Examining South-East University Students Optimisation of the Feedback Tool of the Online Newspaper in Nigeria

By Anthony Chinedu Ekwueme & Sylvester Ugochukwu Ugwuanyi

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Keywords: online newspaper, feedback, tool, optimisation.

GJHSS-A Classification: FOR Code: 890399

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Abstract- The process of sending, and having, reactions to contents of traditional newspapers published used to be tortuous, but with the online newspaper readers' responses to published contents can almost be instantaneously posted online. This current ease has however raised the question as to whether the tool through which users can post reactions online are appreciated and optimised by readers. This study therefore looks into this optimisation within the frameworks of the agenda-setting theory and the democratic-participant theory. A total of 383 students drawn from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, were surveyed. At the end, findings showed that 76% of users read comments succeeding news stories on online newspapers, 55% of online newspapers readers do not utilise the comment box adjourning contents to express their thoughts. While 39% of the comments read by online newspaper users relate to the stories they are adjoining, 41% of respondents say the comments they post on the message board have a direct bearing on the story in question. It was also found that 56% of respondents believe that the process of posting reactions to stories published on web pages is still not easy.

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I. Background of Study

Prior to the advent of online newspaper, the kind of interaction that goes on between traditional newspapers and their readers was far from being prompt and hassle-free. At that time, there was a great time lag between when feedbacks to news and opinions in newspapers are posted and the time they eventually appear on the newspaper pages. Readers then used the post offices to send their letters to the PO Box and PMB of newspapers and magazines. The delivery of such mails took time as the postal services was not that efficient; hence by the time such responses get to be published, something else would have become more topical. And if such feedback gets published, many a reader would be struggling to connect the feedback to a story that trended some time ago.

Although media houses have the responsibility of publishing and airing the reactions of their audience, countless number of letters to the editor and responses to opinion articles could not see the light of the day mostly as a result of the challenges pointed out above; Right of Reply even becomes affected in the circumstance. Aside the delay inherent in when a reaction is written and when same gets published, space constraint constitutes another snag as editors, columnists and other journalists are usually left with no option than to drop less important contents, a category under which reactions from readers are mostly found, for subsequent editions.

But thanks to the internet, online newspapers have come to the rescue, taking care of the two factors of time and space identified above as major inhibitions to the publishing of readers' reactions to newspaper contents. According to Talabi (2011, p. 17) "The new media give users the means to generate, seek and share content selectively and to interact with other individuals and groups, on a scale that was impractical with traditional mass media". Nwabueze (2015, p. 160) writes that, "Web media have a message board for immediate audience reaction to stories. So the online audiences are not passive; neither are they distanced from the reporter. In some cases, they are waiting at the other end as you write the story and once you post it, they immediately read and react".

This goes to show that with digital newspapers, readers no longer have to wait until their letters get delivered by the postman. They are now also occluded from waiting till their letters get the attention and approval of the editor before such sees the light of the day, as they are empowered in most news sites to post their comments and see it published on the site almost immediately without the input of a moderator. Presently, readers no longer need to constrain themselves to a specific number of words as they are at liberty to deploy whatever amount of words they think is enough to pass on their message.

According to Sanusi, Adelabu & Esiri (2015), "journalists and media houses now have the opportunity to interact with users. Interactivity does not only benefit the readers, it also allows journalists to combine different kinds of information in both new and different ways. The internet provides an interactive component that is lacking in the print media and even in television".

With the process of reacting to a newspaper content now made easy and simplified, it would be

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expected that readers, particularly youths who spend more time on the internet, optimise this digitization in participating in the national conversation by commenting on news stories that catch their fancy. In view of the fact that comments can now be posted to online stories and articles in a matter of minutes without the reader even having to rise from the sofa upon which he or she laid to consume online newspaper contents, online readers of newspapers would be expected to maximise this opportunity to make their voices heard and even take the narrative away from the journalist or opinion moulder.

Optimisation of online newspapers' feedback tools should ordinarily be popular among readers since online newspapers are easily accessible provided there is an internet access and the accompanying gadget. It really should be the rave in the present age unlike in the days when the process of sending a feedback to contents on newspapers and magazines begins with buying a copy, which many did not have the means to do. With the process now simplified, it calls for wonder whether readers who are now readily availed this interactivity of the online newspaper are really taking full advantage of the innovation.

a) Statement of the Problem

Okunna (1999, p.115) disclosed that, "The mass media also performs the function of serving as a forum for public debate and discussion of important issues in the society". Severin and Tankard (1987) in Sanusi, Adelabu & Esiri (2015, p. 11) identified; providing a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, as the second of the five guidelines submitted by Hutchins Commission on the role of the media. This function is now better played through the message board embedded in digital newspaper pages which has made discussions and debates on every story published online possible. Indeed, one of the comment plug-in software is called Disqus, a parody of the word 'discuss' which the box attached to every online story seeks to engender.

Arguing that the internet provides an interactive component that is lacking in the print media and even television, Sanusi, Adelabu & Esiri (2015) pointed out that journalists and media houses now have the opportunity to interact with users in a manner that does not only benefit the readers, but allows journalists to combine different kinds of information in both new and different ways.

But despite this innovation which fulfils one of the very important functions played in the society by the mass media, which online newspapers are a part of, it is worrisome that many a user do not avail themselves of or maximise this opportunity to air their views and join in public debates that would help in shaping public opinion and give government officials an idea of what the mood of members of the public are. Such readers exhibit their

apathy by not only refusing to post reactions to stories they read, there are indications that many of them do not even bother to read the comments posted by those who reacted to what they read online. Readers in this category therefore act in negation of the assertion of Okunna (1999) that, "The mass media make it possible for people to know what others are thinking and saying about issues of importance".

Yet, there is also the nagging issue of users posting comments that are at variance with what the story in question is all about. While some use the comment box to hurl insults at a user over his expressed opinion, others unfortunately abuse the noble invention by posting information through which unsuspecting persons are swindled. A visit to the comment section of some online newspaper pages will show fraudsters parading as Customs officers informing the public about the auctioning of vehicles and other goods at ridiculous prices. Many have lost their hard-earned resources to these identity thieves who are plying their nefarious activity on a forum that should ordinarily be more like an intellectual fest where ideas that would help the journalist who authored the story, the media house and the other readers, should be bandied. When this prompt avenue for feedback are abandoned and misused as pointed out above, the online user loses his or her power to control contents in newspapers through their criticism or commendation of the journalists' work. For journalists and media organisations take note of these comments and are guided by them so as not to lose their much esteemed readership that endears them to advertisers.

It is in the light of these that readers' optimisation of the feedback tool of the digital newspaper need to be probed. The comment section of newspapers is too important not to be used, read or left to mischief makers and swindlers. The manner this feedback tool is used and abused also deserves to be investigated in view of some online mediums' seeming encouragement of the posting of all kinds of comments all in the bid to show themselves off as very popular and having a committed swam of loyal readers who do not only voraciously consume their contents but go a step further to share their thoughts on same.

b) Objectives of Study

This work is guided by the following objectives:

i. To find out if users of online newspaper contents read comments succeeding news stories published on web pages.
ii. To see if users of online newspapers utilise the comment box adjourning online news stories to express their thoughts.
iii. To discover the kind of comments users of digital newspapers post on the comment box attached to news stories on online pages.

iv. To find out how easy it is for users of online newspapers to post reactions to stories published on web pages.

c) Research questions

Based on the above-listed objectives, the following research questions were drawn:

i. Do users of online newspaper contents read comments on the same web page with news stories?
ii. Do users of online newspapers utilise the comment box adjourning online contents to express their thoughts?
iii. What kind of comments do users of digital newspapers post on the message board attached to news stories on online pages?
iv. How easy is it for users of online newspapers to post reactions to stories published on web pages?

d) Significance of Study

This work would be of great help to all who surf the internet for news stories. This is as it would be opening their eyes to the enormous power which the comment plug-in on digital newspapers has bestowed on them. The study would not only make users of digital newspapers cultivate the habit of reading comments that trail every story they read but would make them seek to lend their voices to online conversations. That way, they would be playing a part in balancing the flow of information as well as influencing how journalists report and present contents online.

Those who provide contents for online newspapers also stand to benefit from this study. With the increased awareness readers and users would have of the comment plug-in, content providers would now have more persons reacting to their articles and through that means get to know whether their work is actually striking the right chord in the audience as well glean areas they need to improve upon. This is in line with the submission that "understanding the nature of online audience will put a reporter in a better psychological and physical perspective to approach his job". Nwabueze (2015, p. 160).

Also, when the users rightly use the comment box, media houses will by that be presented with an appraisal of the reporters, writers and editors. For instance, when there are errors in an article, users can point that out through the comment box so that whoever edited the script can be called to account.

Indeed, any means by which public opinion on issues are made known should be valued by the government as those in positions of authority can easily measure the mood and feelings of the populace towards their policies and programmes. Public opinion is very evident in exchanges that go on in the comment section of most web pages in reaction to stories contained therein. Since most stories and articles are usually centred on those running the government and the policies being pursued, the most prominent thought of an engaged audience or community which the comment plug-in engenders should ordinarily guide the powers-that-be.

In the main, this work as an addition to existing body of knowledge will be relevant to those in the academia. The study can provide a basis for further research or can be a valuable resource to researcher working on a similar subject.

e) Scope of Study

This research work is on South-East university students' optimisation of the feedback tool of the online newspaper. The scope is therefore limited to both the undergraduate and postgraduate students of universities in the South-East. As that is where one can easily find the youthful population. Edegoh, Ezeh & Samson (2015, p.65) stated that "at present newspapers are available in both hard copy and electronic form and are accessible through the Internet using all kinds of devices which are at the disposal of youths, particularly students. All these innovations are meant to improve readership of newspapers and attract young readers".

Considering that there are five states in the South-East geopolitical zone with each of them having at least more than one university, the quest for a manageable study and the need to beat deadline led this researcher to purposively choose students in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and the Federal University of Technology, Owerri. These cover for Enugu, Anambra and Imo states.

Online newspapers' contents which come with message board are varied; they range from sports, entertainment, gossips, health, motoring, fashion to public affairs. Since studying these story genres would make the work unwieldy and may undermine the drive to get a well-informed and analytical sample size, a decision was taken to restrict the study to users who expose themselves to both news stories and opinion articles that can be categorised under public affairs contents. More so, the utilisation of the feedback tools attached to such stories aids and enhances political participation by the citizens. Hence, the research instrument seeks out respondents who use public affairs contents published by online newspapers.

f) Definition of Concepts

Online newspaper: According to Ganiyu (2011, p. 127), "Online media is a multimedia platform whereby it is possible to reach the same audience via text, audio, video, graphics, animation and pictures at the same time". Quoting Hasting Tribune Online, Mustapha & Wok (2014, p.76) defined online newspapers are serial, machine-readable news-oriented publications that are

accessible via the Internet, adding that they are equally referred to as digital newspaper, electronic newspapers, enews, e-newspapers, among others.

Feedback: This was explained by Okunna (1999, p.8) as the appropriate response from the audience through which to measure whether members of the audience received and understood the intended message. She identified the two types of feedback as immediate and delayed feedback. This study is concerned with the former as Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p. 178) stated, "The scenario of instant feedback tends to create a situation of physical presence actually stimulated through virtual presence. The audience members are able to comment on the stories or issues and even discuss among themselves".

Tool: In this study, tool is seen as an apparatus through which a process or operation is carried out.

Optimisation: This can be said to mean an appropriate usage of something. In this study, it will refer to exploiting an innovation in a manner that was intended by the innovator.

II. Literature Review

With the online newspaper, media users now have more power than ever before in balancing the flow of information. The audience members are no longer like the sitting dog waiting to lap up whatever information that is thrown at them by a reporter or columnist. While they are at still at the receiving end of the information, the journalists and indeed the media house is at the receiving end of audience members' reaction – that is feedback which has been made more prompt by the comment plug-in in new media. Nwabueze (2015, p. 155) pointed out that "most online news media create space (message board) for readers to give feedback on the news they read, making these media interactive in nature".

The internet users, who are said to be involved in the creation of contents on online newspapers, do not just make this happen by merely using the web but by relying on tools which Talabi (2011, p. 18) categorically identified thus: "Armed with easy-to-use web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information; and it's doing just that on the internet". Barker & Sadaba (2008, p. 88) in Ganiyu (2011, p. 127) agreed with him that "internet users are not just viewers, listeners, or readers but they are involved in creating contents".

It is this same internet that has made "news sites become more responsive and better able to handle the growing demands of readers and viewers" (Talabi 2011) and powers the building of an online community around the contents posted on the online newspaper. This must have led Ukonu (2013, p. 183) to posit that

"the interactive nature of online news means also that reporters and editors are writing in a more interactive, informal, tell-a-friend style in online news".

Ekwueme (2008, p.146) stated that "developers of websites have established a variety of ways that individuals can interact, such as designing their own websites, chat rooms, polls, immediate response to information and others". This was buttressed by Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p. 178) who said, "The audience could send feedback immediately after consuming the content or while still consuming it. They do this through e mail, live audio/visual telephone conversation such as on Skype and Yahoo live messenger. They can also send immediate feedback through the social media which include: facebook, twitter, youtube etc".

Barker & Sandaba (2008) held that interactivity is the "measure of a medium's potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content or form of the mediated communication". Ganiyu (2011) stated that "it is the interactivity of internet as a medium that has given rise to not only citizen journalism, whereby non-journalists report news and events but also the advent of bloggers, some of them with more reach than some traditional media". Kiousis (2002) in Wogu (2009, p. 157) attempted to define the basis for new media interactivity by identifying four yardsticks which are as follows: proximity, sensory activation, perceived speed and telepresence.

McQuail (2006, p. 38) in Nwabueze (2015, p. 147) explained that the major features that distinguishes the new media (under which is the online newspaper) from the 'old' media lie in their interconnectedness, their accessibility to individual users as senders and/or receivers, their interactivity, their multiplicity of use and open ended character, and their ubiquity and 'delocatedness'. Nwabueze (2015) then added that "the concept of new media specifically refers to web facilitated communication channels which have redefined journalistic information sharing and dissemination with a more interactive sender-receiver relationship in a mass communication environment".

Listing out the tools through which the online newspaper facilitates interaction as well as gets feedback from users, Folayan (2004, p. 45) wrote,

There are a number of interactive options that can facilitate this dimension of interactivity on an online newspaper site and these include chat rooms, discussion groups, bulletin boards, feedback mechanisms and email addresses displayed on the home page. Email addresses, discussion forums and live chat areas can serve to make communication easy between users and staff at online newspapers and attract and keep readers at a site. What the foregoing quotations from various authors seek to make categorical is that the online newspaper has actually created an avenue for users to be interactive to the extent of even influencing media contents. Since not all

online users would want to take advantage of these interactivity enabled by the message board, Wogu (2009, p. 162) pointed out that, "Participation in many online discussions and interactions is thus essentially anonymous, and this may sometimes be part of the attraction".

But the participation of the online users in discussions through the comment plug-in on digital newspaper is very important as this fulfils the mass media function of creating an avenue for deliberation of matters that are of interest to the society. As Okunna (1999, p. 115) noted, "This is one way in which the mass media help in the formation of public opinion, which is made up of what the majority of people in a society think about a particular issue of public importance. The mass media make it possible for people to know what others are thinking and saying about issues of importance".

These thought aligns with those of Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p. 178) who said, "The audience members are able to connect on the stories or issues and even discuss among themselves. This also creates an online community of media audience. They discuss media contents among themselves and others who are not members of such community also benefit".

Meanwhile, it bears pointing out that in as much as it is desirable for digital newspaper users to post their reactions to stories immediately after going through them; there are online newspapers that actually shut the door against some of the reactions. The online newspaper, TheCable, says it is noted for moderating comments on stories in a manner that makes it difficult for people to post hate speech and fraudulent messages such as "Customs is auctioning cars" and "Cheat MTN".

Speaking about comment moderation on the medium, The Cable editor, Taiwo George, said, We had to put someone on it. We have failed more than 200,000 comments in three years and we are glad that those who want to post inappropriate comments now know that TheCable is the wrong choice. People often tell me there are no enough comments below our stories but they don't know how glad we are. We are not an online newspaper just looking for page views — we have a professional and moral responsibility to encourage decent discourse.

The Cable (April 29, 2017 retrieved from https://www.thecable.ng/hurray-day-2014-thecableborn)

a) Review of Empirical Studies

Studies abound on youths reading profile of newspapers as well as on their use of the message board provided by online newspapers. In a study on *'Evaluation of Newspaper Reading Habits of Youths in Anambra State, Nigeria'* which administered the research instrument on 294 respondents, Edegoh, Ezeh & Samson (2015, p.68) found out that 100 per cent of them affirmed that they read newspapers regularly. As

regards their reading profile, 54 per cent of the respondents read newspapers daily, 27 per cent read newspapers 2-5 times per week, 18 per cent others read newspapers weekly while 1 per cent of the respondents consulted newspapers on monthly basis.

It has also been said that the youths pursuing education source their news from online newspapers. Writing on the circulation figures of newspapers, Ganiyu (2011, p. 126) said,

It could have been better if not for the internet which has seen most young people between the ages of 18 – 35 in most parts of the world using the new media to source for their news... This is more so when the young are being wilfully driven online in Nigeria by the education industry which makes it compulsory for them to get their admissions through the internet.

In a thesis on 'Interactivity in online journalism: a case study of the interactive nature of Nigeria's online', Folayan (2004, p. 63) found out, after observing the website twice a week for six months, that the web version of Guardian newspaper does not have discussion or news groups and also discovered that "the online Guardian site has no public bulletin board for posting messages... there are opinion polls that allow users to vote on topical issues."

According to Mustapha & Wok (2014, p.76) research has shown that the readership enjoyed by online newspapers is on the increase, as many people prefer to read current news on the Internet rather than through the traditional source, adding that,

While DailyBreeze.com (2008) said online newspapers readers turn to the Internet every day for national and world news, Ihlstrom, Lundberg and Perdrix (2003) found that an average of 67.1% and 52.8% read recent and local news, respectively, on the net. In 2005, a study by Pew Research Center for People and the Press also reported that 62% of Internet news consumers said they read the websites of local and national newspapers (Rosenbery, 2005).

A study conducted by Mustapha & Wok (2014, p.76) entitled: *'Online newspapers use and homeland political participation potentials of the Nigerian students in Malaysia'* which sampled 370 Nigerian students studying in Malaysian universities and university colleges returned with this outcome:

Of the three most preferred online newspapers, Daily Trust commands the highest readership (40.4%). While 15.3% of the respondents preferred online news only papers, Vanguard snewspaper was the least preferred (14.7%). Close to a half (45.8%) of the respondents read online newspapers for five days up to seven days a week; about almost a third (29%) read for between three and four days while a quarter of the respondents didn't read or only read for not more than two days a week. Exactly half (50%) of the respondents preferred political news content, while over one-tenth (12.5% and 13.2%) read lifestyle and sport content

respectively. Other contents (finance, crime, and foreign news) had less than 10% patrons among the respondents in this study. With regards to attention paid to the news, a little over one-third (35.6%) reported giving moderate attention while slightly above a quarter accounted for much attention. Those who gave no attention are in the least with 15.5%.

b) Theoretical Framework

This work *'Examining South-East university students' optimisation of the feedback tool of the online newspaper'* is hinged on the Agenda-setting theory and the Democratic-participant theory. These two theories were used because they both complement each other as can be seen in the media giving audience members what to react to by virtue of the news stories published by online newspapers (Agenda-setting) and the reader picking up from there by posting their reactions to, and even trying to influence the set agendum (democratic-participant). We shall now look at each of the theories so as to draw out their relationship with the study.

The Agenda-Setting Theory: This theory, which was developed by Walter Lippmann through his text entitled: *Public Opinion* was made popular by Bernard Cohen in 1963. It was further entrenched by the empirical study conducted by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Wogu (2013, p. 89) quotes McCombs & Shaw (1972, p. 180-181) as positing thus: "In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position".

The relationship between the Agenda-setting theory and this research was succinctly made obvious by Okunna (1999, p. 122) thus: "The mass media can also set the political agenda by deciding what political topics people talk about". Identifying the major idea behind this theory, Wogu (2008, p. 141) asserted that "people consider as important those things reported in the media, and that major issues discussed in the society are introduced by the media".

In view of this given, contents of online newspapers should ordinary provoke discussion centred round the news stories published. It is the readers for whom the digital newspaper reports stories who should go ahead to discuss the idea put across by posting their reactions via the bulletin board contained in the web page of the reports they read.

Democratic-participant Theory: In an attempt to define this theory, Wogu (2013, p. 75) wrote that "the belief here is that people in a society should fully partake in information exchange, rather than remain just recipients of communication from mostly the government. The idea is horizontal, not only vertical/top-down communication". Enzensberger (1970) in Ojobor

(2002, p. 16) averred that this theory takes care of the right to relevant information, the right to reply as well as allows the use of the means of communication for interaction in small-scale settings, interest groups, and sub-cultures.

This theory, which addresses the needs, aspirations and interests of the receivers in a political society, is also said to favour multiplicity, smallness of scale, locality, de-institutionalisation, interchange of sender-receiver roles, horizontality of communication, interaction, and commitment, (Enzensberger (1970) in Ojobor 2002, p. 16). The democratic-participant theory is also referred to as media democratization as it empowers members of the audience to become active partners in the creation of contents and not just a mere object of the information dished out by media organizations.

It is on this basis that this theory provides a vital anchor for this study which is looking at audience members' optimisation of the feedback tool of online newspapers. It is through the democratic-participant theory that one can now see how the user of digital newspapers can through the message board exert a measure of influence in the contents provided by a particular online newspaper. The theory also takes care of the horizontal communication and discussion that takes place among the online newspaper, the user and other users of the platform, thereby making such a classic case of media democratization.

III. Methodology

a) Research Design

Considering that this work is out to examine online readers' optimisation of the feedback tool of online newspaper, the survey research design was picked as tool for carrying out the field work. Ezeah and Asogwa (2013, p.302) pointed out that "Survey method is a very good and reliable method of data gathering for research work and it can be used to study a large population or describe the behavioural pattern of the population". Through the survey design, this researcher was able to elicit raw information from students of universities in Nigeria's South-East which expressed how they take advantage of the feedback tool provided by digital newspapers.

b) Population of the Study

Both the undergraduates and postgraduate students in South-East universities constitute the population of this study. They qualify to be the population of this study in view of the assertion of Ganiyu (2011, p. 126) that most young people between the ages of 18 – 35 in most parts of the world use the digital newspaper to source for their news, adding that the youths in Nigeria are being driven online by the nation's education industry which makes it compulsory for them to get their admissions through the internet.

But considering that it will be cumbersome studying all the universities in the South-East states of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi and Abia, this researcher had to settle for the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in Enugu State, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, NAU, in Awka, Anambra State and the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, FUTO, in Imo State. According to the Academic Planning Units of these institutions, the total number of students in UNN is 32, 608, that of NAU is put at 30,000 while FUTO has a total of 22,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students. The sum of these figures is 84,608.

c) Sample Size

With the population of the study arrived at 84,608, the Sample Size Calculator as developed by the National Statistical Service of Australia (http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.nsf/pages/Sample+size+calculator) was used in determining the sample size for this study. With a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 0.05, the resulting figure of 383 formed the sample size for the study.

d) Sampling Technique

The quota sampling technique was then used to decide the number of respondent to be drawn from each of the three universities. Owing to the fact that FUTO has the least number of students, it was allotted 120 of the research instrument, NAU got 130 while 133 of the research instrument is to be administered in UNN.

e) Instrument for Data Collection

The questionnaire was used as the measuring instrument to get desired responses from the sample size surveyed. The questionnaire came in Sections A and B. Section A contains list of questions on the demographic characteristics of the audience such as gender, age, educational qualification, occupation and marital status. To get the psychographic data, Section B had questions based on each of the research objectives, meant to draw out responses from respondents which can help in addressing the research problem. However, there were specific questions asked to elicit response from the research subject regarding a particular research question.

f) Validity and Reliability

The measuring instrument used in this study evaluates what it is meant to measure and would consistently yield the same answer, baring the vicissitude of human response to issues. The reliability of the instrument stems from it containing structured questions that amply address the research problem and covers the scope of study. This researcher can also vouch for the validity of the instrument because the questions contained therein were all woven around the three research questions of this study.

g) Method of Data Analysis

The researcher used quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis to present and analyze data gathered from the field. This was done through the use of tables of frequencies and percentages. Sentences were also used to buttress whatever data is contained in the tables.

IV. Presentation of Findings

Before going into the presentation of findings, proper, it needs to be pointed out that of all the 383 questionnaires distributed in deference to the sample size, two were unaccounted for. It was also discovered that three others were not properly filled which invalidates the three. Less this number (5), the researcher was left with 378 questionnaires from which to get findings. The 378 responses are presented below in tables of frequencies and percentages.

Table 1: Respondents Demographic Characteristics

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	218	58
Female	160	42
Total	378	100
Age group		
18 – 24	140	37
25 – 30	160	42
31 – 35	57	15
36 – 40	21	6
Total	378	100
Marital status		
Single	295	78
Married	83	22
Total	378	100
Educational attainment		
SSCE	175	46
Diploma/NCE	63	17
BA	85	22

MA	55	15
Total	378	100
University		
UNN	132	35
NAU	127	34
FUTO	119	31
Total	378	100

This table on the demographic characteristics of the respondents shows that while the males made up 58 per cent, females represented 42 per cent. It also shows that respondents within the age group of 25 to 30 were in the majority raking up 42 per cent, this was followed by those between the ages of 18 to 24 who constituted 37 per cent while respondents in the category of 31 to 35 were 15 per cent and the age group of 36 to 40 had the remaining 6 per cent.

As regards marital status, majority of the respondents (78 per cent) were shown in the table to be single while the remaining 22 per cent of the respondents were married. It was also discovered that 46 per cent of the respondents have SSCE as their highest educational attainment; they were followed by those with Bachelors degree who constituted 22 per cent. Respondents with Diploma and NCE added up to 17 per cent while those with a Masters degree take the remaining 15 per cent. In terms of location, 35 per cent of the respondents were in UNN, respondents studying at NAU made up 34 per cent while those in FUTO constituted the remaining 31 per cent.

Table 2: Reading of comments posted in message boards of online newspapers

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Read comments online?		
Yes	285	76
No	91	24
Total	378	100
Frequency of reading comments?		
Most times	50	18
Rarely	104	36
Every time	83	29
Sometime	48	17
Total	285	100

This table summarises the response to the first research question of this study. It can be seen that as much as 76 per cent of the respondents voted that read comments succeeding stories posted on online newspapers. The remaining 24 per cent however stated that they do not read such comments. Respondents who said they read comments were in another question in the questionnaire asked how often they read users' reactions to news stories and it was found that respondents who read comments most times were 18 per cent, those who rarely read were 36 per cent, respondents who read comments every time were 29 per cent while those who sometime go through readers' reactions to online stories make up the remaining 17 percent.

Table 3: Readers of digital newspapers' use of the comment box adjourning online contents to express their thoughts

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Ever posted comments online?		
Yes	171	45
No	207	55
Total	378	100
Frequency of posting online comments?		
Every time	41	24
Most time	26	15
Sometime	49	29
Rarely	55	32
Total	171	100

Just 45 per cent of respondents say the use the message board in posting online comments, the remaining 55 per cent of respondents say they do not do this. In a bid to know how regularly online users post comments through the bulletin board, it turned out that 24 per cent of them do this every time, 15 per cent

others post comments most time, respondents who some time post comments on the same web page with a story are 29 per cent while 32 per cent of them say they rarely do this.

Table 4: The kind of comments posted by users of digital newspapers on the reaction box attached to news stories on online pages

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Comments you find online ...		
Relates to the story	110	39
Advertises idea, services	70	24
Replies an earlier comment	80	28
Criticises the reporter/makes clarification	25	9
Total	285	100
Comments you post online...		
Pertain to the story	70	41
Advertise idea, services	41	24
Reply an earlier comment	38	22
Appraise the reporter/make clarification	22	13
Total	171	100

Two questions from the questionnaire effectively answer the third research question and they were captioned in this table showing that 39 per cent of the respondents who had said they read online comments (285) voted that users' reactions to online stories are related to the news story in question. This was followed by 28 per cent of the respondents who held that reactions to online reports they come across are replies to earlier comments made by users, 24 per cent others believe that those who post on the message board of web pages of online newspapers only advertises idea, goods and services, while only 9 per cent of the respondents find comments on online newspaper stories as criticising the reporter or making clarification on the news report in question.

In a bid to validate this finding, the question 'If you answered yes to question 6, what kind of reactions do you post on the message board after reading an online story?' was posed and it was found, as captured in the table above, from those who said they post reactions to online newspapers, (171), that 41 per cent of them post comments that pertain to the story. Next to this are respondents (24 per cent) who admitted that they use the comment box on web pages to advertise an idea, goods or services. While 22 per cent of the respondents use the message board to reply an earlier comment made by user on a story, 13 per cent of the respondents said they use the comment plug-in to apprise the author of the story or make clarification about the information contained in the report.

Table 5: Ease of posting reactions to stories published on web pages?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Do you consider posting of online reactions easy?		
Yes	168	44
No	210	56
Total	378	100
Preferred position of the comment box		
Immediately after the story	150	40
After the headline	30	8
After the lead paragraph	80	21
Middle of the story	118	31
Total	378	100

From this table, it can be seen that majority of respondents, up to 56 per cent, do not think that posting reactions using the comment box on digital newspapers' pages is easy. They were however countered by the 44 per cent who voted to say that it is easy posting comments on the message board of online newspapers. To squarely tackle the research question, the respondents were asked 'Where should the comment box be sited on the web pages of online newspapers to make it easy/easier for you to post reactions?' and it turned out that majority of them (40 per cent) still preferred the current location of

immediately after the story. However, a significant number of the respondents (31 per cent) want to be able to post their comment in the middle of the story, 21 per cent others want the message board situated after the lead paragraph, while a minute 8 per cent would prefer posting their comment immediately after the headline or caption.

a) Discussion of Findings

The findings above expose whether students of universities in the South-East, while consuming online news reports also read the comments on the same web page with the news stories, it brought to the fore whether the university students in the geopolitical zone use the comment box adjourning online comments to express their thoughts. Aside revealing the kind of comments users of digital newspapers post on the message board adjourning stories, the findings also unearthed whether it is easy or not for users to post comments on the web pages of online newspapers.

RQ1: Do users of online newspaper contents read comments on the same web page with news stories?

Most of the respondents answered in the affirmative to this research question. With 76 per cent of them (n= 285) saying that do read comments on the same web pages with news stories, it then becomes safe to posit that this is what obtains and also validates the postulation of Okunna (1999, p. 115) that, "This is one way in which the mass media help in the formation of public opinion, which is made up of what the majority of people in a society think about a particular issue of public importance. The mass media make it possible for people to know what others are thinking and saying about issues of importance".

Taking into consideration the assertion by Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p. 178) that through the discussions carried out by online community of media audience using the comment plug-in "others who are not members of such community also benefit", this finding has then gone to show that most users of digital newspapers "benefit" by reading online comments. All this effectively fits into the Agenda-setting theory because readers practically see how the digital newspapers have given people what to talk about in the comment section. This goes a long way in affecting the importance readers attach to such issues. Lending credence to this finding is the study done by Edegoh, Ezeh & Samson (2015, p.68) on youths in Anambra State whose outcome was that 100 per cent of 294 respondents affirmed that they read newspapers regularly.

RQ2: Do users of online newspapers utilise the comment box adjourning online contents to express their thoughts?

It was found that majority of users of online newspapers, up to 55 per cent, do not take advantage of the comment plug-in provided in digital newspapers to express their thoughts. Only 45 per cent (n=171) were found to be doing that. Even out of this figure, 32 per cent said they rarely use the message board on web pages to post comments. This may not be unconnected with the novelty of comment plug-in on digital newspapers. As at thirteen years ago, Folayan (2004, p. 63) discovered that the web version of Guardian newspaper, which is one of the most popular newspapers in Nigeria, does not have discussion or news groups and also found out that "the online Guardian site has no public bulletin board for posting messages... there are opinion polls that allow users to vote on topical issues".

That 55 percent of respondent do not get interactive on online newspapers means that these yardsticks: proximity, sensory activation, perceived speed and telepresence identified by Kiousis (2002) in Wogu (2009, p. 157) were not met. However, the 45 per cent of respondents who post comments using the message board on web pages cannot be ignored and they are the ones whose activities have been captured by the democratic-participant theory and who were said by Barker & Sadaba (2008, p. 88) in Ganiyu (2011, p. 127) to have gone beyond being mere viewers, listeners, or readers into getting involved in the creation of contents.

RQ3: What kind of comments do users of digital newspapers post on the reaction box attached to news stories on online pages?

For this research question, it was found that while 39 per cent of the comments read by online newspaper users relate to the stories they are adjoining, 41 per cent of respondents say the comments they post on the message board have a direct bearing on the story in question. These constitute the majority in two questions asked in that wise in the questionnaire. This makes the position of Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p. 178) that "the audience members are able to connect on the stories or issues and even discuss among themselves... They discuss media contents among themselves" to hold water.

While it was also found that there are users who make good use of the message board by appraising the reporter as well as making clarifications on the information presented in the story, there are those who use the comment plug-in to reply an earlier comment or advertise idea, goods and services. Little wonder Taiwo George of The Cable said his medium refused to publish inappropriate comments that propagate hate speeches and fraudulent messages such as "Customs is auctioning cars" and "Cheat MTN". However users who post comments that relate to the story or appraise the reporter and make clarifications to the information contained in reports are those being covered by the democratic-participant theory as active partners in the

creation of contents and not just a mere object of the information dished out by media organizations.

RQ4: How easy is it for users of online newspapers to post reactions to stories published on web pages?

The finding in this regard is that as much as 56 per cent of respondents believe that the process of posting reactions to stories published on web pages is still not easy. This negates the view by Talabi that users of online newspapers are "armed with easy-to-use web publishing tools..." but finds justification in George's assertion that the online newspaper he edits has "failed more than 200,000 comments in three years and we are glad that those who want to post inappropriate comments now know that The Cable is the wrong choice".

Sensing that this may not be the only reason why users do not think that posting reactions to online stories is easy, they were asked their preferred location for the comment box and 40 per cent of the total number of respondents wants the message board retained in the extant position of immediately after the story. But if one takes into consideration that 60 per cent of the total number of respondents wants the comment plug-in sited immediately after the headline, the lead paragraph or the middle of the story, it gives an indication that the placement of the message board is a reason why some lazy readers think that posting comments to online news stories is not easy. This is bearing in mind the assertion by Dominick (2002, p. 343) in Nwabueze (2015, p. 155) that "Research has indicated that many readers don't like to scroll down through stories". By stating that "the audience could send feedback immediately after consuming the content or while still consuming it" Ufuophu-Biri (2013, p. 178) may have seen the possibility of situating the comment box within, not immediately after the story.

V. Conclusion

Communication has been defined as the sending and receiving of messages by one or more persons through a channel with some effect and opportunity for feedback. Ndolo & Ekwueme (2013, p. 15) wrote that "to communicate basically means to share ideas, information, opinion, feelings or experiences between people. The basis of communication is sharing or exchanging between people i.e. establishing common ground with another person or group". Going by these definitions of communication, it then means that the publishing of stories by online newspapers can only become an act of communication when there is feedback. It is this very important feedback function that completes the communication process by digital newspapers that this paper has laboured to explore.

The comment plug-in has become a major component of web pages because of the need for a

feedback, which has comparatively become quite easy to carry out unlike what obtained in the hay days of the hardcopy newspaper. The message board are there in digital newspapers to enable communication among readers as well as communication between the editorial staff of a particular medium and its readers. It is on this basis that the user of the online newspaper is seen as being involved in the creation of content which gives life to the democratic-participant theory of the press. Indeed, the comment box allows the readers of online newspapers respond to the agenda already set by the medium by virtue of the published story.

This work restricted itself to online stories that have a public affairs slant because it is through such reports and the accompanying reactions from readers that political participation can be deepened. As such, the feedback is not only advantageous to the media organisations but equally provides those in authority an avenue to feel the pulse of the citizenry on issues of governance reported by the media. This would then mean that the media is not alone in holding the government accountable but the citizens have joined in as well through the instrumentality of the comment plug-in. But all these become possible and effective when the feedback mechanisms of online newspapers are optimised and not abused.

VI. Recommendations

In view of the need to enhance the interactivity of online newspapers which is greatly assisted by the comment plug-in that is now a regular feature of web pages, the following recommendations become necessary:

a) Online newspapers must do more in making it easier for their readers to be able to post reactions to stories; even if this means doing away with any form of registration such that the only thing users are required to do is just to type reactions on the box, add a name and post.

b) There is the need for the digital newspapers to encourage their readers to comment on stories through their style of writing. Without compromising the seriousness with which news stories are written, reporters and editors can still adopt a conversational tell-a-friend style which would ordinarily present avenues for readers to latch on to in doing an immediate riposte.

c) Users of online newspapers must develop the discipline and patience of reading through a story so as to be able to make relevant and intelligible contributions to the discourse that follows. They must not jump into posting their comments just on the basis of the headline or the lead paragraph of the story. They must also temper their language so as to engender a decent conversation on the web pages.

d) Advertisers and other stakeholders must stop basing the popularity of an online medium on the number of comments stories on that medium generate. This can make online newspapers lower the standards and allow all manner of comments which will not bode well for the society and the intellectual discourse that should be going on in the comment section of digital newspapers.

e) Government also has a role to play in the optimisation of the feedback mechanism of online newspapers by allowing freedom of expression so that users are not hounded by security agents on account of the comments they posted on digital newspapers' sites in reaction to government policies and programmes. They must also improve the electricity situation in the country so that readers do not get discouraged from visiting online news sites, reading stories to the very end and posting their reactions because the batteries of their devices and gadgets are without charge.

f) Public officials are well advised to make it a point of duty to regularly visit the comment sections of online newspapers so that they can read through people's reaction to what they (the government officials) are doing. That way, they would keep abreast of public opinion.

g) The data service providers operating in the country should make broadband service available across the country and make same reliable so that subscribers are not prevented from reading an entire story or posting their reaction because of a buffering network. The relevant agencies of government should prevail on the service providers affordable to virtually every citizen. There should not be a case of people being denied their right to being heard just because they cannot afford the cost of being heard.

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