

AN ASSESSMENT OF FACT-CHECKING TOOLS ADOPTION BY SELECT SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN RIVERS STATE**Okeh Azubuike PhD¹, Ogori Pererich Faith M.², And Elijah Nteiro T³***baiky_zed@yahoo.com, 08055057994¹**faithyjesusbaby@gmail.com, 08035473606²**elyonprecept@gmail.com, 08036727086³***Department of Mass Communication****Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Rivers State****Abstract**

Journalism as a public service institution, requires total commitment to true, fair, trustworthy and objective reportage, to achieve this, reporters and editors require patience, hard work and tenacity. Fact-checking therefore becomes a deliberate editorial task aimed at ensuring correctness of facts in news reports. The overall intention is to ensure that Journalism retains its stamp of quality. In 2024, UNESCO reported that a majority of social media influencers around the world did not verify information before sharing with their audiences. This is a problem that necessitated the conduct of this study, which sought to identify the fact-checking tools being adopted by Rivers State-based social media influencers and how the adoption of such tools has affected the quality of their reports. Being a study that sought to determine the use of fact-checking tools in the news process, the Social Responsibility Theory was most suitable as its theoretical thrust. Relevant literature material bothering on fact-checking, ethics, quality content and social media were leveraged to provide secondary data for the study. The study adopted the qualitative survey design. Purposive sampling was used to determine the sample size while Focus Group Discussion was used to generate reactions from participants who were mainly Chief Executive Officers of ten Rivers State-based social media platforms. Data analysis was done using the Glaser and Strauss Constant Comparative Technique, which facilitated formal identification of themes and construction of meanings out of the responses suggested by the data. The study showed that the social media influencers that participated in the study did not believe in fact-checking to boost trust and confidence, a few that carried out fact-checking on their reports, did not have knowledge of digital verification tools, and only used physical methods such as community note and official position. The study recommended that fact-checking should be a compulsory part of the training for Journalists and other public information providers, and that social media influencers should be more deliberate about the use of fact-checking tools in their content creation.

Keywords: Fact-checking, Fact-checking Tools, Influencers, Social Media.**Background to the Study**

In journalism and other genres of human communication, it is critical to ensure correctness of facts and accuracy in the information being disseminated. When messages are inaccurate and lacking in true information, they lose trustworthiness and the source loses credibility. So, it is important for content creators to be deliberate about cross checking their facts to ensure accuracy and truthfulness in their contents before publishing. Fact-checking has become an enduring part of a journalist's duty because of its ability to influence quality and credibility in content delivery. Although technology is hugely responsible for the proliferation

of doubtful contents by the media, especially by online content creators, it has also provided tools to filter truth from falsehood. Newsroom players, especially reporters and editors adopt a variety of tools such as satellite images, reverse image, data analysis, community notes, official position among others to carry out fact-checking in their reports in order to ensure truth, authenticity, fairness, accuracy and objectivity.

In mainstream Journalism, fact-checking is hugely gaining popularity, many reporters painstakingly examine facts, statements and claims, and go a step further to analyse the credibility of sources and materials before drawing conclusions on their usability. Fact checking is necessary albeit rigorous, it ensures that content is accurate, and does not present false information that could attract legal consequences and fall fowl of truth which is journalism's prime ethic.

Social media influencers like other online contents creators are people who build a grassroots online presence through photos, news, videos among others. This category of players in the information process uses direct audience interaction to establish appeal, grow their platforms, and earn economic profitability.

A UNESCO study conducted between August and September 2024, reported that a majority of social media influencers do not verify information before sharing with their audiences. The study which surveyed 500 digital content creators with above 1,000 followers selected across 45 countries and territories, reported that some of the biggest online contents creators can uncritically spread misleading claims.

According to Ekezie (2025) many online contents creators are in a hurry to publish, their major interest is to earn hits on their handle and make profits, they hardly verify facts before publishing. He insists that online contents are seriously losing taste and trust because many content creators are targeting to attract traffic, instead of feeding the public with quality and objective information.

Journalism requires total insistence on delivering true, fair, objective and trustworthy reports, achieving this requires patience, hard work and tenacity. It requires painstaking efforts to check and recheck in order to avoid misleading information.

As reported by UNESCO and Ekezie, the failure of many current active players in the information process to adhere to Journalism's ethical demand for truth, is a challenge to human communication, and an issue that makes this study worthwhile.

The study therefore aimed to ascertain the following;

1. Determine how Rivers State-based social media influencers have utilised fact-checking tools in their content creation.
2. Identify the tools being adopted by Rivers State-based social media influencers in carrying fact-checking on their contents.

Consequently, the study asked the following questions.

1. What are the fact-checking tools adopted by Rivers State-based social media influencers in creating their content?
2. How has fact-checking tools adoption improved content creation and enhanced traffic in news platforms operated by Rivers State-based social media influencers?

Geographically, the study is delimited to social media influencers operating within Rivers State, South-South Nigeria. The study thematically looked at how Rivers State-based social media influencers have adopted and utilised extant fact-checking in their content creation process.

Operational Definition of Keyword

Social Media: Online platforms or digital systems that allow people to form networks, share information, ideas and interconnect virtually.

Influencers: Individuals who have the ability to affect the decision of others following their knowledge, authority, position or relationship with the people.

Fact-checking: To verify the veracity or accuracy of a claim with the aim of preventing misinformation or disinformation.

Fact-checking Tool: Analogue or digital devices that can be used to verify the accuracy of information.

Theoretical Anchorage

This study is theoretically anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory.

In their book titled: "Four theories of the Press", Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, posited that absolute libertarianism had become antiquated, outdated and obsolete. This paved way for the replacement of Libertarian Theory with the Social Responsibility theory.

Being one of the normative theories of the press, the Social Responsibility Theory gives room for a free press but not without responsibility, obligation and self-regulation. It is at the heart of media ethics, and supports a media system that promotes responsible journalism.

Fact-checking is a deliberate effort to ensure correctness of facts which are the ingredients of a news report, the intention is present a fair, authentic and trustworthy report to the public, for a study that seems to determine the use of fact-checking tools in the news process, the choice of the Social Responsibility Theory is most essential.

Conceptual Review:

Fact-checking, Source Credibility and Quality Content Delivery

The need to confirm the veracity of the information being posted on the web has become more critical as more lay citizens take up roles in the news process through available online windows. With technology, news now travels in seconds compressing spaces to hit consumers in locations very far-flung from the source. So, fact-checking which used to be a back-room product of conventional journalism has become a front-line duty aimed at building credibility and tackling the plague of misinformation (Chan, Jones, Hall, and Albarracín, (2017).

According to Jarman (2016), fact-checking deals hugely with finding the truth around arguments, photos, videos, and statistics before they are published. Although a technical and somewhat painstaking exercise, fact-checking is a moral duty an information carrier owes the receiver.

Jarman asserts that purveyors of public information are duty bound to exude ethical marksmanship when the information is capable of promoting polarization of opinion, threat

to public safety and social rift. He insists that fact-checking has become a crucial skill in media practice, be it the dismantling of doctored images or ensuring accuracy of reference to quotes and figures.

Also discussing fact-checking and credibility, Kearney (2017) says that fact-checking has become an enduring form of journalism that is capable of influencing public discussion, and a counter false content especially on social media platforms. It is the opinion of Kearney that false and misleading information is threatening democratic societies through political polarisation, decreased public trust toward news sources and in the plethora of ways in which social media and artificial intelligence have accelerated information creation and content dissemination.

Kim, Moravec and Dennis (2019) holds that, fact-checking remains a vital way to promote trust in media sources, it evaluates the truthfulness of public claims and other societally significant contents. They opined that there is need for rigour in undertaking fact-checking people who play roles in human information process.

Kim et al assert that the prevalent lack of rigorous critical evaluation of information highlights an urgent need to enhance media content creators' information literacy skills and fact-checking tools usage.

According to Milmo (2024), unlike trained journalists in the mainstream media who possess the skills and tools to assess the credibility of sources and verify facts, digital content creators such as social media influencers often lack formal training in such areas, a situation capable of leading to challenges in ensuring the accuracy of their contents.

Milmo is further of the opinion that online influencers generally do not rely on official sources of information, such as government-issued reports and documents, claiming that as digital influencers, they were only promoting "critical thinking and digital literacy" despite not engaging in thorough fact-checking or source evaluation.

Fact-checking, Ethics and Misinformation

Journalism is a public service institution that is strictly pegged on truth. Every other guideline about service delivery in journalism such as fairness, objectivity, trustworthiness, among others are derived from journalism's core focus on maintaining the truth at all times. News reports, photos, videos and other message types that are served the public will definitely lack truth or correctness of facts if news reporters, editors and other key players in the information process do not take deliberate steps to gather factual information and cross-check their facts before publishing.

Chan, Jones, Hall and Albarracín (2017) assert that, fact-checking is a very critical aspect of journalism that should not be taken for granted, and that truth which is journalism's prime ethic can only be achieved through consistent and rigorous fact-checking. They posit that journalism and communication generally will lose taste if its cardinal ethical principles are jettisoned for other factors.

While discussing about the techniques and tools that can be adopted for fact-checking, Wilson, Parker and Feinberg (2020) listed FactCheck.org, Google Reverse Image Search,

'InVID', Alt News Snopes and 'Politifact' as effective tools that can enable information purveyors to verify the veracity of their messages.

They stated that it is important for journalists to acquire the skills to trace the origin of content in order to identify manipulated contents. According to them, not all sources are equal, so fact-checking enables journalists to tackle misinformation and disinformation by assessing credibility and identifying agenda-driven misinformation.

Earlier, Herson (1995) had urged journalists to conduct real-time fact-checking on their reports because live debates and political speeches have become subject to real-time scrutiny. To effectively undertake this task, journalists should be equipped to verify claims on-the-go while maintaining accuracy and impartiality. According to Herson, being committed to rigorous fact-checking is an ethical responsibility, it will enthrone transparency on news copies and boost public trust.

Bennett, Lance, and Livingston (2018), holds that disinformation, also called fake news can be spread intentionally to manipulate public opinion while out-of-context reportage such as misinformation can be mistakenly as the truth and spread without the intent to deceive or mislead. So, to separate fact from fiction, news agencies, news aggregators and social media platforms should increasingly turn to fact-checkers to validate claims and counter-claims made by news sources.

Some professional journalists and communication scholars have reasoned that digital content creators bother more about their impact than they on their reporting.

This is perhaps the output of some news influencers does not reflect the kind of work that traditional reporters would recognise.

Fincham (2024) asserts that while trained mainstream journalists undergo the rigours of actually producing news contents that adhere to communication ethics, the digital influencer mostly subjectively talks about the content or provide their own, often partisan analysis of the events or occurrences. For example, Dylan Page, the young UK-based creator behind News Daddy on TikTok, describes his work as an effort to "revolutionise the way news is consumed", to him, the "consumed" is key, the page is not making the news, but he is changing the way audiences consume it, by packaging complex stories into short-form videos that are highly subjective and lacking in rigour.

Digital Contents Following: Beyond the Facts

As digital content creation and social media Influencing gain more grounds within the information process, questions are arising whether their driving force is to present correct facts to their audiences or to harness the economic benefits of being in the news business.

Karhawi (2023) writes that factual reporting is actually not the primary focus of digital influencers, and although some influencers may engage in factual reporting or fact-checking, the core of their focus revolves often around contents about lifestyle, entertainment, and promotion of products or services.

It is obvious that many influencers build their platforms around sharing aspects of their daily lives, personal interests' sentiments or providing entertainment that are majorly built around travel, fashion, beauty, fitness, or other niche topics.

Karhawi insists that the trust that social media influencers earn from their following or audience are drawn from the seemingly personal relationship they enjoy. "They feel like your friend, and appear authentic and more accessible than a suited-up newsreader behind a desk. But getting the news from influencers comes with risks"(p.125).

In their own reasoning, Vallas, Schor and Juliet (2020) Journalism has long defined itself by a series of norms and routines such as rigour, patience, tenacity, truth, objectivity, fairness among others, many social media influencers do not consider themselves journalists, and hardly share these ethical guideposts but instead post or share strictly information that build their online identity and community. Social media influencers typically offer their audiences commentary and opinion on their chosen subject matters, and present themselves as an alternative to mainstream media, which, they accuse of suppressing the truth.

According Vallas et al, with the constant changes in new media technology, social media platforms are fundamentally altering the dynamics of reach and influence in ways that are yet to be adequately comprehended. They believe that as more people depend on social media influencers for their daily news consumption, the tendency of circulating unverified reports will continue to be on the rise, and that this development will make assess to quality and reliable information more difficult.

Empirical Review

The UNESCO conducted a survey that lasted between August and September 2024, the study conducted by the UN agency's scientific and cultural arm, reported that a majority of social media influencers refused to verify information before sharing with their followers online

It further reported that some of the biggest online contents creators can uncritically spread misleading claims, and that 62 per cent of the creators surveyed in the study do not vet the accuracy of content before sharing it with their online audiences.

It said that about one-third of influencers admitted that they shared information without checking its validity and source credibility.

The UNESCO study which surveyed 500 digital content creators with above 1,000 followers across 45 countries and territories also reported that only 37 per cent of the study sample verified information with a fact-checking site before circulation

In assessing the popularity of unverified contents, and their effect on the society, the Pew Research Centre in a recent study found that almost 40 per cent of young Americans aged between 18 and 29 rely on influencers for their daily news consumption. And that more than half of American adults "at least sometimes" get their news from the social media.

The centre stated that unlike mainstream journalists who are often equipped with skills and tools to assess sources' credibility and verify facts, digital content creators often lack formal training in such areas, making it difficult for society to be served accurate and objective reports.

A global poll reported by Simpson (2019) which surveyed no fewer than 25,000 online users in 25 countries reported that 86 per cent of global online news consumers were exposed to disinformation or misinformation on social media platforms, news websites, YouTube and

television, and that almost nine in ten users initially believed such disinformation or misinformation to be true. The study concluded that online news content providers should be more deliberate about the veracity of the information they post to their followers.

It has continued to be said that the ever-growing world of digital content is posing a distinct problem to organisations across the globe. The reality is questioning how businesses can preserve their brand integrity and reputations in the face of online of contents.

An online technology company, Stackla Tech, conducted a study of customer shopping habits in 2023, and found that for 80 percent of customer user-generated content highly impacts their purchasing decisions, while 88 percent say the kind of authenticity that comes from online contents is important to them when they are deciding the brands to support. According to the study, online contents benefits brands only when they are true and reliable, and that not many online contents are negative and capable of is positive, and additional causing companies to lose patronage. It further reported that some 40 per cent of consumers will disengage from a brand community after any exposure an unreliable report about such brand.

Method

The study adopted the qualitative survey design. Purposive sampling was used to determine the sample size while Focus Group Discussions was adopted to generate reactions from participants who were mainly Chief Executive Officers of ten Rivers State-based social media influencers that manage online news platforms namely: theactivistmedia.com, spherewatch.com, thenewsonline.com, kristinareports.ng, newsnow.com, ripplesnigeria.com, legitnews.ng, intelregion.news.com and Portharcourtblog.com.

To ensure validity, the research instrument, Focus Group Discussion Guide was put to pre-validation test, while the data generated from the field were subjected to post data validation exercise using the member checking framework.

Data analysis was done using the Glaser and Strauss Constant Comparative Technique. The method enabled the researchers to formally identify themes and construct meanings out of the responses suggested by the data. This approach consists of three concurrent flow of activities such as data reduction, display and conclusion.

Data Presentation

A fact checking tools adopted by Rivers State social media based influencers for news report.

S/NO	PARTICIPANTS	FACT-CHECKING TOOLS	AGGREGATED ANALYSIS
1	Participant 1	Community Note	Very few of the participants have used community note and Official position methods to carry out fact-checking. Others have never used any fact-checking tool.
2	Participant 2	None	
3	Participant 3	None	
4	Participant 4	None	
5	Participant 5	Official Position	
6	Participant 6	None	
7	Participant 7	None	
8	Participant 8	None	
9	Participant 9	None	
10	Participant 10	Community Note	

When Social Media Influencers in Rivers State use Fact-Checking Tools.

S/NO	PARTICIPANTS	INSTANCES OF FACT-CHECKING TOOLS USED	AGGREGATED ANALYSIS
1	Participant 1	When we are not sure of the report	The social media influencers surveyed use fact-checking tools when the report is sourced online, sensitive, not directly covered, or controversial.
2	Participant 2	When the report was sourced online	
3	Participant 3	If we did not cover the story directly	
4	Participant 4	Not sure of when to do fact-checking	
5	Participant 5	When the story appears sensitive and controversial.	

The Social Media Influencers Conduct Fact-Checking on forwarded photos.

S/NO	PARTICIPANTS	TOOLS TO CHECK FORWARDED PHOTOS	AGGREGATED ANALYSIS
1	Participant 1	Reverse image search	Most of the social media influencers surveyed in the study have not used any digital fact-checking methods to verify photos.
2	Participant 2	None	
3	Participant 3	None	
4	Participant 4	None	
5	Participant 5	None	
6	Participant 6	None	

Results and Findings

From the data generated by the study, only a few of the social media influencers that were surveyed have utilised fact-checking tools in processing their contents. Most of the participants did not have any knowledge of extent fact-checking tools and did not know when it was necessary to conduct fact-checking on their reports.

The study concludes that it is important for the society to continue to support traditional media organisations and local newsrooms. It holds that although digital media may be engaging, they cannot necessarily replicate the rigour demonstrated in mainstream media Journalism.

According to the data, the study showed that the social media influencers that participated in the study did not believe in fact-checking to boost trust and confidence. The few that undertook fact-checking lacked knowledge of digital verification tools, and only used physical methods such as community note and official position.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and findings above, the study recommends that:

1. Fact-checking should be a compulsory part of the training for Journalists and other public information providers.

2. Social Media Influencers should be more deliberate about the use of fact-checking tools in creating their contents.
3. Social Media Influencers should adopt both physical and digital verification tools in processing their contents in order to ensure human moderation while ensuring reliability.

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