Fake news and the impact of its widespread among media consumers

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Abstract

The continuous spread of fake and ill-researched news content in today's media is quite alarming. Media consumers are often fed with fake news. The most worrisome part is that this unverified news is disseminated through popular social media platforms at lightning speed. They are consumed by millions of these innocent users, shared, commented, liked, uploaded in multiple channels. The most bothering aspect is at times we can see television channels broadcasting these unconfirmed content and hence being a parry to the promotion of fake news.

With this as background, the present research has been undertaken to study the rate at which fake content is being generated online. Having understood the very fact that fake content is rampant mostly on social media platforms especially in this 21st century, random selection of social media users in Bangalore constitutes the population of the study. The questionnaire method was used as the instrument of data collection and the result of the study revealed that fake news is mostly propagated through social media and it has a long lasting effect and impact on gullible social media users.

Keywords: Fake news, Social media, Media consumers.

Introduction:

The menace of fake news has long been in existence in the media world and it has been a major concern to professional media practitioners as it has indeed in no small measure dealt a great blow on the integrity of professionals on the field. The concept of Fake news could be explained as the step-by-step approach of making, generating, or copying other people's work, presenting the same as real news on social media platforms to get attention and also to realize the motive or agenda for which it was established. (https://w ww.cits.ucsb.edu)

The concept of fake media content has long existed in the global media space as Marcus and Joyce (1993) in their book said, "the menace is as old as the writing system itself."

The recent discussion explains the concept as controversial write-ups premised on tales designed or fine-tuned to look exactly like genuine news content. The duo of Gentzkow and Allcott (2017) said fake news "is news content that is deliberately untrue, generated to lead readers astray."

Also known as disinformation, Wardle (2017) said "it is the act of intentionally formulating and spreading information known to be untrue." A good example of this misleading information and fake news is the alleged presence of the deadly virus known as 'Zika' in the USA which led to a series of controversial activities online. Megha S., Kapil Y. et al. (2017), thought that controversial and false content gain more popularity than true posts disseminating correct information about the virus.

According to BBC news on 'Nationalism as a major propellant of false news in India' published in November 2018, it is believed that the major reason behind the propagation of false news by common people in the country is the quest for freedom and liberation. Though had been in existence long ago, the concept was as well believed to have gained more popularity at the wake-up event of the 2016 US Presidential election as it was believed that the current President of the United State won the 2016 election with the help of well propagated false news in the media space.

This has since made media scholars start looking at the capability of false news, and most importantly, its potentials in influencing electoral outcomes (Gentzkow, Allcott 2017).

Though over the years, the media most especially traditional media are seen as the best platform to consult when in search of authentic and genuine news, presently in the 21st century, the reversed seems to be the case especially with the heavy presence of web-based media as well as social media platforms which facilitate the sending, reception, uploading, sharing, liking, tweeting and retweeting of contents at a very high speed.

On the other hand, various attempts have been made by media scholars to explain Citizen Journalism. Bowman & Willis (2003), said, "it is the act of playing a definite role in the step-by-step approach involved in collating, presenting, and propagating news content by individual(s) to make available a piece of objective and reliable information though often without the professional experience on the field of journalism." Metzgar, Kurpuis, & Rowley (2011), see citizen journalism simply as "journalism at the grass-root aimed at filling the gap that cannot be filled by reporters in the mainstream media."

Most of the time the good intentions of citizen journalists are not disputed. They aim to report events and happenings at the grass root. In some cases, reporters and correspondents working for the mainstream media rely on them for firsthand information as they are often present at the scene, most often as an eye witness.

The major challenge of this kind of journalism and the purpose for which this research is conducted is the influx and great influence of pseudo citizen journalists whose dastard journalistic style of reporting which is most often plagued and filled with ill-researched content has since put a question mark on the activities of these passionate citizen journalists.

Pseudo Citizen Journalist in the context of this paper is someone who disguises as a news reporter or news anchor while nursing an ulterior motive(s) or agenda. They are often known for pseudo citizen journalistic style which is derogatory and lacks the professional journalistic ethics.

In a nutshell, fake news is primarily propagated by Pseudo Journalists with the use of online platforms, to deceive and mislead unsuspecting media consumers. Though some researchers reveal that Pseudo journalism to some extent is advantageous especially with regards to the 2016 US Presidential election as they argued that the activities of Pseudo journalists to a very large extent helped in influencing the voting decision of some electorates.

The report has it that a very good number of Americans were brainwashed with false stories before the election as the after-election survey revealed that a good number of the electorate who were brainwashed with these stories believed, accepting them as correct (Gentzkow and Allcott 2017; Guess et al. 2018). It has since been a heated argument among scholars as well as in the public space that fake stories were consequential in the 2016 US presidential election as it is said to have played an important part in securing the White House seat for the

present world leader but doubtlessly, the disadvantages far more outweigh whatever the advantages might seem to be.

Another historical background given to the concept of fake news was dated back to the "War of the Worlds", a radio program in America. Here, a 40-year old novel was converted into hoax news bulletins describing a Martian invasion of New Jersey which was said to be believed by some listening audience as factual news whose distress phone call to security agents, newspaper offices as well as radio stations brought conviction to journalists and media men that the show had caused a national outrage.

Theoretical Framework:

Magic Bullet Theory

Otherwise referred to as Hypodermic Needle Theory this theory was promulgated by Harold Lasswell (1920). The theory posits that consumers are homogenized when receiving information from the media. Here, the audience is seen as dummies who can't reason for themselves and take whatever the media pose to them. This theory is a proof to the scenario discussed in the last section of the introductory part of this paper about the outrage caused by the 1938 "war of the worlds."

The theory is best described as it is pronounced, "magic bullet". The media is seen as carrying a bullet that when shot at the audience, it enters and stays without any question. This theory best underlies this study as it examines how media consumers are being influenced by fake ill-researched content with any available media most especially social media.

Cultivation Theory

Introduced by George Gerbner (1998), the theory argues that media consumers are affected by whatever media contents to which they are exposed. As a matter of fact, according to the theory of cultivation, media consumers are immersed in what they see on the screen and the content they read in the papers which by implication will directly or directly start shaping their opinions and beliefs towards these content.

This theory well underlies the study as the fact remains that media consumers will have their perspectives changed due to the large consumption of these content just as it was evident in the 2016 US Presidential election which remains a controversy till today in the global media space.

Literature Review:

The following work will be reviewed:

Trends in the Diffusion of Misinformation on Social media:

This work as conducted by Allcott H, Gentzkow M, (2018) considers the various paths in the spread of false news otherwise referred to as fake news. The study shows the concern about the increase in the spread of the plaque-like menace and how it has done no good whatsoever to societies and the existing democratic social institutions.

It measures trends in the spread of contents from specific websites known for the propagation of false news as well as fake content on selected social media platforms from January 2015 to July 2018. The result indicated that reading, sharing, tweeting, and re-tweeting of false content on the selected Social Media Platforms (Facebook and Twitter respectively) was on the high side especially towards the end of 2016 which coincidentally is the same period with the 2016 US Presidential election.

The researchers did not consider the rate at which contents are being re-transmitted by the electorates as it had its major focus on the rate at which these contents are consumed and not re-transmitted. This current paper will look at the rate at which the contents are being re-transmitted in the form of sharing and re-tweeting as the case may be.

Combating Fake News: A Survey on Identification and Mitigation Techniques

This study was conducted by Karishma Sharma, Feng Qian, (et al 2019). The survey describes the current challenge posed by fake news, highlighting the various issues to which it is associated. The researchers discussed the methods suitably applicable to both identifying and fighting against the menace stating the merits as well as demerits of each method.

Moreover, comprehensive compilation and summary of the characteristics features of available datasets were done but no effort was made to measure the rate at which social media users are being influenced by these widely circulated media content, this present study will bridge this gap as efforts will be made to measure the rate at which social media users are being influenced by these widely circulated media contents.

Automatic Deception Detection: Methods for Finding Fake News

Niall J. Conroy et al as the author of this research, the paper has its central focus on the mechanisms through which the activities of pseudo-journalists as being perpetrated through the available web-based media could be drastically reduced especially with the use of 21st century aided machines. It suggests strong networking as the only panacea that could help in reducing the rate at which fake news is being circulated.

The spread of fake news by social bots

The study was done by Chenge S. Glovanni L. et al (2017) and it sets to understand the level at which fake news is being spread by social bot. A social bot is a 21st-century web-based agent, technologically designed to interact with humans. It is as well made in such a way that it could influence people's opinions and perspectives on ideologies.

The study made the analysis of millions of messages circulating on Twitter both during as well as after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It was revealed that social bot is very instrumental in the circulation of fake news. And that active accounts spreading the analyzed fake content are significantly more likely to be social bots.

This paper under review is perfectly in line with the current research as the researchers dealt with the extent at which content is generated, rebroadcast and the rate at which consumers are being influenced by these widely generated and circulated contents especially concerning the 2016 U.S Presidential election, the findings of this study will serve as one of the bedrocks for the current research.

The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 20l6

The research as carried out by Lei G, Chris J, and Michelle A. (2017), examines the ability of false news in influencing consumers' agendas revealing the level at which media consumer's reasoning and behavior could be influenced by fake news. It conducted an analysis of the online media landscape between 2014 and 2016. The result however confirms the fact that news emanating from fake news sites has a high ability in making an issue popular bringing it into the limelight as it gradually shapes and influences the agenda of media consumers.

Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective

The study as carried out by Kai S., Amy S. et al. (2017) presented the best approach for identifying fake content on social media platforms. To facilitate well-conducted research on this topic, the scholars utilized the qualitative research approach, and findings from data collated online indicate that a larger percentage of media consumers get media content on the social media order than the traditional news media.

It concludes that social media has been instrumental in the circulation of fake news, with long-lasting implications on users as well as the community as a whole.

Fake News: A Survey of Research, Detection Methods, and Opportunities.

This study was conducted by Xinyi Z., Reza Z. (2018) and is centered on the menace of fake news as it focuses on the concept from four different perspectives which include: the fake knowledge it conveys, the presentation technique, the method of circulation as well as the integrity of its initiators and disseminators. The study utilizes theories cutting across various disciplines to enhance in-depth research in the interdisciplinary concept. The study utilizes the qualitative approach and reviewed the characteristics of fake news in the existing research papers about this concept focusing mainly on fake news from four aspects as stated in the above paragraph.

The findings of the study reveal that social media handlers are the most instrumental in spreading the dastard plague of false news as they are capable of engaging in its propagation through diverse means some of which include: sharing, forwarding, liking, retweeting, etc.

Fake news game confers psychological resistance against online misinformation

The research conducted by Jon R. Sander V. (2019) set out to address the widespread of online misinformation which was said to have since posed a grievous challenge to countries across the globe. To do this, the scholars made an internet facilitated game where participants are designed to act as initiators of false content.

The game helped in cautioning as well as familiarizing media consumers with the techniques adopted in generating false content and as well went a long way in making them discern between real and fake news.

The study utilizes the qualitative approach and about 1500 participants constitute the study population. The result of the study indicates that media consumers have the capability of identifying and ignoring fake content regardless of their societal, educational, or economic status.

Fake News and Social Media: Indian Perspective

This paper as written by Aasita B. & Prathik D. (2019) studied how the propagation of fake news has disrupted the 1ndia public sphere. The duo in their research as well considered the possible policies that could be implemented to curtail the plague of false content. The interconnectedness between various events of violence as reported in India media and the roles of fake news is causing crises are also extensively discussed in this paper.

Though the researchers do not state in clear terms the research approach used but findings of the study indicate that media consumers have become so vulnerable to fake news as a result of the fact that they are ignorant of the dangers inherent in it. They rather develop a deeper interest in the extensive consumption of social media content emphasizing their fundamental rights and claiming democratic participation.

Also based on findings, the scholars discovered that the social media platforms are not being regulated and thereby concluded that, "there is little importance given to the awareness of regulating content on social media."

New Social Media and Impact of Fake News on Society

Kuldeep N. (2018) conducted this research to analyze the current issues about fake news as well as its implication(s) on the society especially as it is being conveyed with the help of the web. The scholar used the local approach of analysis in studying the recent development of the dastard act.

The fact that social media has become so popular in the last 20 years made it an avenue of analysis in this paper with the use of big data analytics. The study finds out that though social media is also strong and instrumental in the circulation of fake news as it has since become a powerful tool most especially in the hands of pseudo citizen journalists, a substantial number of countries across the continents of the world (India inclusive) are still so much glued with the traditional media. The scholar argued that the menace of fake news would have escalated by the year 2020 and as matter of fact, his proposition is becoming a reality and this is the purpose for which this present research is set out.

Research Objective

This study is premised on the following research objectives:

To understand the rate at which news contents are being generated on social media

To assess the rate at which social media-generated news contents are being rebroadcast

To know the extent to which social media users are being influenced by social media-generated news content.

Research Methodology:

The present research adopted a quantitative research method. A structured questionnaire was distributed among 102 respondents residing in Bangalore. Convenient random sampling was used to select a sample from the population. The data was classified, codified, and analyzed by using a simple percentage method followed by an interpretation, and then the conclusion was drawn.

Data Analysis

This section reveals responses of the respondents to items on section A and B of the questionnaire. Data generated through the administration of copies of questionnaires on 102 respondents were presented as they appeared on the questionnaire.

Demographic Data

This section reveals the responses of the respondents to section A of the questionnaire.

**Pie chart showing age distribution of respondents**

It was observed that 41% of the respondents were within the age groupings of 15 to 20 years, 48% are within the age grouping of 21 to 25 years, 8% are within the age groupings of 26 to 30, 2% are within the age grouping of 31 and above while 1% is 42 years.

Pie chart showing gender distribution of respondents
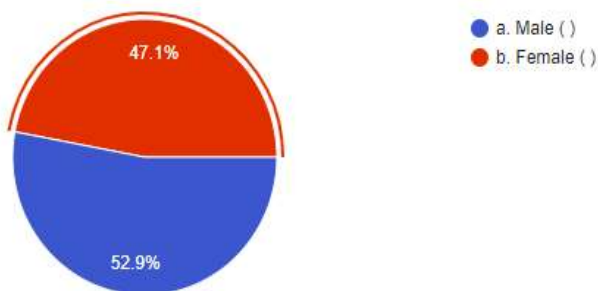
The result revealed that 47.1% of the respondents are female while 52.9% are male.

Pie chart showing education qualification of respondents
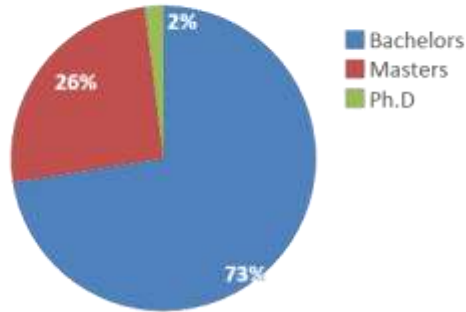
On the basis of the education qualification of respondents, 72% are bachelors holders, 26% are masters holders, while the remaining 2% are holders of Ph.D.

Research Data:

This section presents analyses of responses of respondents to section B of the questionnaire.

Are you a regular Social Media user?
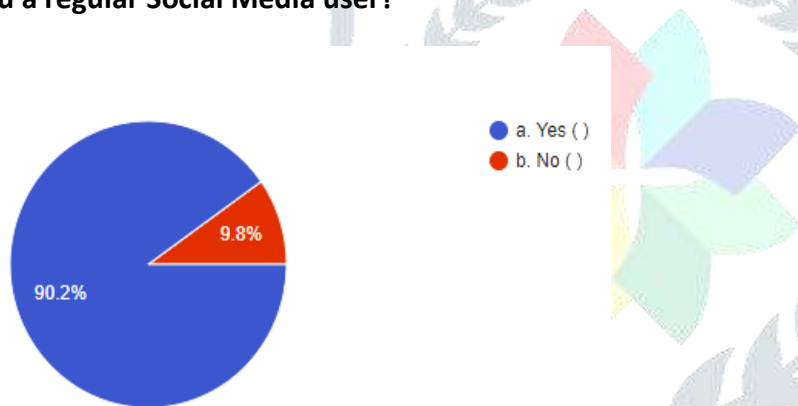
Result stating if respondents are regular Social Media user

The result indicates that the majority of the respondents make use of Social Media regularly. This is such that 90.2% (92 respondents) confirmed it while only 9.8% (10 respondents) indicated that they are not regular users of Social Media.

Which social media platform(s) do you most often use?
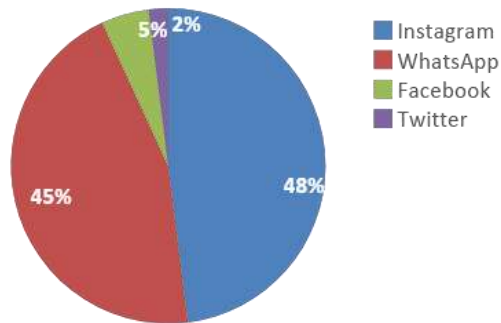
**Result stating which social media is most often used by respondents**

In the result, responses show that most respondents most often make use of Instagram as 48% of the respondents which constitutes 49 out of the 102 respondents attested to this, WhatsApp users constitute 45% which represents 46 respondents, Facebook users constitute 5% which represents 5 of the respondents while just 2% which represent 2 of the respondents are Twitter users.

Are you used to generating news content on social media?
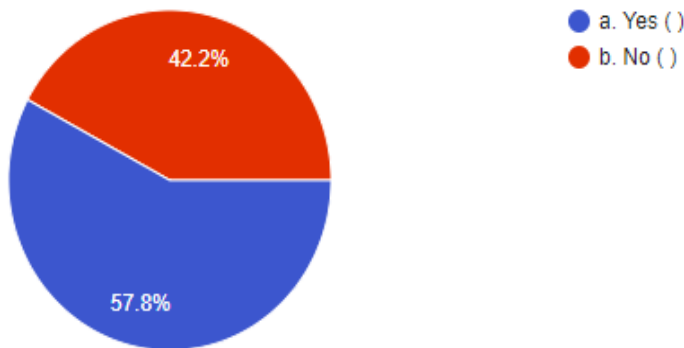
Result stating if respondents are used to generating news on social media

The above result as presented indicates the percentage of respondents that usually generate news on social media. 57.8% of the respondents indicate that they are used to generating news content on social media, this represents 59 respondents while 42.2% of the respondents' responses which represents 43 respondents said they don't usually generate content through social media. It shows that a good number of respondents usually generate content via social media platforms.

How often do you generate news content on your most often used social media platforms?
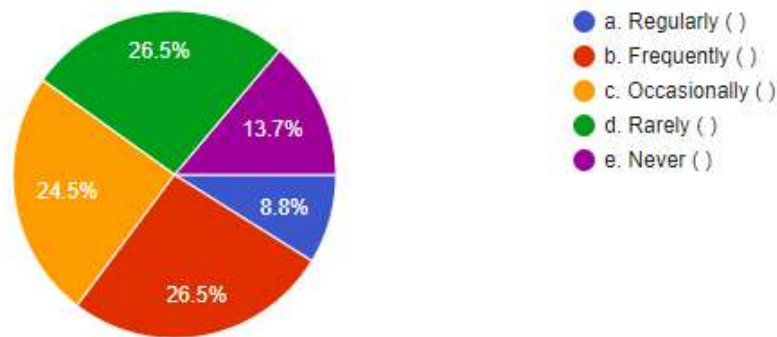
Result stating how often respondent generate news content on their most often used social media platforms

Above result indicates that 26.5% which represents 27 respondents rarely generate news on social media, another 26.5% which also represents 27 respondents frequently generate news on social media, 24.5% which represents 25 respondents occasionally generates news content on social media, and 13.7% which represents 14 respondents indicate that they are not used to generating news through social media. Just 8.8% representing 9 respondents regularly generate news on social media. The result indicates that a limited number of respondents generate news content regularly on social media.

Are you acquainted with the concept of false information on social media platform(s)?
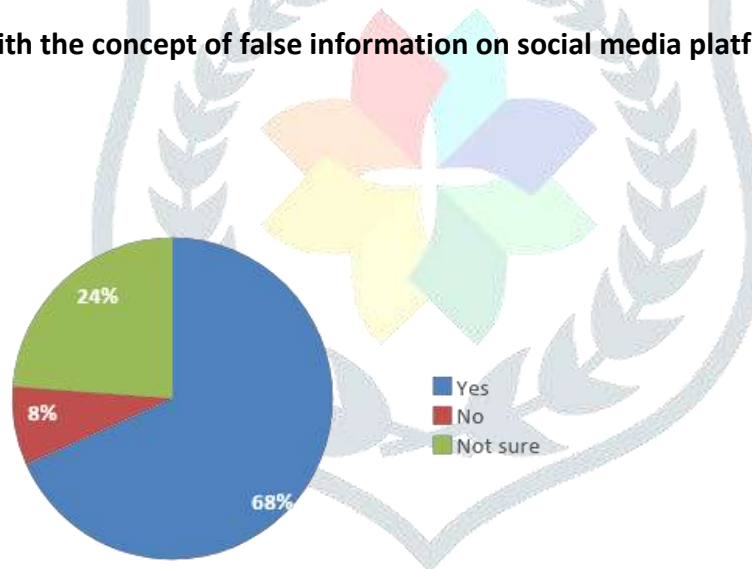
Result stating if respondents are acquainted with fake information concept on social media platform(s)

Findings reveal that 68% which represents 69 respondents are acquainted while 24% which represents 24 respondents said they are not sure, 8% which is 9 respondents said they are not in acquaintance with the concept on social media. The results indicate that the majority of the respondents are acquainted with the concept of false information as being circulated through social media.

What would you do if you come across fake news?
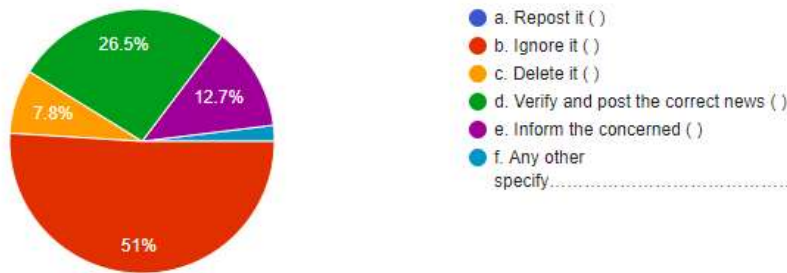
**Result stating what respondents would do if they come across fake news**

The result indicates that 51% which represents 52 respondents will ignore such news content, 26.5% which represents 27 respondents will verify and repost the news while, 12.7% which is 13 respondents said they will inform the concerned, 7.8% which represents 8 respondents said they will delete it. The results indicate that the majority will ignore false information whenever it comes their way while on social media. The remaining 2% did not give any specifications.

**How often do you repost social media generated news stories?**
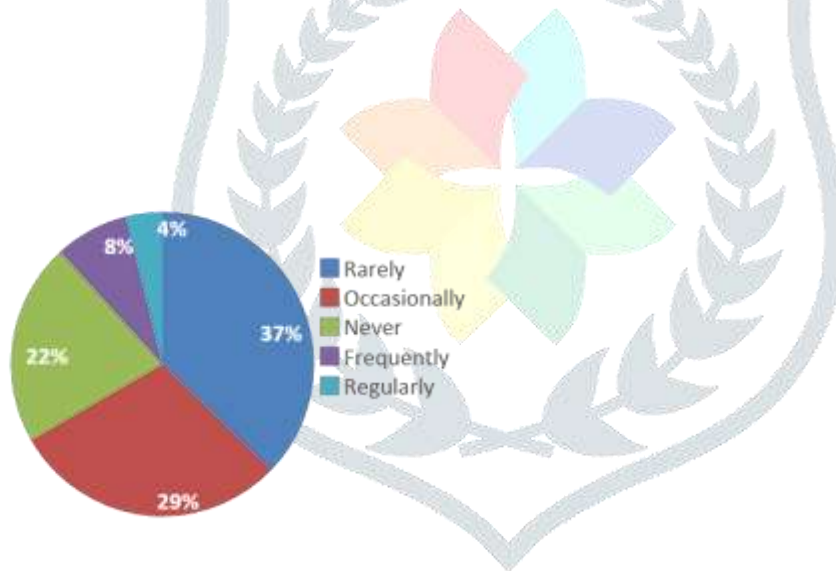
**Result stating how respondents repost the generated news content on social media**

The result indicates that 37% which represents 38 respondents rarely repost news content generated on social media platforms, 29% which represents 30 respondents occasionally repost news contents generated on social media platforms, 22% which represents 22 never repost social media generated news stories, 8% which is 8 respondents said they frequently repost social media generated content while only 4% which is 4 respondents said they regularly repost social media generated news content on another platform (s). The result indicates that the 2nd largest percentage of the respondents occasionally repost news generated via social media on other platforms.

Has social media-generated news content ever influenced your decision in any way?
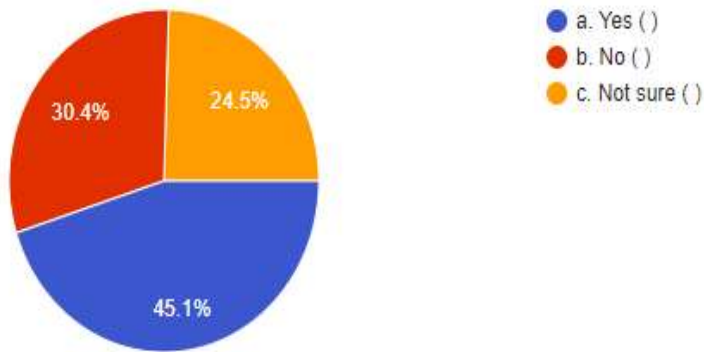
Result stating whether social media generated news content has ever influenced respondents' decision in any way.

The result indicates that 45.1% which represents 46 respondents has been influenced by such news content, 30.4% which represents 31 respondents said their decision has never been influenced by such news while 24.5% which represents 25 of the respondents said they are not sure. The result here indicates that the largest number of respondents are influenced by the news content on social media.

To what extent would you rate this influence if any?
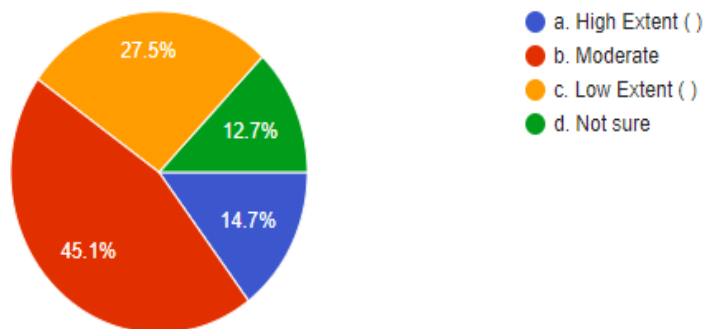
Pie chart showing results of what extent would respondents rate this influence if any

The result indicates that 45.1% which represents 46 respondents rate their level of influence as moderate, 27.5% which represents 28 respondents said it does to a low extent, 14.7% which represents 15 respondents said it does to a high extent while 12.7% which represents 13 respondents are not sure. The result indicates that a higher percentage of the respondents are influenced by social media news content to a moderate extent.

Do you agree that social media platforms are the best to consult when in search of factual news?
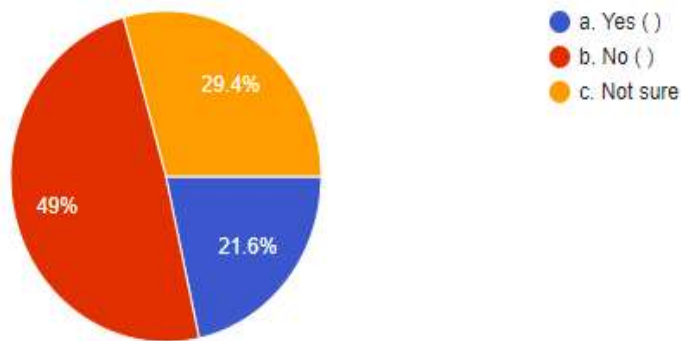
Result of respondents on whether social media platforms are the best to consult when in search of factual news

The results presented above indicate the response of respondents on their agreement that social media platforms are the best to consult when in search of factual news. The result indicates that 49% which represents 50 respondents are not in agreement with the assertion, 29.4% which represents 30 respondents said they are not sure while, 21.6% which is 22 respondents said social media platform is the best to consult to get factual news. The result indicates that the least percentage of respondents see social media as the platform to consult in getting factual news.

If yes, give a reason in one sentence and if no, give a reason in one sentence

The result indicates that 49% which represents 50 respondents are not in agreement with the assertion and they gave their reasons for the disagreement. These are some of their reasons: they are biased, it is the combination of different perceptions, some of them work in algorithms and information on social media has lots of loopholes. While 21.6% which is 22 respondents said social media platform is the best to consult to get factual news giving the following reasons; some pages may have right sources, it could be verified based on individual wishes, and verified content is available.

Summary of major findings:

Majority of the respondents regularly make use of the Social Media

The response of the majority indicates that they most often make use of Instagram

Majority's response reveals that they generate news on social media

Limited respondents generate content regularly via social media.

Respondents' majority are acquainted with the concept of fake content on social media.

The majority will ignore false content if seen on social media.

Respondents' large percentage occasionally repost social media generated news content.

The largest percentage of responses indicates that respondents are influenced by social media news content.

Responses reveal that social media content influences a higher percentage of the study population to a moderate extent.

Least percentage of respondents see social media as the best platform to consult in getting factual news

Conclusion and Recommendation:

In conclusion, the research paper discovers that though the percentage of the respondents influenced by fake news is low compared to those that are not influenced, the effort of the influenced set of people by fake news in reposting the news has done more harm than good to unsuspecting media consumers.

Moreover, the study indicates the efficacy and the potential power inherent in fake news with special recourse to the national outrage in 1938 occasioned by the "war of the worlds" this to a large extent is a pointer to the fact that fake news itself is more than enough to spark a national conflict.

Finally, this study has been able to come to the conclusion that social media is a strong instrument in the dissemination of fake news as it attracts more attention in form of likes, tweets, retweets, shares etc. as the case maybe in the respective social media platforms.

In light of the above, it is recommended that:

- Proactive measures should be taken to regulate social media content.
- Strong sanctions should be levied on anyone who violates the rules and regulations put in place to regulate social media content as this will doubtlessly serve as a deterrent for others.
- Consumers of social media content should not hesitate in using fake news detectors in order to validate the authenticity of any content before digesting or reposting the same.

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