi, Valensise, Brugnoli, Schmidt, Zola, Zollo, and Scala, 2020) has been highly evident in the perilous Covid-19 pandemic era, especially with issues related to the vaccine. Misinformation on the vaccine is proving to be dangerous in the unnecessary prolongation and spread of the virus because of the fragmentation effect misinformation has on societal response. Social media platforms amplify the spread of false information on the vaccine especially through the forwarding of print, video, audio and pictorial content militating against the vaccine on WhatsApp particularly, and other social media platforms generally. It is easier and faster to spread such misinformation on WhatsApp because the platform is used by the greater majority of mobile phone owners and also because it is much cheaper to access. WhatsApp is also difficult to regulate as compared to other platforms.

Misinformation feeds on people's emotions, especially where trust, belief systems and conspiracy theories (Jennings, Stoker, Hunting, Valgarosso, Gaskell, Devine, Mckay, and Mills, 2021) are rife. Disturbingly, this misinformation spread on social media convinces people to even oppose and be adamantly oblivious to science, as some innocently consume, share and forward the disinformation messages.

Social hesitancy towards vaccines to some extent is attributed to misinformation news articles circulating on social media of people succumbing to death after they received the vaccine (Chadwick, Kaiser and Vaccari, 2021). Social media if used irresponsibly can cause deep yet unnecessary damage to society yet these are the platforms of choice for news consumption by the majority of the world population (Khan, Chouhan, Jain and Sheikh, 2021); particularly younger generations. However, all is not lost as news authenticity can actually be established even with social media news.

Fact-checking can reduce the spread of fake news (Chung and Kim, 2020) especially when after fact checking one exposes the article read as fake news. When reading a story and you sense that something is not right about the story, search around different news websites for the story, or simply visit the readers' comments section of the story and you will get indicators that the story is authentic or disinformation.

More Google searches around the story will lead you to unravel the true details of a story that will authenticate or prove an article to be fake.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature seeking to establish why younger users gravitate towards Hoatiti news rather than to mainstream newspapers when seeking information on a daily basis. The advantage of this method is that it sorts and gives voice to the consumer, therefore empowering the interviewee as a partner in generating content from the study. Through interviews, the researcher leads interviewees to tell stories based on their lived experiences (Seidman, 2005). In the process of selecting the narrative from the sources' streams of consciousness (experiences), the researcher gleans meaning of the phenomena under study (Seidman, 2005). The study therefore interviewed the generation that consumes Hoatiti news and people with experience with different media of communication such as media practitioners and media lecturers to solicit their different perspectives on Hoatiti news as a credible source of news.

Findings

From Hoatiti News

We are a group of people with a common goal to disseminate news. Our platform is somehow informal in which we don't have constant income, so contributors have a share of whatever amount available to share and buy data. Take note that we operate under cover for one reason; we work as whistle blowers and publish news without fear of anyone as undercover means protection afforded to us. Our page started in 2018, but before then, we have been posting on different Facebook pages, that is from 2015. Our objective is to transmit news to social media users in Lesotho, and all over the world. We are entirely propagating news via social media only because that is the modern medium where majority of people are concentrated. Secondly, we aim to promote local small businesses by offering them slots for advertising on our page. They are charged a small fee for that service. Third, our aim is to promote the vernacular language Sesotho as most newspapers offer news predominantly in English. With news written in local language we are able to reach masses in the remote villages where people do not have access to newspapers. Fourthly, our page is the platform for promoting art, such as poetry and music.

From Hoatiti news consumers

A consumer of Hoatiti news from Leribe said: I use Hoatiti news as a source of information on a daily basis. I find Hoatiti news to be a reliable source because I have seen in many cases where their information is truthful. I know if Hoatiti writes about

an issue, I will hear it from other sources as well. Not only is it truthful but it also looks at immediacy compared to Newspapers and the TV Hoatiti deserves 90%. Hoatiti deserves 100% on journalistic ethical practice. It's truthful, it is immediate and they give the public what's of interest while also being objective.

Another consumer of Hoatiti news from Maseru said: I do not use Hoatiti news at all to get INFORMATION, especially when it comes to the Covid-19 pandemic. However I use it to get information on other matters. I believe Hoatiti news is reliable as a source of news. Hoatiti covers mostly community news as well as political news and truthfully because its sources are credible as in some cases they provide audio evidence of sources where needed. I have observed that they strive for credibility. For truthfulness and reliability I would give Hoatiti news 80% because they strive to disseminate without being biased. I would give Hoatiti news 55% for ethical journalism practice because sometimes their language is explicit and they do not censor where need be.

A student of journalism with a local university said that he did not prefer using Hoatiti news as a source of serious news because of its unreliability. He said that for him it serves as a source of news hints on some news beats but cannot rely fully on Hoatiti. He says the problem with Hoatiti is that there is no evidence to reflect professional news gathering. He went on to say that the outlet mainly covered political news although they lack the element of reliability although they touch on pertinent issues. He however says he rates Hoatiti higher than LNBS news outlets (Lesotho TV, Radio Lesotho and Ultimate Radio) because these outlets are heavily biased towards the government where as Hoatiti news is nonpartisan. He however says Hoatiti sensationalises issues therefore lacking in the area of journalism ethical practice.

From communication professionals

One practicing journalist said: no one knows who is behind the account but it's suspected it's owned by an individual who is probably a journalist. He or she either breaks news or report taking material from newspapers. He also takes advertisements.

A lecturer of broadcasting and journalism with a local institution said: I have never gleaned any news on Covid-19 from Hoatiti news since the outbreak of the pandemic. I have been relying on international news outlets such as BBC, Al Jazeera, SABCN, eNCA, CNN, NewzA because most of the time these channels give truthful and reliable information. Hoatiti provides about five percent Covid-19 news. They don't have reliable news sources to update their

page on a regular basis. Hoatiti doesn't follow journalistic codes of ethics. It's not reliable. Anyone can post anything they like. It's more or less citizen journalism.

Another professional communicator who is both a practicing corporate Public Relations Officer and broadcaster said: Hoatiti news is hard to categorize because in my view it is neither a blog nor an online newspaper. I don't know if one can say it is a gossip hub or what. If it was not created under a fake account then we would be talking something else. The identity of the blogger is vital to tell what it is or to even categorize it. It is the same as saying Makhaola Qalo and Liotloana News agency is a blogger. I regard those as fake accounts. I only take them as whistle blowers.

Analysis

Social psychology research has established that messages shared anonymously exhibit antisocial tendencies of unnecessary crude, offensive, sexually inappropriate, aggressive, violent and inhuman behaviour (Zhang and Kizilcec, 2014). "Controversial content is more likely to be shared anonymously than uncontroversial content", Zhang and Kizilcec (2014).

When being anonymous, consumers tend to be more entertaining and seek more entertainment, as compared to when they use non-anonymous platforms where they tend to be more neutral (Kasakowskij, Fietkiewicz, Friedrich and Stock, 2018).

Under the circumstances of deadly disease outbreaks, it is most ideal to approach social media disseminated news with extreme caution because of the disinformation and misinformation campaigns characterising the communication of the Covid-19 vaccine. Consumers, especially youthful social media participants, should be taught media literacy and be equipped with tool kits and skills to establish fake news when the encounter such on social media. The vaccine campaigns rolled out globally by nations are hampered by the incessant spread of negative information about the content of the vaccine, the intention behind the vaccine by the rich few, among other negative loads of disinformation. Anonymous sources of news on social media should be exposed for what they are so that scientifically verifiable information can be published and consumed without unnecessary blemishes from fake news that feeds into people's insecurities and emotions and fears of the unknown leading them to resist receiving the vaccine.

Hoatiti news is influential to younger consumers of online news and if properly constituted and run, it can be established as an online newspaper with a sizable number of readers. It is a noble entrepreneurial

initiative which can perform even better with proper structures and employing trained journalists and hence establish itself as a credible newspaper.

Conclusion

The study set out to establish the reasons why Hoatiti news, among other social media outlets, is popular with younger consumers. It was established that such news outlets produce immediate, apolitical news which resonates well with younger consumers. However, professional communicators dismiss Hoatiti news as a news outlet of significance due to the element of anonymity. The study also established the dangers of anonymous sources of news in spreading disinformation and misinformation especially in times of crisis.

Recommendations

The study recommends Hoatiti news to morph into a properly constituted online newspaper with well known journalists.

The study also recommends that Hoatiti news should start producing ethical news, with a number of interviewees and known content producers for purposes of accountability and fairness to those being written about.

Young consumers of news and social media users should be taught media literacy so that they are not taken advantage of by uncouth social media news producers and disseminators as they may be used as conduits for the spread of disinformation and misinformation campaigns especially in the Covid-19 era.

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