



Anonymous Commenters' Contributions to Online Debates and Discourses on Abba Kyari: A Critical Review

JAMMY SEIGHA GUANAH

Department of Mass Communication University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria Email: jammyguanah@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Internet has made the publication of online news possible. It has also empowered readers to react and comment on what they read on news platforms. Some of these comments are made anonymously. This study looked at the comments made anonymously in response to posted news stories on *Sahara Reporters*, *The Cable*, and *Premium Times* platforms about the former Chief of Staff to Nigeria's President, Abba Kyari, who died of COVID 19 complications. This was a prevalent topic in the news, especially the debate on the controversial roles he played on most national issues. The research was hinged on the Technological Determinism Theory. Content analysis research method was used to glean data from the news outlets. Coding sheets and coding guide were used to collect data. The unit of analysis were anonymous comments. Results showed that most of the comments had harsh tone, and some were not related to Abba Kyari's issue. The study concluded that online discourse can be improved upon, and some responsibility and consistency brought into commenting when more steps are taken to moderate comments. It recommended that news platforms should spell out guidelines commenters must abide by if they must make any post anonymously, and where necessary, perpetually abusive anonymous commenters should be made to register with their names, addresses and phone numbers, and charged a fee to activate their accounts. Also, news platforms must put in place pre-moderation systems to manage comment quality by using content-filtering systems that all posts must pass through so as to remove offensive comments before they are made public.

Key words: Abusive, Anonymous, Commenters, Discourse, Internet, Moderation

Introduction

One of the advantages of the Internet is the liberalisation of the media space, and the enhancement of communication, communication having been defined by Awotua-Efebo (2008) as impacting or the conveying of information or knowledge from one person to another through the mutual exchange of ideas, thoughts, opinion, facts and emotion. With the Internet, those who hitherto never had the opportunity to air their views on various issues, and be heard, can now do so effortlessly even from the comfort of their homes. Buttressing the role of the Internet in the society, Oyero and Jegede (2011) affirm that modern technology has made communication easier, and has brought about "digitalization, individuals now socialize digitally and this has led to the creation of online communities" (p. 109).

To further enhance the liberty of readers to express their opinions on varied matters, newspapers and other news platforms have the

comment feature that enables readers to comment on the stories they read online. The comment feature serves as the oxygen and window that enriches the freedom of expression of citizens. Online news platforms have made it easy for readers to comments on articles and news stories published, as well as grant them the liberty of doing so through limitless space usage, as compared to the less space the hard copy print of newspapers offer.

However, it has been noticed that some of the comments are done anonymously. This is a situation where by a commenter cannot be identified with a full name, email, or contact information. The commenter can neither be identified (nor verified) by name and city. He or she sometimes comment under a pseudonym, which according to McLellan Marketing Group (2010, p.2), is to "use a nickname, not a real name" to comment.

There has been a lot of condemnation of anonymous commenting because this group of

commenters are often seen as people who want to hide under the guise of anonymous comments to be abusive, mischievous, and “may feel so free because his identity is unknown and his comment may become vulgar, abusive and aggressive” (Awodi, Gambo, Etudaiye, Ssni, Mohammed, & Ezeaghasi, 2019, p.480). The anonymous commenter is also “apt to behave poorly, namely with malevolence in their comments” (Pitts, 2010; Schultz, 2010 as cited in Santana, 2014, p.4).

The issue of anonymous commenting is now making most news outlets to insist that commenters register by providing personal information before they can post comments of their platforms (Pérez-Peña, 2010a), while others are calling for the moderation of online commenters in order to promote quality discourse in the unruly comment threads (Diakopoulos, & Naaman, 2011; Nagar, 2011) and bring about civility and credibility to commenting. It is believed that if commenters are known, they will be more cautious and responsible with their comments when they consider the consequences of their posts. Meanwhile, studies by Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) and Goldberg (2010) indicate that some commenters are ready to stop using the comment feature if they were required to provide their real names. However, Rosenberg (2010) points out that verifying identity on a large scale can be very difficult.

Although a lot of negativity is associated with anonymous comments, it is essential for public sphere deliberations because it is an important aspect of commenting. Apart from protecting a range of people, it is an effective means to blow the whistle about atrocities going on in the society without the whistle blower being exposed to any form of endangerment to his life and property, or attack from the individuals or organisation(s) whose crime is being exposed. No doubt, anonymity encourages candor; that is why media lawyer, Robert Bertsche, who represents the New England Newspaper and Press Association says, “By allowing anonymous comments, you're going to get things and information that otherwise would not come to light” (cited in Goldberg, 2010, p.5). The arguments and counter arguments about

anonymous comments present the media as a medley of the good and the bad; hence Hallahan (2014) proclaims that it is difficult to separate mediated reality from real life because the media have become a battleground. Hallahan (2014) cites British cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall as observing that, “the mass media serve as a public forum in which groups struggle to define social reality” (p.99).

This study investigated the anonymous comments made after the former Chief of Staff (CoS) to President Mohammadu Buhari of Nigeria, Abba Kyari, contracted the Coronavirus which led to his eventual demise. This choice for study is justified because, according to Google Nigeria, 'Who is Abba Kyari?' was the second top trending search terms on Google Nigeria in the month of April 2020 (Augoye, 2020). One of the reason that his death became a national issue is the existing power dynamics and institutional framework of power that Kyari was a significant part of before he died (Olaopa, 2020). Abba Kyari, who was CoS from 2015 to 2020, was referred to as a 'de facto President' by his critics (Umor, 2020). He was said to be behind most unpopular policies and decisions of the Buhari administration. The anonymous comments studied were made in reaction to the stories published in the *Sahara Reporters*, *The Cables*, and *Premium Times* news platforms about the late CoS.

Scope

The period of this study ran from March to May 2020, covering when the news of Abba Kyari contracting Covid 19 first broke, and after his death and burial. The study was limited to *Sahara Reporters*, *The Cable*, and *Premium Times* online news platforms, and to only the anonymous comments made in reaction to Abba Kyari's issue.

Statement of the Problem

It is assumed that the opportunity offered by the comment sections of online news platforms are being abused by anonymous commenters, in that some of their comments are either considered to be distasteful, abusive, uncomplimentary, rude or

inflammatory, thereby preventing those who would have contributed meaningfully to online discourse to do so.

Hlavach and Freivogel (2011) believe that most comments signed with pseudonyms are insensitive, rude, and speculative, emphasising that offensive comments are capable of discouraging potential sources who could give authentic information on an issue from giving their opinions. The duad also assert that the unstructured and unrestricted format of online comments often lead to offences and abusive discourse because most commenters are anonymous and, therefore, cannot be held accountable for their words. At present, more media outlets are finding the purpose of their allowing comments on their platforms, which is to encourage debate and civil discourse among a representative selection of users, being jeopardised (Green, 2018).

Anonymity also makes readers to doubt the authenticity of what they have read. According to Green (2018), a series of subsequent analyses found that when readers are exposed to uncivil, negative comments at the end of articles, they are less trustful of the main content (dubbed the “nasty effect”). The incivility concomitant with anonymous comments has made many journalists and the mass media industry observers to call for the stoppage of anonymous comments. Santana (2014) cites studies by scholars like Pitts (2010), Schultz (2010), Rieder (2010), Pérez-Peña (2010), and Crosbie (2006) to support this stand of putting an end to anonymous commenting. In fact, Falkenthal (as cited in York & Timm, 2011) calls for the entire ban of anonymous commenters because they have polluted the Internet “with false accusations and name-calling attacks” (p.1). Since news outlets want to make it as easy as possible to attract people to participate, and anonymity allows users to feel less inhibited when they comment (Gsell, 2009), there will be need for them to be circumspect in taking decision on whether to allow those who comment to remain anonymous.

This study, therefore, intends to establish the number of anonymous comments made on Abba Kyari's narrative, so as to assess the tone of the anonymous comments, and to examine if the

comments addressed the news or articles published about Abba Kyari.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives centred on:

- i. Establishing the number of anonymous comments in the selected news platforms.
- ii. Assessing the tone of the anonymous comments.
- iii. Examining if the comments addressed the news or articles published about Kyari, other issues, or Abba Kyari and other issues.

Literature Review

Theoretical Approach

This study is located within the Technological Determinism Theory. It tends to be widely accepted that Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), an American sociologist and economist, devised the term “technological determinism” (Alabi, 2017; Muhammad, 2018). Technological determinism seeks to show technical developments, communications technologies or media, or technology as a whole, as the key causes in history for the change in society's social and cultural values. Technology is implicated as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. According to Oyero and Jegede (2011), technological determinists interpret technology in general and communications technologies in particular as the basis of society in the past, present and even the future. McQuail (2005, p. 102) agrees that the accelerating pace of technological inventions witnessed over the years have advanced social change in culture and communication.

Haruna and Adamu (2018) recount that the first major elaboration of a technological determinist view of socio-economic development came from Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. According to Muhammad (2018), Karl Marx` theoretical framework was based upon the idea that changes in technology and productive technology are the primary influence on the organisation of social relations, and that social relations and cultural practices ultimately revolve around the

technological and economic base of a society. However, its contemporary presentation is alluded to Marshall McLuhan (1962) who is of the opinion that media technology shapes how society members think. In the summative therefore, Technological determinism can be explained away as technology, especially new media technologies, playing a key role in human lives, due to the variations it introduces to existing cultures and the hitherto ways of the social lives of the people who are now exposed to technology.

The link of this theory to this work stems from the fact that the Internet, via the comment feature of online news platforms, has empowered commenters to participate in public debates and discourses. This rare privilege was not available until the advent of the Internet. The usage of this feature has brought about changes in the society because the culture of silence in the face of tyranny and mis-governance can now be addressed without physical confrontation with the power that be, unlike what was tenable when people had limited opportunities to air their views on various matters.

Internet and the Comment Feature

The Internet, coupled with its adjuncts of new media technologies, brought about a new vista in relating and communicating across the world. Guanah (2019) declares that “the advent of the Internet, especially the social media aspect of it, brought about easy access to the public sphere which avails everybody the opportunity to express his or her opinion on any burning issue” (p.457). The Internet makes it possible for people to have unfettered link to diverse information, and to also create information that others can access too through the same platform. According to Oyedele and Agberu (2018), the Internet has revolutionised the nature of the mass media terrain in that the audience now play active roles in completing the process of news gathering, dissemination and feedback instead of being passive. The comment feature of online news platforms is one of the provisions of the Internet through which readers of online news stories can air their views, interact with the news, comment on whatever they have read

from various news fora, and learn about others' views.

People are entitled to express their opinions on any matter to the level the constitution of a nation allows it. Though, that right and privilege to do so remains dormant until it is activated through the comments and participation in public discourses. Some of the reasons responsible for online contribution to news stories are the urge to express personal opinions on public issues, and attempt to share knowledge with others (Miloni, Vadratsikas, & Papa, 2011). Meanwhile, Awodi, et al. (2019) assert that readers' online commenting space is an interactive format that allows readers of online newspapers to express their views and discuss published articles. According to Suzanne (2013), comments' threads on the Internet provide spaces for public discourse and deliberation. Some comments are made under anonymity; however, Manosevitch and Walker (2009) note that when anonymity is not moderated and given minimal censorship, it may lead to inappropriate use of language that may impede substantive and constructive discussion.

Anonymous Commenters and their Comments

The impression most Internet users had was that they were at liberty to “speak their minds”, and spew vituperations at will without them being identified, traced or sanctioned. Pérez-Peña (2010b) recalls that a New Yorker cartoon from 1993, during the Web's infancy, which had one mutt saying to another, “On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog” (p.1). This was due to the fact that most postings could be done anonymously. However, there tends to be an abuse of the anonymity cover by some commenters who now use it as attack-medium hence Robert Steele, director of the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at Depauw University said, “With no name attached, the commenters basically wear a hood and swing a sharp axe” (Goldberg, 2010, p.3).

Sawers (2015) admits that managing online comments is a perennial problem for media outlets, and that media outlets are faced with the dilemma of, “should we allow anyone to comment

anonymously to encourage interaction and engagement? Should we enforce a real-name policy to deter the trolls? Or heck, should we just ban comments altogether?" (p.1). Contrary to the trending vogue where abusive anonymous comments have become prevalent on the comments` sections of most news platforms, the comment feature was put in place to encourage discourse between the platforms and their readers, and also between and among the commenters. However, the anonymity factor is now enabling bad behavior and facilitating "uncivil discourse" in shared online spaces" (Johnson in Listgarten, 2020).

Comment sections are supposed to be pools where various ideas are exhibited, and new information and opinions shared for the betterment of participants in the public sphere, and in the society as a whole. This is no more the case due to the activities of anonymous commenters who bring disrespect into most conversations by turning them into what McLellan Marketing Group (2010) refers to as "verbal vomit." McLellan Marketing Group (2010) argues that "when you allow anonymous commenting, you disrespect the topic, the conversation and the readers" (p.1). McLellan Marketing Group (2010) quotes Connie Reece, Davina Brewer and Paul Flaherty as saying that anonymous comments cheapen conversations, make trolling too easy, and give people permission to be jerks, emphasizing that anonymity rapidly allows conversations to degrade into the equivalent of verbal diarrhea. Goldberg (2010) also references CNN's thought that "User comments on news sites, while vital to interactive storytelling in the digital age, often read like scribbles on a bathroom stall: anonymous, offensive and full of hate" (p.1). Green (2018) affirms that countless other news outlets are overwhelmed by anonymous contributors who often hijacked comment threads with offensive and inappropriate submissions.

Though it is a problem when a comment denigrates other commenters, anonymous commenting does have a lot of advantages too. When people write under anonymity, there is the tendency for them to do so honestly because they will freely be expressing themselves without any

form of fear, abuse, or rebuke from those who may not agree with their positions. Heatherly, Fargo and Martin (2014) posit that "allowing people to comment anonymously or pseudonymously opens up forums for commentary and news tips to people who may fear negative consequences from peers, employers, or government officials" (p.2). According to Joinson (2001), though in some situations, anonymity may result in toxic disinhibition which makes users to engage in antisocial behavior such as disrespectful language, aggressive criticism, and threats, it can also provide an empowering opportunity for public opinion expression and debate.

Bindu Reddy, founder of *Candid App*, which allows users to post messages anonymously, says anonymity allows people to have much more frank discussions, and to get a sense of connection on a topic right away, for it breaks down barriers, because people don't know who you are so as to judge you. Reddy thinks people can just be much more honest and authentic on an anonymous service because some of the best conversations on *Candid* have shown this. She confirms she has seen a number of cases where people post messages about having problems in their personal lives and they get thoughtful and helpful responses from a host of complete strangers, emphasizing that "In many cases, these problems are ones that they would likely feel uncomfortable discussing in public" (Ingram, 2016, p. 2).

While defending anonymous commenting, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a San Francisco-based non-profit organization that supports online free speech, responded to Christopher Wolf's (an attorney with the Anti-Defamation League)'Letter-to-the-Editor' of *The New York Times* where he said, "People who are able to post anonymously (or pseudonymously) are far more likely to say awful things, sometimes with awful consequences...". EFF holds that the claim about anonymous speech was mostly assumptions because they are not backed up with any research. EFF writes that, "we should not be willing to sacrifice free expression for the possibility of civility, especially not when there are more

effective alternatives" (Galperin& York as cited in Santana, 2014, p. 4).

Commenting anonymously could even be disadvantageous to the commenter, especially if his comments are reasonable, and there is need to contact him, maybe for consultancy business. People may even want to learn one new thing or the other from anonymous commenters about their businesses or organisations, based on their posts. They will miss the increased gratifications, including the opportunity to be recognized, publication of their expertise, greater respect, and more knowledge of the world (Leung, 2009). The negative effects of anonymous commenting, which Mitchell, Lebow, Grathouse, and Shoger (2011) believe leads to lower levels of happiness among Internet users overall, counter the positive outcome of commenting. This has raised the call for commenters to register before they can comment because of the propensity for anonymous online users to suspend their consciousness of consequences and thus adopt a sense of being less inhibited in their expressions (Sproull & Kiesler as cited in Santana, 2014). According to Goldberg (2010), some experts fear that anonymity protects irresponsible or even dangerous commenters.

While researchers like Shepard (2011) and some journalists are averse to the use of comments in online journalism, especially in the case of anonymous contributors, some others (Pérez-Peña, 2010a; Goldberg, 2010) feel that making commenters to register will go a long way to mitigate against offensive anonymous commenting. Goldberg (2010) reports about the Massachusetts paper that requires commenters to register with a credit card number. The postulation is that registration tied to social media profiles will help to raise the level of discourse. News editor Margaret Sullivan, who concedes that vetting commenters will be a "challenging" task because some people might still slip through the cracks', equally opines that "It is the ability to remain anonymous that encourages people to say whatever they want [online] ... when people are required to give their names, our thinking is that they'll think twice" (Goldberg, 2010, p.3).

Jonathan Smith of *Vice News* is of the opinion that without moderators or fancy algorithms, comments sections "are prone to anarchy. Too often they devolve into racist, misogynistic maelstroms where the loudest, most offensive, and stupidest opinions get pushed to the top and the more reasoned responses drowned out in the noise" (Green, 2018, p.3). Though registration of commenters is a good idea, the problem with it, as expressed by Scott Townsend, is that with real names, "how do you verify that they're a real person? If I say that I'm Eric Smithington, how do you know I am? The honest folk will leave their names, but the dishonest folk will hide behind another pseudonym that just sounds real. Is that any better?" (McLellan Marketing Group, 2010, p.4).

The man Abba Kyari

The news of the death of the former Chief of Staff to Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari on April 17, 2020, as a result of complications from Covid 19, was received with mixed feelings by Nigerians. Some sympathised with his family while some saw it as a good riddance to rubbish, because of the belief he was part of the cause of the problems that befell Nigeria, and of whatever happened politically and socially while he was in office (Umor, 2020). The Kano State Commissioner for Works and Infrastructure, Muaz Magaji, publicly expressed delight after the death of Abba Kyari was announced (Bassey, 2020). Magaji wrote on his Facebook page thus: "It's very very important we put things in perspective so that we can save our system from punitive unconstitutional usurpers in the future! Democracy & democratic equity does not by itself strive. It must be guarded and protected... One person, just one person can set a dangerous precedence!" (Yahaya, 2020, p.1).

Many saw Abba Kyari as the most powerful Chief of Staff in Nigerian history (Ekpu, 2020). Hence, his critics said he was the president and President Muhammadu Buhari was just a figurehead or one impostor (Umor, 2020). To Isiekwene (2020), the late CoS was adept at the power game:

He hardly spoke openly in defence of the administration's policies but within the walls of the Presidential Villa, he was eloquent - he was heard by all without having to raise his voice. He was the power behind the throne, the alleged head of the much disdained but all-powerful cabal. He called the shots without any restraints from anyone, not even the one who appointed him (p.13).

President Buhari openly delegated enormous power to him when he ordered that all his ministers and other members of his cabinet should bring their files to him through Kyari's table, and that all correspondences and requests for meetings must be passed through him. The CoS had the final say on which file got to the President and which did not, or who to allow or deny to meet with the President. During Abba Kyari's tenure, there was a time the Minister of State for Petroleum Resources, Dr. Ibe Kachikwu, said that for about one month he had sought to see the President who was, and still is, the Minister of Petroleum Resources, but he was blocked. This was beside the fact that he had written a letter, the content of which he wanted to discuss with the President. Ekpu (2020) recalls that the letter hinted at corruption in the oil industry and the lack of due process in the contract awarding process.

Abba Kyari was seen as more or less the unofficial vice president of Nigeria, "and to some people it did not seem like a misnomer to dub him as the Deputy President" (Ekpu, 2020, p.2), because of the power he wielded. In November 2019 when the Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, was the acting President, Abba Kyari sidelined him and took a bill to President Buhari in London for signature. According to Oriola (2020), apart from creating a parallel economic think-tank vis-à-vis that headed by Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, he was fingered as the one behind the removal of the Vice President's key aides, and refusal to name him acting president during President Buhari's subsequent trips overseas.

While some Nigerians were calling him names and bathing him with curses over every problem Nigeria was faced with (Umor, 2020), and another

set of people held firm and resolute in the mantra and placed the blame for the state of affairs in Nigeria squarely at his feet (Boot, 2020), his name was mentioned in other sundry matters. He was allegedly said to be involved in the MTN fine bribery issue because of the role that he played to the discomfiture of the supervising ministry, Ministry of Communications (Ekpu, 2020). Also, Umor (2020) mentions that some of members of his All Progressive Congress (APC) coterie also accused him of collecting bribes from other members so as to assent their ambitions. At one time or the other too, he was said to have been involved in altercations with First Lady Aisha Buhari, National Security Adviser (NSA), General Babagana Munguno, and the erstwhile Head of Service of the Federation, Winifred Oyo-Ita; that is what the critics of "the Cabal" think of him (Isiekwene, 2020).

Apart from the enormous power wielded by the CoS, as Olaopa (2020) says the wife of the president alleged, which enabled him to make several appointments that were just constitutionally wrong because the CoS was not empowered to make them, and the allusion to Kyari's "self-appointment" to the board of NNPC, even though there are no self-evident facts of abuse, Isiekwene (2020) confirms that he dabbled into security issues, infrastructural development, telecommunications, oil and gas. He was considered a meddling interloper by a segment of the country due to his 'usurpation' of the duties of others. The National Security Adviser (NSA) to President Muhammadu Buhari, Babagana Monguno, once accused the late Chief of Staff of undue and dangerous interference on national security matters by presiding over meetings with Service Chiefs and Heads of security organizations as well as Ambassadors and High Commissioners to the exclusion of the NSA and/or supervising ministers.

According to Bolashodun (2020), what the NSA did was an indicator that the Chief of Staff has been meddling with other people's jobs, from the Vice President to the ministers. It is believed the Transport Minister, Works and Housing Minister, former Agriculture Minister, Education Minister and many more, have had to protest the

meddlesomeness of the Chief of Staff. In fact, he was said to be on one of his usurped trips to Germany to meet with Siemens to wrap up an agreement on power without the Minister of Power who heads the Ministry of Power in the country that he contracted Covid 19 which eventually led to his death.

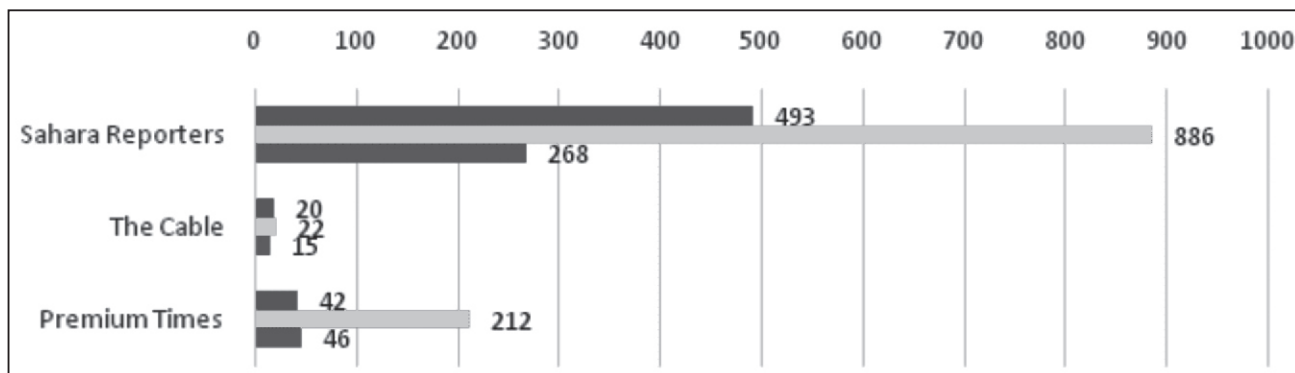
Though the late CoS could be frontal when necessary, he was said to be soft spoken, and he spoke in measured stance. Nwabughioqu (2020) describes him as a man who was exceptionally brilliant, and had unflinching support and loyalty to President Buhari. One unique thing about him was that, with the plethora of accusations hauled at him, he was reticent. He never for one day agreed to, or refuted any, even though he once practised as a journalist, and had unhindered access to the media. Campbell (2020) describes him as the gatekeeper and a "whisperer" who was a confidential advisor to the president who had complete confidence in him.

study because it is a suitable method for analysing detailed data, particularly in media and communications research (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The comments on *Sahara Reporters*, *The Cable*, and *Premium Times* online news platforms were studied, with specific focus on anonymous comments. These news platforms were selected for analysis because they are popular among Nigerians who visit their sites daily to read their stories, and to post comments in response to the stories they read. The news and articles that relate to Abba Kyari and their corresponding anonymous comments were collated and saved as PDF files for offline analysis. All the comments from the three news platforms were 2,668 (*Sahara Reporters*-2,090, *The Cable*-27, and *Premium Times*-551). However, the population of the study are all the anonymous comments in the selected news platform that fell into the scope of the period of study. The comments were 2004.

Research Method

Content Analysis research method was used for this

Figure 1: Frequency of Anonymous Comments before the determination of Sample Size



Source: Content Analysis, 2020

Key: March (dark grey), April (light grey), May (medium grey)

Scale: 1cm = 10%

The Sample size was determined using Cozby's (2004) Precision of Estimate table which was calculated using conservative assumptions about the nature of the true population values; it states that ±5%, a population between 2000 and 4999 shall have a sample size of 322. Therefore the Sample Size for this study is 384. This sample size has to be divided proportionately among *Sahara Reporters*, *The Cable*, and *Premium Times* based on the number of comments they had.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Sample Size for } \textit{Sahara Reporters} &= \\ \frac{1,647 \times 322}{2004} & \\ &= 264.65 \text{ Approximately} = 264 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Sample Size for } \textit{The Cable} &= \\ \frac{57 \times 322}{2004} & \\ &= 9.14 \text{ Approximately} = 10 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Sample Size for } \textit{Premium Times} &= \\ \frac{300 \times 322}{2004} & \\ &= 48.20 \text{ Approximately} = 48 \end{aligned}$$

Inter-coder Reliability

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) refer to Inter-coder reliability as the levels of agreement among independent coders who code the same contents using the same coding instruments. The Inter-coder reliability test for this study was calculated using Ole Holsti's 1969 formula.

The formula is:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2m}{N1+N2}$$

Where m = number of coding decision the code agree.

N1 + N2 = total number of coding decision by the first and second respectively.

A sub-sample of the content universe was selected for the purpose of determining the reliability of the coding process. The sub-sample comprises 18 units. The two coders used and agreed on 14 out of the 18 coding decisions. The figures were used in calculating the reliability coefficient thus:

$$\frac{2(14)}{18 + 18} = \frac{28}{36} = 0.78$$

Therefore, that Reliability coefficient= 0.78 (78%). The outcome showed the coding sheet was reliable to be used for the content analysis.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is an observable and measurable unit that provides a standard way of dissecting the text into elements to be analysed (Keyton, 2001). Unit of analysis here refers to the actual thing which was studied or counted when coding. The unity of analysis of this study are the anonymous comments made by commenters. In this study, a comment is categorised as anonymous if the commenter used a pseudonym, just a phone number, and can neither be identified nor verified by full name, email, city, or contact information. The study was to establish the **Frequency** of anonymous comments; their tone, to know if they were **Harsh/Impolite**-when the comment is abusive, name-calling or vulgar; **Civil/Polite**- when the comment is courteous, or **Subtle**- when the comment is neutral, that is, neither harsh nor courteous, and thirdly to examine if the comments were only on Abba Kyari, other issues only, or on Abba Kyari and other issues combined.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Columns and simple percentages were used to analyse the data.

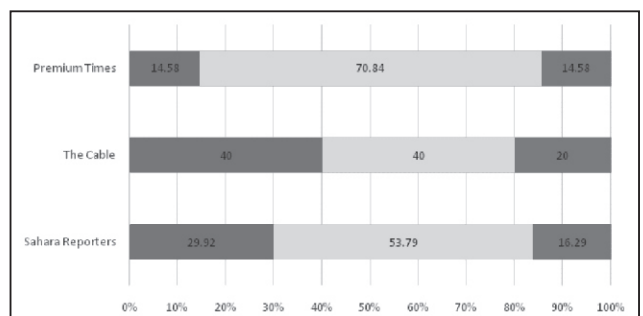


Figure 2: Frequency of Anonymous Comments after Sample Size determination

Source: Content Analysis, 2020. Key: March April May
Scale: 1cm= 10%

Figure 2 shows that, from the proportionate sample size selected, *Sahara Reporters* news platform had the highest number of anonymous commenters (264=81.99%), followed by *Premium Times* (48=14.91%), and then *The Cable* (10=3.10%) during the three months study period.

Figure 4 portrays that Abba Kyari and his activities while he served as the CoS to the president was the centre of the anonymous comments. Commenters did not only comment about him, but also linked him to other domestic and international issues. Few of the comments had nothing to do with Abba Kyari.

Discussion of Findings

The volume of anonymous comments in the selected news platforms shows that many Nigerians are using the Comment feature to comment anonymously due to one reason or the other. The reasons include the fact that they can present their opinions on issues of national discourse freely without the fear of being victimised later. A study carried out by Stroud, Duyn and Peacock (2016) which acknowledges that 66.6% of commenters and comment readers agree that allowing anonymity in comments sections allows participants to express ideas they might be afraid to express otherwise buttresses this reason.

The fact that a comment is made anonymously does not devalue the content of such comments which may be filled with a lot of viable information. When people comment, and others get involved by reacting via their comments, the outcome of the arguments and counter arguments can become raw materials of good governance for those saddled with that task in the society. It could also be a win-win situation for online newspapers organisations or news platforms too, because they would be exposed to the divergent views on different issues so that they would know what to add or subtract from the subsequent publications on the issues raised.

This assertion aligns with the thought of Nagar (2011) who acknowledges that the information being commented on contains value for the reader, the comments that follow the piece of information can generate value by themselves, especially when taken into account in an integrated manner. The accumulation of these myriad comments coming in form of suggestions, criticism and public opinion can help government and those they are directed to take decisions on salient matters.

The second finding of this study clearly

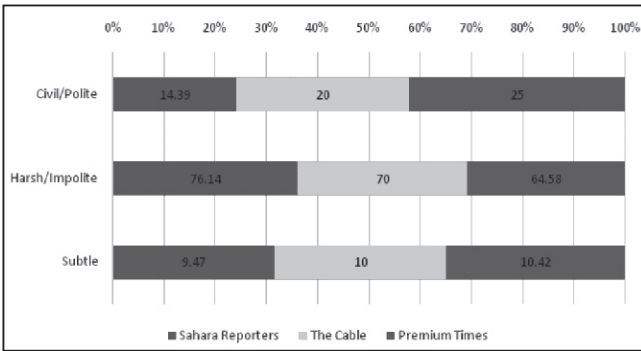


Figure 3: Tone of Anonymous Comments

Source: Content Analysis, 2020.

Key: Sahara Reporters (Dark Grey) The Cable (Light Grey) Premium Times (Medium Grey)

Scale: 1cm = 10%

The data in Figure 3 indicate that 239 (74.22%) out of the 322 anonymous comments were Harsh and Impolite; 52 (16.15%) were Civil/Polite while 31 (9.63%) were Subtle. This may have to do with how most of the commenters saw Abba Kyari. It may also mean that the number of harsh comments is high because the comments were done anonymously; maybe it would have been lower if the commenters could be identified.

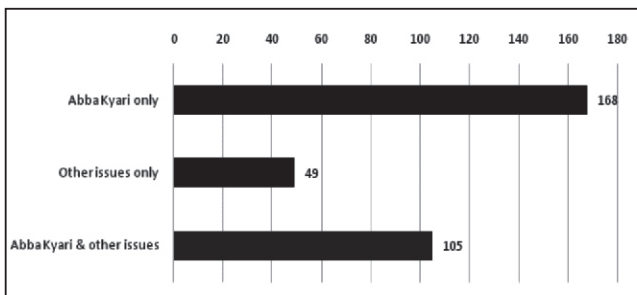


Figure 4: Comments being either on Abba Kyari, other issues, or on the CoS and other issues combined

Source: Content Analysis, 2020.

Key: Abba Kyari only (Dark Grey) Other issues only (Medium Grey) Abba Kyari & other issues (Light Grey)

Scale: 1cm = 10%

indicates that the tone of most of the comments (64.58%) was harsh and impolite. This confirms the fact that most anonymous comments are abusive, and denies the society of civil discourse (Green, 2018; Goldberg, 2010). This is reiterated by Listgarten (2020) when he referred to a commenter who bemoaned the lack of respect for dissenting opinion. The commenter says, "Rather than being curious about why other people may not agree ... their response is simply to call people they disagree with idiots, fools or make some other personal insult ... People attacking each other instead of trying to understand each other" (p.2).

Although negativity and antisocial behaviours are associated with anonymous comments (Joinson (2001), most times, this largely depends on the topic being discussed. As for the issue concerning Abba Kyari, it was expected that some of the comments would be harsh, considering that fact that some Nigerians see him as part of the cause of the problems Nigeria faced, and for the bad state of affairs in Nigeria (Boot, 2020; Umor, 2020).

While examining if the comments addressed the news or articles published about Kyari, other issues, or Abba Kyari and other issues combined, data collated revealed that other issues that had little or nothing to do with Abba Kyari were commented on. Hence, while describing anonymous commenters who leave the major issues being discussed to commenting about other things not related to the topic of discourse, McLellan Marketing Group (2010) says they swing "to both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand - they're vicious in their personal attacks, cruel comments and judgments. On the flip side, they can completely bypass the topic all together in an attempt to get some link love/attention for their product or service" (p.3).

Richardson (2018) observes that most times comments are quite interesting, but that sometimes there could be disappointment in how an intelligent conversation can quickly devolve or be diverted onto lesser topics. This position tends to be supported by an anonymous commenter (RHS76) whom McLellan Marketing Group (2010) quotes assaying that "I can attest to the anonymous posters post childish comments and comments that are out of

line. These individuals do not care about establishing a conversation. They are "hit-and-run" posters. They'll write something to denigrate you or write anything unrelated to the topic, and then disappear, without commenting again, for fear of being called out" (p.3).

Conclusion

A communication could be said to be effective only if there is a feedback from the decoder; the type of feedback received determines if the communication was effective or not. Royal Town Planning Institute (2005) argues that effective communications are the ability to listen to others' views shared, and respond in accordance to the shared information. In a face-to-face communication, the feedback is immediate, but, for instance, when the communication is through a medium like the print version of the newspaper, the feedback may be delayed. However, the advent of new media technologies has made communication feedback to be immediate, especially through the comment section of news platforms.

Since communication is meant to be socially interactive because it involves a sender and a receiver, a lot of commenters used the comment sections of the selected news outlets of this study lavishly to comment. Albeit the tone of most of the comments were harsh, and commenters even went outside the discourse on Abba Kyari to express their opinions on other issues, the fact remains that the comment sections became public spheres through which citizens aired their views on varied topics. The conventional hard copy print newspapers do not guarantee this social interaction where readers can communicate with newspapers` editorial managers and receive an immediate feedback through comments. However, the online discourse can be improved upon, and some responsibility and consistency brought into commenting, when more steps are taken to moderate comments.

Recommendations

1. Commenters should be encouraged to use civil tones to make their comments.
2. Where necessary, perpetual abusive anonymous

- commenters should be made to register with their names, addresses, phone numbers, and charged a fee to activate their accounts.
3. News platforms should spell out guidelines commenters must abide by if they must make any post anonymously.
 4. News platforms should engage the services of moderators to supervise the comment spaces by ensuring laid down guidelines are adhered to, and that any comment deemed inappropriate is deleted, and that trolls are blocked.
 5. News platforms must also put in place pre-moderation systems to manage comment quality by using content-filtering systems that all posts must pass through, so as to remove offensive comments, before they are made public.

References

- Alabi, S. (2017). Use of social media for news by students of tertiary institutions in Lagos State. *CRUTECH Journal of Communication (CJC)*, 1(1), 45-50.
- Augoye, J. (2020). Abba Kyari, hand sanitizer preparation, others top Google search in Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/entertainment/naija-fashion/391533-abba-kyari-hand-sanitizer-preparation-others-top-google-search-in-nigeria.html>.
- Awodi, S., Gambo, A., Etudaiye, M., Ssni, H., Mohammed, M., & Ezeaghasi, P. (2019). A content analysis of *Vanguard* online readers' comments on T.Y. Danjuma's self-defence speech in Nigeria. In A. M. Adeyanju, B. Jimoh, & H. M. Suliman (Eds.), *Research, theories and practice. A book in honour of Professor Suleiman Salau* (pp. 471-489). Kuru-Jos: National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS).
- Awotua-Efebo, E. B. (2008). *Effective teaching: Principles and practice*. Port Harcourt: Jeason Services.
- Bassey, J. (2020). Ganduje sacks commissioner over comments on Abba Kyari's death. Retrieved from <https://businessday.ng/politics/article/ganduje-sacks-commissioner-over-comments-on-abba-kyaris-death/>.
- Bolashodun, O. (2020). Opinion: NSA's courage and the need to rein in Abba Kyari's meddlesomeness. Retrieved from <https://www.legit.ng/1308261-opinion-nsas-courage-rein-abba-kyaris-meddlesomeness.html>.
- Boot, H. (2020, May 8). The man died. *Leadership*, p. 25.
- Campbell, J. (2020). Presidential gatekeeper and confidant, Abba Kyari, dies from COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/blog/presidential-gatekeeper-and-confidant-abba-kyari-dies-covid-19>.
- Cozby, P. C. (2004). *Methods in behavioral research* (8th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Diakopoulos, N., & Naaman, M. (2011). Towards quality discourse in online news comments. *Proceedings of the ACM 2011 conference on Computer supported cooperative work CSCW*, 11, 133-142.
- Ekpu, R. (2020). Gambari: Buy one, get one free. Retrieved from https://www.operanewsapp.com/ng/en/share/detail?news_id=7062e86b5de48bfce23fd63d666b4a53&news_entry_id=2346a868200520en_ng&open_type=transcoded&request_id=RELATED_NEWS_d3913931-56ce-4bf7-9184-ca71e863bee0&from=news.
- Goldberg, S. (2010). News sites reining in nasty user comments. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/TECH/web/07/19/commenting.on.news.sites/index.html>.
- Green, M. (2018). No comment! Why More News Sites Are Dumping Their Comment Sections. Retrieved from <https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/29720/no-comment-why-a-growing-number-of-news-sites-are-dumping-their-comment-sections>.
- Gsell, L. (2009, February/March). Comments anonymous. *American Journalism Review*, 16-17.
- Guanah, S. J. (2019). Analysis of netizens' reactions to religious leaders' comments on political issues in selected Nigerian online news platforms. *University of Uyo Journal of Humanities*, 23 (2), 435-462. Available at www.uujh.org.
- Hallahan, K. (2014). *The consequences of mass communication: Cultural and critical perspectives on*

- mass media and society*. Fort Collins: McGraw-Hill-
- Haruna, A. A., & Adamu, M. (2018). Utilisation of information and communication technologies for record keeping and information dissemination by select tertiary institutions in Kaduna State, Nigeria. *Novena Journal of Communication*, 6, 55-68.
- Hlavach, L., & Freivogel, W. H. (2011). Ethical implications of anonymous comments posted to online news stories. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26, 21-37.
- Heatherly, A. K., Fargo, L. A., & Martin, A. J. (2014). *Anonymous online comments: the law and best media practices from around the world*. Vienna-Austria: International Press Institute.
- Ingram, M. (2016). This app founder says anonymous comments allow people to be more honest. Retrieved from https://fortune.com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/fortune.com/2016/08/11/candid-app-anonymity/?amp_js_v=a2&_gsa=1&usqp=mq331AQFKAGwASA%3D#aoh=15909469893070&_p_ct=1590947135216&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%24s&share=https%3A%2F%2Ffortune.com%2F2016%2F08%2F11%2Fcandid-app-anonymity%2F
- Isiekwe, P. (2020, May 7). Abba Kyari: Blind loyalty or presidential abdication? *The Guardian*, p. 13.
- Joffe, H., & Yardley, L. (2004). *Research methods for clinical and health psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self-awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31 (2), 177-192.
- Keyton, J. (2001). *Communication research: Asking questions, findings answers*. New York: McGraw Hill Companies Inc.
- Leung, L. (2009). User-generated content on the Internet: An examination of gratifications, civic engagement and psychological empowerment. *New Media & Society*, 11 (8), 1327-1347.
- Listgarten, S. (2020). Should you read the comments? Retrieved from <https://www.paloaltoonline.com/blogs/p/2020/05/10/should-you-read-the-comments>.
- Manosevitch, E., & Walker, D. (2009, April). *Reader comments to online opinion journalism: A space of public deliberation*. Paper presented at the 10th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, TX. Retrieved from <http://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2009/papers/ManosevitchWalker09.pdf>
- McLellan Marketing Group (2010). Anonymous comments aren't about the conversation at all. Retrieved from <https://www.mclellanmarketing.com/2010/06/anonymous-comments-arent-about-the-conversation-at-all.html>.
- McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (5th Ed.). London: Sage.
- Milioni, D., Vadratsikas, K., & Papa, V. (2011, September). 'Their two cents worth': A content analysis of online readers' comments in mainstream news outlets. Paper presented at the World Association for Public Opinion Research 64th Annual Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Retrieved from <http://wapor.unl.edu/amsterdam-conference-papers/>.
- Mitchell, M. E., Lebow, J. R., Uribe, R. R., Grathouse, H. H., & Shoger, W. W. (2011). Internet use, happiness, social support and introversion: A more fine grained analysis of person variables and internet activity. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(5), 1857-1861.
- Muhammad, A. H. (2018). An assessment of Internet use for research in selected universities in North-Central Nigeria. *The Nigerian Journal of Communication* (TNJC), 15 (1), 183-198.
- Nagar, N. (2011). *The loud public: The case of user comments in online news media*, Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from ProQuest database. (UMI No. 3460834).
- Nwabughio, L. (2020). Abba Kyari: 'Our father' was greatly misunderstood. Retrieved from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/05/abba-kyari-our-father-was-greatly-misunderstood/>.
- Olaopa, T. (2020, May 7). Abba Kyari: Matters arising for a reprofiled presidency. *The Guardian*,

- p. 14.
- Oriola, T. (2020). Osinbajo and the Buhari Presidency after Abba Kyari. Retrieved from .
- Oyedele, J. O., & Agberu, A. O. (2018). Analysis of online readers' comments on news stories about Chibok girls' release published by the Sahara Reporters and the *Vanguard* newspapers. *Fuoye Journal of Communication*, 2, 130-150.
- Oyero, O., & Jegede, E. A. (2011). Patterns of Facebook utilization among students of tertiary institutions in Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*, 3(2), 107-118.
- Pérez-Peña, R. (2010a, April 12). Unmasking the commenters. *New York Times*, p. 1. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/>.
- Pérez-Peña, R. (2010b). News sites rethink anonymous online comments. Retrieved from .
- Richardson, P. (2018). We're changing our policy on online comments. Retrieved from .
- Rosenberg, S. (2010). Newspaper comments: Forget anonymity! The problem is management. Retrieved from <http://www.wordyard.com/2010/04/13/newspaper-comments-forget-anonymity-the-problem-is-management/>.
- Royal Town Planning Institute, RTPI (2005). Guidelines on effective community development and consultation. Retrieved from www.rtpi.org.uk.
- Santana, D. A. (2014). Virtuous or vitriolic: The effect of anonymity on civility in online newspaper reader comment boards. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263729295_Virtuous_or_Vitriolic_The_Effect_of_Anonymity_on_Civility_in_Online_Newspaper_Reader_Comment_Boards. DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2013.813194.
- Sawers, P. (2015). A newspaper is retroactively unmasking readers who have posted online comments anonymously. Retrieved from <https://venturebeat-com.cdn.ampproject.org>.
- Shepard, A. C. (2011). Online comments: Dialogue or diatribe? *Nieman Reports*, 65(2), 53-53.
- Stroud, J. N., Duyn, V. E., & Peacock, C. (2016). News commenters and news comments readers. Retrieved from <https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ENP-News-Commenters-and-Comment-Readers1.pdf>.
- Suzanne, R. M. (2013). *Threads of deliberation: A textual analysis of online news comments*. Master's Thesis, Faculty of Communication, Scripps College, Ohio University.
- Umor, L. A. (2020, May 15). Between the old and new chief of staff. *The Guardian*, p. 12.
- Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction* (6th Ed.). Belmont-California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Yahaya, H. (2020). Nigeria: Kano commissioner sacked over comments on Abba Kyari reacts. Retrieved from <https://allafrica.com/stories/202004200027.html>.
- York, J., & Timm, T. (2011). On newspapers, public discourse, and the right to remain anonymous. Retrieved from <https://www.eff.org/deep-links/2011/09/newspapers-public-discourse-and-right-remain>