

From News Breakers to News Followers: The Influence of Facebook on the Coverage of the January 2010 Crisis in Jos

Authors : T. Obateru, Samuel Olaniran

Abstract : In an era when the new media is affording easy access to packaging and dissemination of information, the social media have become a popular avenue for sharing information for good or ill. It is evident that the traditional role of journalists as 'news breakers' is fast being eroded. People now share information on happenings via the social media like Facebook, Twitter and the rest, such that journalists themselves now get leads on happenings from such sources. Beyond the access to information provided by the new media is the erosion of the gatekeeping role of journalists who by their training and calling, are supposed to handle information with responsibility. Thus, sensitive information that journalists would normally filter is randomly shared by social media activists. This was the experience of journalists in Jos, Plateau State in January 2010 when another of the recurring ethno-religious crisis that engulfed the state resulted in another widespread killing, vandalism, looting, and displacements. Considered as one of the high points of crises in the state, journalists who had the duty of covering the crisis also relied on some of these sources to get their bearing on the violence. This paper examined the role of Facebook in the work of journalists who covered the 2010 crisis. Taking the gatekeeping perspective, it interrogated the extent to which Facebook impacted their professional duty positively or negatively vis-à-vis the peace journalism model. It employed survey to elicit information from 50 journalists who covered the crisis using questionnaire as instrument. The paper revealed that the dissemination of hate information via mobile phones and social media, especially Facebook, aggravated the crisis situation. Journalists became news followers rather than news breakers because a lot of them were put on their toes by information (many of which were inaccurate or false) circulated on Facebook. It recommended that journalists must remain true to their calling by upholding their 'gatekeeping' role of disseminating only accurate and responsible information if they would remain the main source of credible information on which their audience rely.

Keywords : crisis, ethno-religious, Facebook, journalists

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