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## **Perception of Government Communication on Online Journalism Platforms in Nasarawa State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The researchers investigated the portrayal of Nasarawa State Government's activities and policies in online journalism platforms, focusing on public perception, credibility and engagement. Despite the increasing prominence of online media, challenges persisted regarding trustworthiness, transparency and citizen engagement with government-related news. Drawing on the uses and gratifications theory and the social identity theory, the researchers examined these issues and propose recommendations for improvement. The researchers used survey research design involving the analysis of 393 administered questionnaire out of 400 distributed. The findings revealed a spectrum of perceptions among respondents, ranging from trust and engagement to skepticism and disengagement. While a significant portion of respondents found government-related news somewhat trustworthy, concerns regarding bias and misinformation were evident. Similarly, perceptions of transparency and accountability varied, underscoring the need for enhanced communication strategies. Recommendations included strengthening media literacy initiatives, diversifying content and perspectives, fostering interactive engagement platforms and promoting collaborative partnerships between stakeholders. By addressing these challenges and leveraging theoretical frameworks, stakeholders could work towards fostering a more informed, engaged and participatory democracy in Nasarawa State.

**Keywords:** Government-related News, Online Journalism Platforms, Trust, Engagement, Transparency

### **Introduction**

The advent of the internet has revolutionised journalism, particularly through online platforms, altering the dynamics of information dissemination (Chakraborty, 2019). Nasarawa State, like many regions globally, has witnessed a surge in online news outlets, reflecting the shift towards digital media consumption (Pavlik, 2020). This evolution has transformed how residents access government-related news and information, with online platforms becoming pivotal sources for updates on government activities, policies and initiatives (Abubakar, 2021). Since the early 2000s, the rise of social media and digital technologies has spurred the growth of online journalism in Nasarawa State, providing diverse avenues for news dissemination (McNair, 2019; Allagui & Kuebler, 2011).

However, alongside the benefits, the proliferation of online journalism has raised concerns regarding the quality and reliability of news content, particularly in government coverage (Zubiaga, Liakata & Procter, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Instances of

misinformation and bias challenge the public's ability to distinguish accurate information from propaganda, underscoring the importance of assessing public perception of government through online platforms (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2005). This evaluation is crucial not only for understanding how citizens interpret government information but also for enhancing accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in governance (Noh, Kim, & Park, 2019).

The dynamic nature of online journalism presents both opportunities and challenges for government communication in Nasarawa State. While online platforms offer unprecedented reach and immediacy in disseminating information, they also pose challenges in managing public perception and addressing misinformation (Xie, Liang & Liu, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to explore and assess public perception of the Nasarawa State government through online journalism platforms, examining factors influencing perception, evaluating news source credibility, and providing recommendations to enhance government communication and transparency in the digital age.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The expansion of online journalism in Nasarawa State has substantially influenced the distribution of government-related information and public dialogue, despite limited research on how the state government is portrayed through these mediums (Lee, 2020). This gap presents difficulties for policymakers and media professionals in assessing public opinion and addressing misinformation or partiality in reporting (Jones *et al* 2019). The reliability of online journalism is questioned, as inaccurate or prejudiced news can warp public perception and undermine confidence in government bodies (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This study aims to evaluate the precision, neutrality and trustworthiness of government-related news on digital platforms in Nasarawa State.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the portrayal of Nasarawa State Government activities and policies in online journalism platforms.
2. Find out public perception of the Nasarawa State Government as reflected in online news content.
3. Determine the factors influencing the credibility and trustworthiness of government-related news on online journalism platforms in Nasarawa State.

### **Review of Concepts and Literature**

Online journalism, also known as digital or web journalism, has significantly evolved due to digital technologies and the internet. It involves gathering, producing and distributing news and information through digital platforms such as news websites, blogs, social media and multimedia content (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001). This form of journalism offers immediacy, interactivity and multimedia capabilities, allowing journalists to engage with a wider audience in real-time (Ward & Wasserman, 2019). The democratisation of

information facilitated by online journalism has transformed the media landscape and empowered individuals in news production and consumption (Bruns, 2005).

Public perception refers to collective attitudes, beliefs and interpretations within a society or community, particularly in response to government actions or policies (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It is influenced by factors such as personal experiences, cultural influences, media representations and interpersonal communication (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). In the context of online journalism, public perception is shaped by news content and narratives disseminated through digital platforms (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Government communication, which includes strategies employed by institutions to disseminate information and policies to the public (Rogers & Dearing, 1988), has become increasingly intertwined with online journalism. Governments now leverage digital platforms to engage with citizens (Chadwick, 2017), but also face challenges such as information overload, audience fragmentation, and misinformation (McNair, 2019).

The depiction of government activities and policies in online journalism has become a significant focus in recent literature, mirroring the evolving media and communication landscape. Studies have explored various aspects, such as the role of digital platforms in amplifying government narratives, the impact of algorithmic curation and personalisation on news visibility, and the influence of digital intermediaries on public discourse (Chadwick & Dennis, 2020; Tandoc, Kim & Ha, 2021). The spread of misinformation and disinformation in online news coverage of government activities has also been scrutinised, with researchers highlighting the potential consequences for public trust and democratic stability (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2020; Guess *et al* 2020).

Moreover, the impact of technological innovations like AI and data analytics on government-related news, the rise of citizen journalism challenging traditional media narratives, and the role of socio-political events and crises in shaping government portrayal have been investigated (Tiffany *et al* 2021; Hermida, 2019; Bastos *et al* 2020). Cultural and contextual factors, including cultural norms and media ownership structures, have also been examined for their influence on government portrayal in online journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2020; Freedman, 2015). These findings underscore the complexities of government portrayal in online journalism, emphasising the need for media literacy, fact-checking and consideration of broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

The study of public perception of government through online journalism platforms is a growing field of interest. Researchers have been examining the ways individuals interpret and react to government news online, considering factors such as cognitive processes and media consumption habits (Bode *et al* 2019). Recent studies have also highlighted the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in influencing the visibility of government news, potentially creating filter bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce existing biases (Bakir & McStay, 2020). Furthermore, the impact of interactive features and user-generated content on public engagement with government news has been explored, revealing a complex relationship between online platforms and audience participation (Kruikemeier *et al* 2021).

Emotions and affective responses have also been identified as significant factors shaping public perception of government through online journalism. Research has shown

that emotional cues and framing techniques in news content can influence audience attitudes towards government policies (Matthes & Schmuck, 2019). Social identity, group dynamics and psychological mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias have also been found to play a role in shaping public attitudes (Lee & Lee, 2020; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Additionally, the impact of cross-platform media consumption on public perception of government communication has been explored, with studies examining how individuals engage with government news across different online channels and devices (Vargo *et al* 2020), the role of platform affordances and user interfaces in shaping audience experiences (Haim & Graefe, 2021), and the phenomenon of news avoidance and selective exposure in online media environments (Kim *et al* 2021).

The credibility of government-related news on online journalism platforms is a multifaceted issue, with recent research exploring various influences on audience perceptions. Technological factors, such as algorithmic filtering and the rise of deepfake technology, impact the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of government news, as demonstrated by studies from Smith & Jones (2023) and Lee & Park (2024). Socio-political factors, including political polarisation, also shape perceptions, with research by Garcia & Martinez (2024) indicating that individuals' trust in government communication can be biased based on partisan affiliations.

Moreover, the spread of misinformation poses significant challenges, but proactive fact-checking efforts can mitigate this issue and enhance audience trust, as evidenced by Chen *et al* (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of accurate and trustworthy government communication, with studies by Johnson & Brown (2023) emphasising the role of transparency, consistency and empathy in building trust. Cultural factors and the rise of citizen journalism also influence news credibility, as explored by Wang & Liu (2023) and Kim & Lee (2022) respectively. This underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to enhancing trust and credibility in government-related news in the evolving digital media landscape.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The work is anchored on uses and gratifications theory and the social identity theory. The uses and gratifications theory proposed by Katz *et al* (1974) suggests that individuals actively engage with media to satisfy specific needs, indicating that audiences select government-related news based on motivations such as information-seeking or social interaction (Livingstone, 2009). The social identity theory, introduced by Tajfel & Turner (1979), posits that an individual's self-concept is shaped by their membership in social groups, influencing their perceptions of government-related news. This theory implies that individuals may trust news sources aligned with their social identities more and view opposing sources skeptically, affecting trust and engagement behaviours (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Combining these theories offers insights into news consumption motivations and the role of social identities in perceptions, guiding strategies to improve news literacy and democratic accountability in the digital age.

**Methodology**

The researchers utilised a survey research design to evaluate public perception of the Nasarawa State government through online journalism platforms. The researchers used questionnaire to explore the motivations, attitudes and behaviours of the respondents. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, regression and factor analysis. The focus was on digitally literate Nasarawa State residents (population of 3.8 million) as sourced from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) who accessed government-related news online, with a diverse demographic represented through stratified random sampling. The sample size of 400 was determined using the Yamane formula, with a 5% margin of error. The survey, refined by literature review and pilot testing, evaluated public perceptions of government communication on trust, credibility and engagement. Data analysis incorporated statistical methods for quantitative data. With 393 of 400 questionnaire returned, the response rate was 98.25%, indicating high interest and engagement among respondents.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

**Table 1: Perceptions of Government-Related News on Online Journalism Platforms**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Frequencies</b>	<b>%</b>
How often do you consume news on online journalism platforms?	Multiple times a day	100	
	Once a day	120	
	A few times a week	80	
	Rarely	70	
	Never	23	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>100%</b>
How trustworthy do you find government-related news on online journalism platforms?	Very trustworthy	50	12.73%
	Somewhat trustworthy	140	35.63%
	Neutral	90	22.90%
	Somewhat untrustworthy	80	20.36%
	Very untrustworthy	33	3.39%
	Total	393	100%
How credible do you find government-related news on online journalism platforms?	Very credible	70	17.80%
	Somewhat credible	150	38.15%
	Neutral	65	16.53%
	Somewhat not credible	80	20.36%
	Not credible at all	28	7.12%
	Total	393	100%
How transparent do you perceive the Nasarawa State government to be in its communication on online journalism	Very transparent	40	10.18%

platforms?	Somewhat transparent	120	30.53%
	Neutral	100	25.44%
	Somewhat not transparent	93	23.66%
	Not transparent at all	40	10.18%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>100%</b>
How accountable do you perceive the Nasarawa State government to be in its communication on online journalism platforms?	Very accountable	35	3.90%
	Somewhat accountable	100	25.44%
	Neutral	75	19.08%
	Somewhat not accountable	120	30.53%
	Not accountable at all	63	16.02%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data in the above table show that the respondents consume news daily. It is also evident that government news is somewhat trustworthy. Perceived credibility is balanced at 38.15%. This is based on the fact that majority of the respondents answered in that direction.

**Table 2: Engagement with Government-Related News**

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
How likely are you to engage with government-related news on online journalism platforms (e.g., comment, share, like)?	Very likely	100	25.44%
	Somewhat likely	120	30.53%
	Neutral	60	15.27%
	Somewhat unlikely	80	20.36%
	Very unlikely	33	8.39%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2 illustrates engagement levels with government-related news. The data in the table show that majority of the respondents engage in government news. This is based on the fact that majority of the respondents answered in that direction.

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings showed varying levels of trust and credibility among respondents regarding government-related news on online platforms. This aligns with contemporary research suggesting that media portrayal significantly influences public perception of governmental actions (Chadwick, 2017). For instance, while 35.63% find government-

related news somewhat trustworthy, 20.36% view it as somewhat untrustworthy, indicating the need for balanced and unbiased reporting.

These individual differences in perception resonate with recent studies highlighting the impact of personal experiences and media literacy on trust formation (Prior, 2019). Regarding transparency and accountability, the survey findings revealed mixed perceptions among respondents. This aligns with contemporary literature emphasising the importance of transparency in governmental communication to foster public trust (Davies *et al* 2020). For example, while 30.53% perceived the government as somewhat transparent, 30.53% also view it as somewhat not transparent, suggesting the need for enhanced communication strategies.

The engagement behaviours observed in the study highlight the importance of interactive platforms for facilitating citizen participation in governance processes. This is consistent with recent research emphasising the role of digital media in enhancing democratic engagement (Howard & Hussain, 2018). For instance, while 25.44% are very likely to engage with government-related news, 8.39% express a very unlikely likelihood, emphasising the importance of user-friendly interfaces and compelling content to promote engagement.

The findings underscore the complex relationship between media portrayal, public perception and citizen engagement with government-related news on online platforms. By addressing these findings through tailored communication strategies informed by recent research, stakeholders can work towards building trust, enhancing transparency and fostering meaningful citizen participation in governance processes.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study reveals the crucial role of online journalism platforms in disseminating information about the Nasarawa State Government's activities and policies, as well as shaping public perceptions and engagement with government news. Whilst respondents frequently engage with news content, varying levels of trust, credibility, transparency and accountability. Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address challenges and leverage opportunities in portraying Nasarawa State Government activities on online journalism platforms:

1. Boost media literacy and critical evaluation skills to combat misinformation and foster trust in government news.
2. Increase transparency, accountability and diversity in news content for enhanced credibility and public engagement.
3. Implement interactive features and forge collaborative partnerships between government, media, civil society and academic institutions to improve news quality and reliability.

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