Public Perception of the Implications of Citizen Journalism for Nigeria's Democracy

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Abstract

This paper investigated public perception of the implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy. Survey research method, with questionnaire as instrument for data collection, was used to generate data for the study. Four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents. Out of this number, three hundred and ninty-six (396) copies were returned. The analysis was based on the copies returned. The findings of the study show that citizen journalism had both positive and negative implications for Nigeria's democracy. While the study found that citizen journalism facilitated the growth of Nigeria's democracy, it also found that it spread lies and encouraged electoral violence in the country. The study also revealed that the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism was not low. Some of the recommendations made based on the findings of the study include sensitization of Nigerians on the proper use of the social media and regulation of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria.

Introduction

Journalism has ceased to be the exclusive preserve of professional journalists and the mainstream media. Ordinary citizens without professional training in journalism now practise journalism with the aid of the increasing prevalence of the new media technologies

The process in which ordinary citizens engage in journalism practice is called citizen journalism. It is the act of a citizen or a group of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information (Bowman and Willis, 2003:10). This brand of journalism has been variously called "public journalism", "participatory journalism", "democratic journalism", "guerrilla journalism" and "street journalism." In all, it is a rapidly evolving form of journalism where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community. It is news of the people by the people and for the people (Banda, 2011:26).

Over the years, citizen journalism has gained currency across the globe. Being seen as the "We media", citizen journalism is considered as the complete democratization of journalism. The implication of this view is that every human being can now practise

journalism, without necessarily undergoing journalism trainings and irrespective of class, creed and occupation.

The ordinary citizens, who were hitherto prevented from expressing their views by the bureaucracy of the traditional media, have found solace in citizen journalism. New media technologies such as social networking and media-sharing websites, and the increasing prevalence of cellular phones have made citizen journalism more accessible to people all over the world who can now report breaking news much faster than traditional media organs(Wikipedia, 2012).

The potency of citizen journalism has been tested. The examples that readily come to mind are the roles of citizen journalism in the Areb uprising popularly known as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement in the United States of America. On the home front, citizen journalism played a significant part in the nation-wide protest against fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria in 2012.

Citizen journalism has been criticized by its opponents as amateurish, misleading, fallacious, subjective and haphard in quality and coverage. Some critics claim that veracity is murdered in citizen journalism.

However, the proponents of citizen journalism believe that it is beneficial to modern democracy. It has been described as the news of the people, by the people and for the people. It has, therefore, been argued that citizen journalism helps to create the democratic citizenry that is necessary for democratic governance.

This paper is an attempt to ascertain the implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy, in this era of social media prevalence.

Statement of the Problem

Citizen journalism has attracted mixed reactions. While the proponents say that it is good for the society, the opponents hold that it is injurious to the peace existence and governance of the society. This paper, therefore, aimed to find out the implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:
1. To find out whether Nigerians participate in the country's democracy through citizen journalism.
2. To ascertain the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism.
3. To ascertain the implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy.
4. To find out the factors that work against the use of citizen journalism in Nigeria's democracy.
5. To determine how to make citizen journalism beneficial to Nigeria's democracy.

Research Questions

These questions were framed to guide the study:
1. Do Nigerians participate in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism?

2. What is the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism?
3. What are the implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy?
4. Are there factors that prevent participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism?
5. How can citizen journalism be made beneficial to Nigeria's democracy?

Review of Related Literature
UNDP(2010:67) carried out a baseline readiness assessment of the Nigerian mass media as forum for citizen engagement in the 2011 elections in the country and found that Nigerians already had access to a wide range of media, including the Internet. The study found that many young people in Nigeria (57.4%) were Internet users who participate in social media, mostly, but not only facebook. They were already deploying the social media for political and democratic discussions, asking questions from officials who were on social media platforms and discussing with one another the political and other issues that concerned the country.

The UNDP survey revealed that Nigerian political leaders have heavy presence on the Internet and the social media networks. Citing Webster(2010), the study stated that President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria was said to have "more facebook fans than the combined tally of British Prime Minister, David Cameron; German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and South African Head of State, Jacob Zuma." This survey report points attention to the embrace of the social media and citizen journalism by the Nigerian political leaders and the electorate.

In a study on the rise of citizen journalism in Nigeria- case study of Sahara Reporters, Dare(2011:44) found that only 33 respondents of the 120 surveyed trusted Sahara Reporters. The Sahara Reporters, however, scored high as a source of breaking news: 86 respondents cited it as a source of breaking news. Also, 58 of the respondents noted that the website (Sahara Reporters) gave them a voice in public affairs.

Dare's study gave an insight into the use of the social media in Nigeria. In it, facebook scored the highest with 54 representatives, followed by twitter 17, YouTube 10 blogs 4 and 32 of the respondents reported using a combination of the first three. Dare (2011:24) stated that "National recognition came for social media when on June28, 2010, Nigeria's President, Goodluck Jonathan, launched his facebook fans page to reach out to the youth and Nigerians with a view to getting feedback on electoral reform and other national issues." He observed that during the 2011 presidential elections, Nigerian politicians employed the social networking sites like facebook and twitter and indeed sms messaging to advance their campaigns and deliver their manifestos in order to boost their followership.

Salawu (2011:192) studied citizen journalism off-line, with a focus on the Nigerian Punch model. He found that , despite the newspaper's claim of creating an opportunity for readers to create their own news, the Punch's model of citizen journalism was still with some limitations. He noted that "Compared with online citizen journalism, especially one that is done through blogs, the Punch model is with

inadequacies. In the model, the professional in charge of the page would still play the role of gatekeepers." He added that the professionals would "determine what stories to go public and what should not go. Even, for those that would go public, some editing would have been done on the stories, thereby robbing them of their originality, and in a way distorting the actual reports of the contributors."

However, Salawu (2011:194) observed that "Citizen journalism has profound implications for the flowering of democracy. But do we consider the question of ethics in this open source journalism, and how to regulate the activities of the great army of participants, just to ensure the health of the society?" Citing Bowman and Willis (2003:54-58), he listed the benefits of citizen journalism to include increased trust in media, shared responsibility in informing democracy, better journalism, etc.

One important factor in citizen journalism is the level of Internet usage and penetration. A report by the International Telecommunications Union put the Internet user figure of Nigeria at 43,982,200 as of June 2010, equivalent of 28.9 of the country's population. This is far from the year 2000 figures in which Nigeria was reported to have only 200,000 Internet users, which was just 0.1% of the country's population. This improvement notwithstanding, the level of Internet penetration in Nigeria is still low.

Another impediment to citizen journalism in Nigeria is the high level of illiteracy in the country. According to the World Development Indicators (2010), reports, the adult literacy level in Nigeria is 60%. UNDP (2010:69) noted that "This means that 40% of the population (about 60 million people in Nigeria) is excluded from citizen journalism and all other opportunities for audience participation that may require basic literacy. This is clearly dangerous to the health of the nation's democracy." This, in fact, is the bane of citizen journalism in Nigeria.

Citizen journalism has been variously criticized by its opponents. In his book, the *Cult of the amateur*, Keren (2010:15), cited in the Wikipedia (2012), wrote: "Out of this anarchy, it suddenly became clear that what was governing the infinite monkeys now inputting away on the Internet was the law of digital Darwinism, the survival of the loudest and most opinionated. Under these rules, the only way to intellectually prevail is by infinite filibustering."

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the public sphere theory. According to the World Bank (n.d),

> The notion of the public sphere is at the center of participatory approaches to democracy. The public sphere is the arena where citizens come together, exchange opinions regarding public affairs, discuss, deliberate, and eventually form public opinion. This arena can be a specific place where citizens gather (for example, a town hall meeting), but it can also be a communication infrastructure through which citizens send and receive information and opinions. The public sphere is a central aspect of good governance. Without a functioning

and democratic public sphere, government officials cannot be held accountable for their actions, and citizens will not be able to assert any influence over political decisions.

The contemporary understanding of the public sphere concept is based on the work of Jurgen Habermas, a German sociologist. Habermas provided a comprehensive analysis of the nature as well as the historical transformations of the public sphere. Habermas (1992:360), cited in World Bank (n.d), defined the public sphere as "network for communicating information and points of view . . . the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions."

The public sphere theory vividly captures the nature and style of citizen journalism

Method
The survey research method was adopted to generate relevant data for the study. The method was considered appropriate because the study was an audience research that involved ascertaining opinions, attitudes and believes of the respondents on the subject matter.

Population of the Study
The population of the student comprised residents of Edo State who were 18 years and above. According to the 2006 population census, the population of Edo State was 3,218,332. So, the study used a population of 3,218,332.

The researcher decided to use Edo State due to the political activities and tension in the State, in preparation for the governorship election in the State slated for July 2012.

Sample Size
The study used a sample size of 400 respondents. The sample size was drawn using Yamane's (1967:886) formula for sample size determination:

$n = N/1+N(e)^2$

Where n= sample size; N= population and e= level of significance (error limit). The level of significance in this study is 0.05 (5%).

n= 3,218,332/1+3,218,332(0.05)^2 n= 3218332/1+3218332(0.0025)

n= 3218332/8046.83   n= 399.95 =   400.

The researcher drew the sample from the two largest cities in Edo State – Benin and Ekpoma. The cities were chosen because of their strategic positions in the State. Benin is the state capital and houses the University of Benin; Ekpoma houses the state university (Ambrose Ali University). The cities are cosmopolitan, with enlightened citizen.

Sampling Technique

Simply random sampling technique was adopted in selecting the sample for the study. The technique was preferred to other sampling techniques because it gave every member of the population equal chance of being included in the sample.

Instrument for Data Collection
The study used questionnaire to generate the needed data. The questionnaire contained structured (close-ended) and unstructured (open-ended) questions. The open-ended questions gave the respondents space to express their opinions, while the close-ended questions provided options to guide the respondents. 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents.

Reliability and Validity of the Research Instrument
A pilot survey was first carried out by this researcher, during which ten copies of the questionnaire were administered to selected members of the population of the study. The aim of the pilot survey was to assess the suitability of the instrument for generating relevant data for the study. The measuring instrument was later given to a statistician for face validity examination.

Data Presentation and Analysis
Simple tables, frequencies and percentages were used to present and analyze the generated data as shown below.

Figure 1: Respondents' Sex Distribution
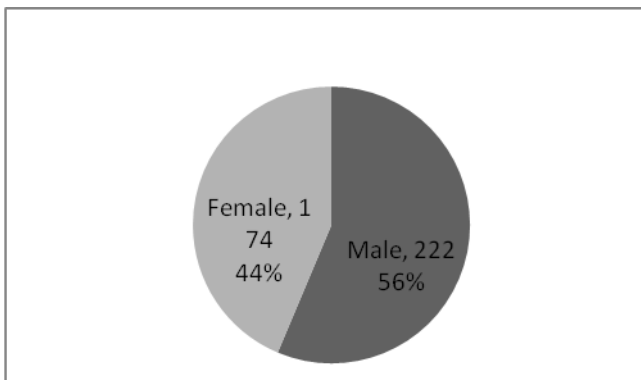
The above figure shows that 222 (56%) of the respondents were males, whereas 174 (44%) of them were females.

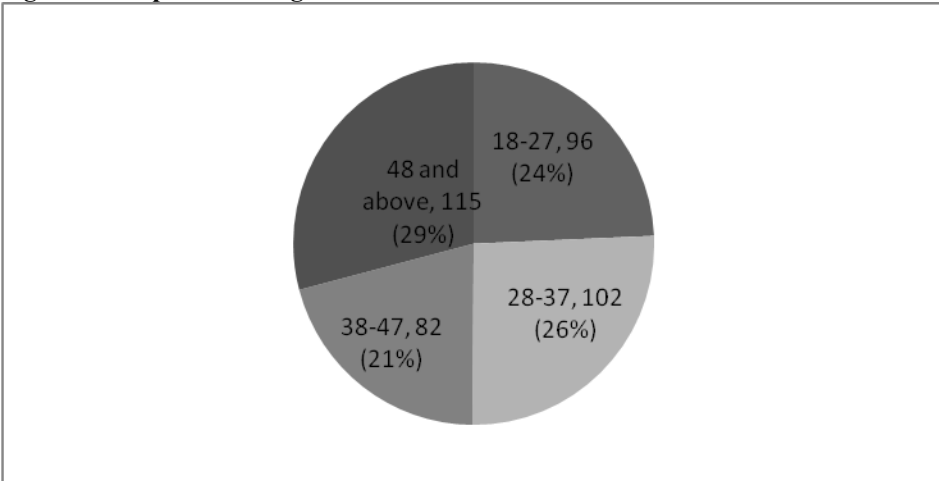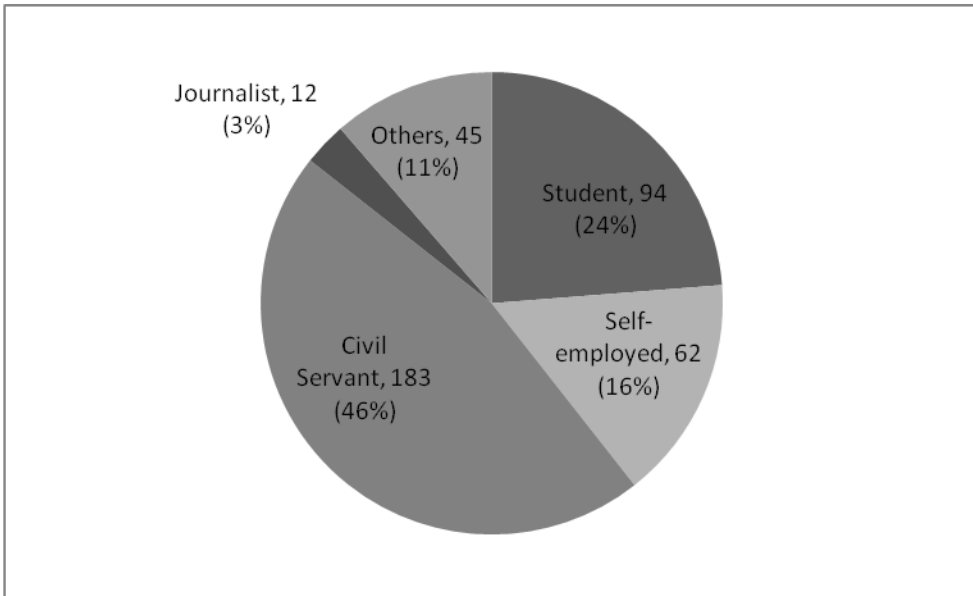**Figure 2: Respondents' Age Distribution**

Figure 2 indicates that 96 (24%) of the respondents were aged between 18 and 27 years; 102 (26%) were between 28 and 37 years; 83 (21%) were between 38 and 47 years; 115 (29%) of them were 48 years and above.

Figure 3: Respondents' occupation

From figure 3, 94 (24%) of the respondents were students; 62 (16%) were self-employed; 183 (46%) were civil servants; 12 (3%) were journalists and 45 (11%) of them had other occupations.

Answering the Research Questions

Definite questions were asked in the questionnaire to generate answers to the research questions that were posed in the study. The data that addressed each research question are presented and analyzed here.

Research Question One: Do Nigerians participate in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism?

Figure 4: Whether Nigerians participate in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism
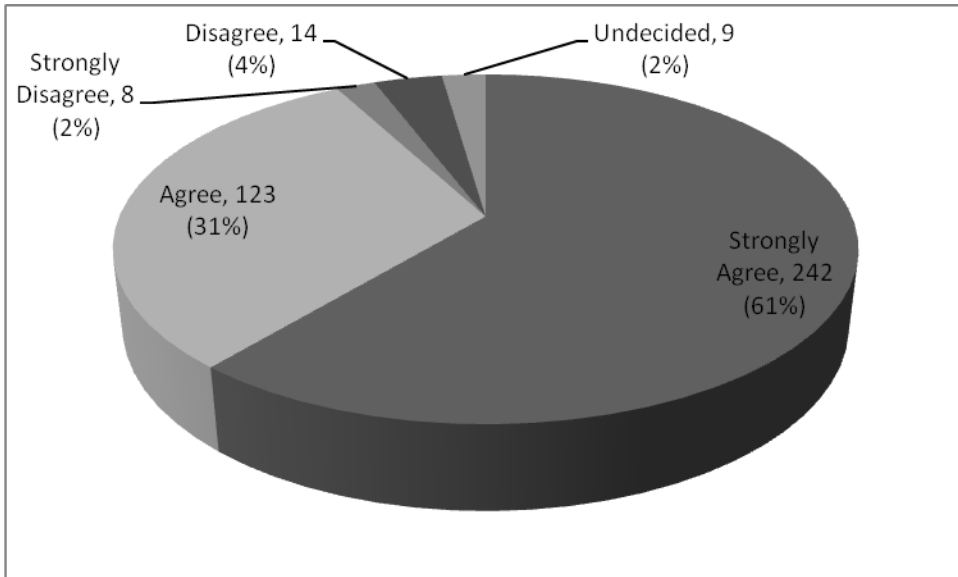
The data on figure 4 show that 242 (61%) of the respondents strongly agreed that Nigerians participated in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism; 123 (31%) of them agreed; 8 (2%) strongly disagreed; 14 (4%) disagreed while 9 (2%) of them were undecided.
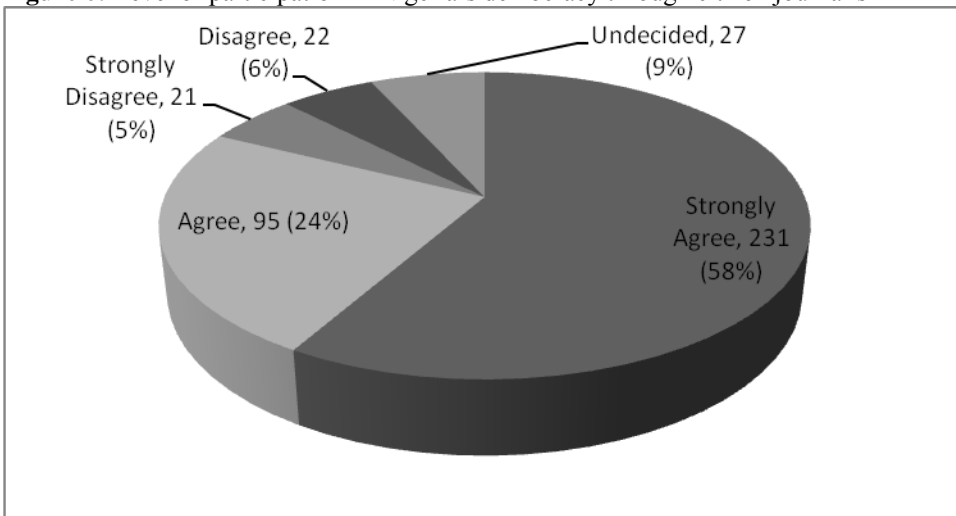
Figure 5: Whether the respondents have participated in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism
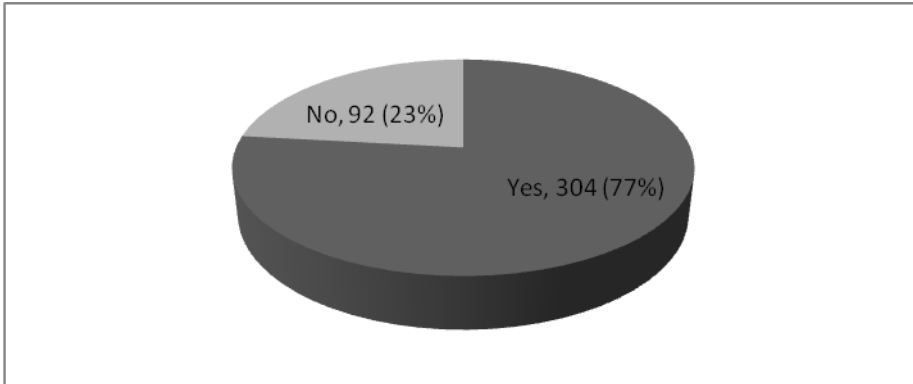
The above figure shows that 304 (77%) of the respondents had participated in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism while 92 (23%) of them had not.

Research Question Two: What is the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism?

Figure 6: Level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism

From the above figure, 231 (58%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism was not low; 95 (24%) agreed; 21 (5%) strongly disagreed; 22 (6%) disagreed while 27 (7%) were undecided.

Research Question Three: What are the implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy?

Figure 7: Implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy
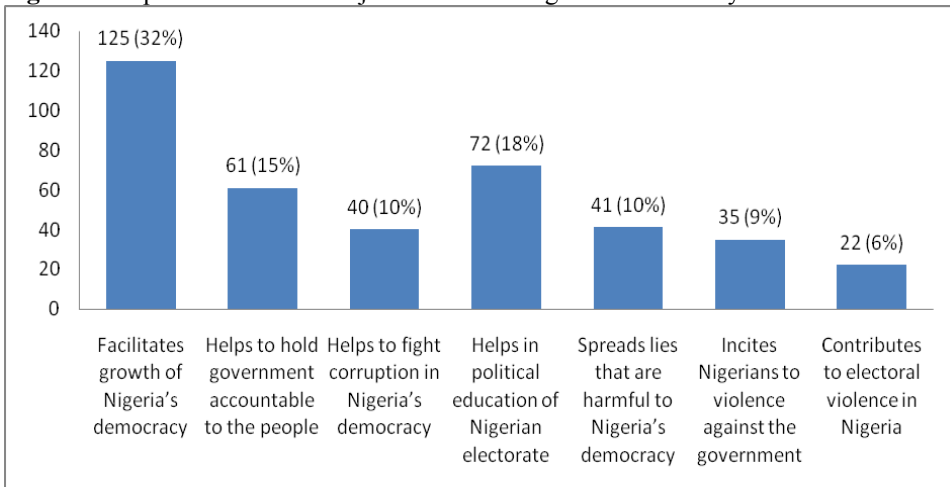

Figure 7 above shows that 125 (32%) of the respondents were of the view that citizen journalism facilitated the growth of Nigeria's democracy; 61 (15%) of them said it helped to hold government accountable to Nigerians; 40 (10%) said it helped to fight corruption in Nigeria's democracy; 72 (18%) stated that it helped in political education of Nigerian electorate; 41 (10%) said it spread lies that were harmful to Nigeria's democracy; 35 (9%) said it incited Nigerians to violence against the government; 22 (6%) stated that it contributed to electoral violence in Nigeria.

Research Question Four: How can citizen journalism be made beneficial to Nigeria's democracy?

Item 23 in the questionnaire was used to elicit answer for this research question. The item was an open-ended question that required the respondent to suggest ways in which citizen journalism could be made beneficial to Nigeria's democracy.

A majority of the respondents suggested that Nigerians should be sensitized on the benefits and dangers of citizen journalism; some of them stated that citizen journalism should be regulated; some of them suggested that electricity and other infrastructural facilities required for effective social networking should be provided , whereas some of them were of the view that the government should publish it activities and policies in the social media to allow Nigerians greater space to participate in the country's democracy.

Analysis/Discussion of Findings of the Study

The study found that Nigerians participated in the country's democracy through citizen journalism. The data displayed on figure 4 show that 242 (61%) of the respondents strongly agreed that Nigerians participated in Nigeria's democracy via citizen journalism and 123 (31%) of them also agreed to that. figure 5 indicates that 304 (77%) of the respondents said they had participated in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism. This finding of the study means that citizen journalism has become a major medium for citizens' participation in Nigeria's democracy.

The study also found that the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy via citizen journalism was not low. From figure 6, 231 (58%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the level of participation in the country's democracy through citizen democracy was not low; 95 (24%) of them agreed that it was not low. This finding is in line with the response to whether Nigerians participated in the country's democracy through citizen journalism. It has reaffirmed that Nigerians actually participated in the country's democracy via citizen journalism. The high level of participation in governance in Nigeria through citizen journalism recorded in this study lends credence to the heavy presence of Nigerians in the social media recorded in other studies cited earlier in this study.

The study also found that citizen journalism has both positive and negative implications for Nigeria's democracy. The positive implications identified by some of the respondents included the it facilitated the growth of the country's democracy; helped to hold government accountable to Nigerians; helped to fight corruption in Nigeria's democracy; helped in political education of Nigerian electorate. Some of the respondents identified the negative implications of citizen journalism for Nigeria's democracy to include spreading lies that were harmful to Nigeria's democracy; inciting Nigeria's to violence against the government and contributing to electoral violence in Nigeria. These negative implications buttress Dare's (2011:44) finding that only 33 respondents of the 120 surveyed trusted Sahara Reporters. That might also be why some of the respondents in this study suggested that citizen journalism should be regulated in Nigeria. The report in the social media that the Dana plane crash in Nigeria in June 2012 resulted from the closure of the airways because of the President's wife's visit to Lagos state is a case in point. It was later proved to be false.

However, the positive consequences of citizen journalism to Nigeria's democracy identified in this study appear soothing. It implies that those who have access to the social media can freely participate in governance in Nigeria. With this, the political exclusion in Nigeria can be, at least, be reduced.

Conclusion

The study found that the level of participation in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism was high. It revealed that citizen journalism had both positive and negative implications for Nigeria's democracy. While the study show that citizen journalism

facilitated the growth of Nigeria's democracy, it is equally clear from the findings of the study that citizen journalism spread harmful lies and contributed to electoral violence in Nigeria.

This double –edged nature of citizen journalism calls for caution. This might be why some of the respondents suggested that citizen journalism should be regulated in Nigeria. On this note, time is, indeed, ripe for Nigerians to be adequately sensitized on the proper use of the social media that most citizens use for citizen journalism. This will help to eradicate, or at least, drastically reduce the adverse consequences of citizen journalism on Nigeria's democracy.

Recommendations

These recommendations were made based on the findings of the study.

- Nigerians should be sensitized on the use of the social media
- Nigerian citizen journalists should be encouraged to use the citizen media to build the country.
- Mainstream media in Nigeria should open citizen journalism websites to help citizens contribute to content creation.
- Citizen journalism should be regulated in Nigeria.

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