

“Those Speculating About My Health are Mischief Makers”: Contextualizing Newsreaders’ Comments on President Buhari’s Illness

Yakubu Ozohu-Suleiman¹

Adegwu Obuo John²

Abstract

President Buhari’s illness has become a subject of political interest in Nigeria that is divergently represented in the local news media and variedly reacted to the public. Premium Times – one of the country’s famous private online newspapers had published a news story about the President’s telephone conversation with his Media Advisor with the headline, “Those speculating about my health are mischief makers”. This story received 250 comments from readers within three days of publication, thus signifying public anxiety over the President’s illness. In this study, we analyzed the 250 comments to establish the tones of public opinion on the President’s illness in relation to the country’s current issues with governance. Each comment, taken as a unit of analysis, was coded into operationalized categories of “Favors the President”; “Disfavors the President” and “Neutral to the President” to determine their relative incidence. The reasons indicated for the tones of the comments were coded into a variety of contextual categories such as “Discontent with economic recession”; “The Acting President (Osinbajo) is doing better”; “Buhari is needed for the

¹ **Dr. Yakubu Ozohu-Suleiman** is a Lecturer in Ahmadu Bello University. He holds a PhD and teaches media and communication with research interest in governance, human security and development. He was formerly Senior Reporter at *Daily Trust* newspaper in Nigeria, and resource person on Investigative Journalism to the World Bank Institute.

² **Adegwu Obuo John** is a student in the Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: Yakubu Ozohu-Suleiman (Ph.D) Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, NIGERIA. Email: osyakubu@gmail.com. Phone: +234 (0)803 689 9917

success of anti-corruption policy and institutionalization of good governance in Nigeria”; “Empathy towards the President”; “Cultural aversion towards the President”. A Residual category was created and tagged “Others” to accommodate comments that do not fit into any of the afore-mentioned categories. Findings reveal that majority of the comments took the unfavorable tone, with cross-tabulation revealing “discontent with economic recession” the most as reason. The next closely indicated reason for unfavorable comments is “Cultural aversion to the President”. Minority comments that favored the President were largely appended to “Buhari is needed for the success of anti-corruption policy and institutionalization of good governance in Nigeria” as reason for the tone. Placing these results in a broad context, this study concludes that online news media hold a vestige of becoming more successful than the traditional print in stimulating governance debate, enhancing political participation and visibility of public opinion, and bridging the gaps between the government and the public in Nigeria.

Keywords: Readers’ comments, News public, President Buhari, Premium Times, Nigeria, Online news.

Research Background

In May 2016, Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari cancelled a two-day project inauguration trip to Lagos after citing an ear infection suspected to be Ménière's disease. About one month later, on June 6, the President travelled to the United Kingdom to seek medical attention. This happened a few days after the President’s Media Advisor Femi Adesina had announced that the President was "as fit as fiddle" and "hale and hearty". The announcement sparked criticism from some political analysts who think the President’s trip to the UK for medical attention suggests that his Media Advisor had misinformed Nigerians about the actual health condition of the President.

On January 19, 2017, President Buhari again departed Nigeria for a 10-day vacation to the UK, during which he was to undergo medical treatment. At the expiration of the two-week vacation on 8 February 2017, the President requested Parliament to extend his vacation to await test results. His office

did not give any further details on his health condition nor the expected date of his return, thus leaving the Vice President Yemi Osinbajo to preside over the country's affairs longer than expected.

The President's prolonged stay in the UK and his silence in addressing Nigerians about the reason became a controversial issue featuring prominently on social media and news headlines. A rumor that the President had died in the UK became widespread on social media networks, and one of the President's political opponents – Ayo Fayose – the Governor of Ekiti State was quoted on WhatsApp to have said, "I will commit suicide if Buhari returns alive". Discontent with these rumors, the President, according to news reports, had a telephone conversation with his Media Advisor in which he said, "I am still resting, thank you for holding out against mischief makers". Although there are no information as to whether the President's telephone conversation with his Media Advisor was meant for private or public consumption, the tone suggests a private conversation, which got to the media through undisclosed means. On February 25, 2017, at 7:48 pm Nigerian time, *Premium Times* took to its Facebook page to break the news of the President's telephone conversations with his Media Adviser under the title, "Those speculating about my health are mischief makers" – Buhari. This story generated 250 comments from Face book readers across Nigeria within three days of publication.

In this study, we did a census analysis of these early comments with the following objectives:

- 1) determining how favorable or unfavorable and neutral they are to President Buhari and
- 2) identifying the context in which they favor or disfavor or are neutral to the President.

The overall goal of the investigation is to understand how the tone of public opinion on the President's illness relates to prevailing issues of governance in the country, and what implications their visibility in reader's comments might have on the intersection between the media, government and the public in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Significance of Online Readers' Comments

There is a long dissatisfaction regarding the limited one-way communication process of traditional mass media (Schultz, 1999). This is because of lack of immediate feedback options for readers of media contents to comment on issue that matter to them. The arrival of web 2.0 on the internet and subsequent invention of social media platforms has closed this gap by establishing new opportunities for online newspapers to deliver news to large readers and at the same time offer them greater chance of commenting on the news almost immediately the news is posted online. Whereas in the traditional newspapers, feedback is delayed and limited to writing letters to the editor, online newspaper offers opportunity for instant feedback with as many members of the news public able to express their views on issues of common interest. This is why the emergence of online reader's comments over the past years has made opinions of readers more visible to journalists and users of news websites (Friemel & Dotsch, 2015). They can immediately publish their opinions below online news texts (Erjavec, 2014). With regard to this, Weber (2013) argues that the world is witnessing an increase in user-generated content in online news, and that commenting on the news is the most common form of participation in contemporary news use, and it is certainly one of the most common forms of citizen engagement online.

Posting comments on the news is one of the most popular forms of user participation in online newspapers, and there is great potential for public discourse that is associated with this form of user communication. However, this potential arises only when several users participate in commenting and when their communication becomes interactive (Weber, 2013). According to Alejandro (2010), a growing number of readers, viewers and listeners are going online for their news. This is in line with the Schultz's (1999) idea that the internet has the potential to increase interest in journalism. Readers' comments are a rich source of qualitative data that reflect public opinions and provide insight into how decisions are made and beliefs formed (Holmes & Henrich, 2013). Diakopoulos & Naaman (2012) noted that with the growing interest in the interactivity of news, the quality of the discussion anchored around online news stories is of paramount importance to news organizations wishing to stimulate public criticism, debate, and discussion while maintaining a credible community profile.

3. Impact of Online Reader's Comments

A growing research literature has shown interest in the character of online news readers comments and its impact on knowledge of public opinion. Friemel, Thomas & Dotsch's (2015) reported of findings from an online survey among the users of eight Swiss newspapers, for example, indicates that comments are not representative of public opinion since people who write comments tend to differ from those reading the comments with respect to gender, age, and political orientation. They explained that those writing comments tend to be politically further right than those reading comments and that "Rightists" are writing more frequently. However, readers of the comments are not aware of this bias, leading to a systematically distorted perception of public opinion.

Adeyanju (2014) had similarly conducted a textual analysis of online newspaper readers' comments on the coverage of the Chibok schoolgirls kidnap. The study used Mckeess' post-structuralist approach to make a guess about the contextual meaning of the comments using Nigeria's *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* newspapers. The findings revealed that online comments were often influenced by ethnic, religious and cultural affiliations while tones of banality, frustration and hostility were present in the specific case examined. This finding underscores the need to pay attention to cultural differences in studying newsreaders' comments on issues of common concern in a politically fragmented society.

Coe, Kenski and Rains (2014) examined 6,400 comments made by readers of a newspaper website to compare the character of those who comment frequently with those who are infrequent in commenting. The study, which was conducted over 300 articles, came up with the finding that that the frequent commenter is more civil the infrequent commenter and that the uncivil commenter is less likely than civil commenter to use evidence in support of claims.

In another dimension, Weber (2013) analyzed *Weilte.de*, *Focus online* and *Sueddeutsche.de* to determine the factors influencing participation and interactivity in online newspaper reader's comments. The result of this study showed that temporal dimension of news events frequently affects participation level. The study also indicated that the potentials for quality

discourse are determined by the feature of the websites, especially by a website's comment management strategy such as the presentation style of the news and optimization of news story for active audience participation.

Da Silva (2015) conducted a study on online news comments to give readers account on online news comments, published in the online version of one of the most prominent daily Portuguese newspapers, *Publico*. The study used 90 posts to examine readers' viewpoints, perceptions, and expectations toward online comments section. The finding of the research showed that some post made positive uptakes, while a few conversational comments provided suggestion of negative perception that users have, with high degree of frustration and anger. This study is similar to that of Rowe (2013), who analyzed comments left by readers of the Washington Post's politics section on Washington Post's website and Facebook page, using a sample of 250 comments. The study compared the occurrences of incivility in readers' comments on Washington Post's website and Facebook page. The findings showed that incivility of comments was more/less common on the website than the Facebook page, where instances of incivility and impoliteness were less likely to be interpersonal.

From a study of online news comments to explore newsroom strategies, tension and opportunities of value in sacBee.com, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2012) reported that both writing comments as well as reading them fit together fairly well. The study suggested that individual differences in reading post impact on quality perceptions. Fernandes, Giurcanu, Neely and Bowers (2011) also studied college students' Facebook group for the 2008 presidential election in the United States. The study revealed that Obama was personally criticized on 23% of all wall posts of pro-McCain group and criticized for policies on 46% of the wall posts, while McCain group was personally criticized on 24% of posts and his policies were criticized 17% of the wall posts of pro-Obama group. These findings indicates that Facebook provides a forum for political participation, where supporters can organize on a local level and exhibit their support for their candidate as well as frustrations they have with the opposing candidate.

Overall, existing research literature indicates that online readers' comments offer a new avenue for understanding public opinion. Although this

approach does not often provide sufficient data for generalizable outcomes as the review here shows, it offers accessible and verifiable data, and represents a new opportunity for increased understanding of political participation.

4. METHOD

This study is based on a content analysis of readers' comments on *Premium Times* story about President Muhammadu Buhari's illness titled, "Those speculating about my health are mischief makers - Buhari", posted on Facebook by the newspaper on February 25, 2017 at 7:48 pm Nigerian time. This story generated 250 comments from readers across Nigeria within three days of publication, signifying the political significance of the President's illness. *Premium Times* is Nigeria's top-two most prominent and widely read online newspapers. It is privately owned and has demonstrated considerable measure of editorial independence in pursuing investigative stories.

The unit of analysis was the comment, which was obtained through the Facebook feed of *Premium Times*. The population of the comment (unit of analysis) was 250, a census of which was included in the study.

4.1 Categories and Measurement

To analyze the comments, we drew up the content categories from the research objectives and measured them as quantitative variables by identifying and coding the comment in which their descriptors are present as "1," and others in which their descriptors are absent as "0." Cases of multiple descriptors occurring in a single comment were resolved by initially recording each occurrence of a descriptor as "1," such that each comment (unit of analysis) is coded for the most prevalent descriptor. This was done to comply with the rule of coding each unit of analysis into only one category. The categories include "Favors the President", which is operationalized here to mean comments that empathize with the President and show support for his leadership; "Disfavors the President", operationalized to mean comments that indicate disregard for the President's health condition and opposition to his leadership; "Neutral to the President", operationalized to mean comments that indicate balance of the views. On the reasons indicated for tone of comments, we also drew up

categories from a variety of prevailing viewpoints on the issues of governance in the country, which includes “Discontent with economic recession”; “The Acting President (Osinbajo) is doing better”; “Buhari is needed for the success of anti-corruption policy and institutionalization of good governance in Nigeria”; “Empathy towards the President”; “Cultural (personal, ethnic and/or religious) aversion towards the President”. These categories served as the context in which the tones of reader’s comments were situated. Lastly, we created residual category as “Others” to accommodate comments that do not fit into any of the afore-mentioned categories.

We conducted inter-coder reliability test with a sample of 25 (10%) of the 250 comments. *ReCal2* internet-based software was used to calculate inter-coder reliability. The test result shows a reliability coefficient of between 87 and 98 percent for agreement, and a range of .68 and 99.0 for Scott *Pi*, Cohen Kappa and Krippendorff’s alpha. Reliability is thus substantial.

5. Findings:

5.1 OBJ 1: TONES OF COMMENT

The first objective of this study was to determine the tone of the readers’ comments. Table 1 below shows the coding for tones of the comments analyzed.

Table 1: Tones of Comment

Category of comments	Frequency	Percentage
Favors the President	64	25.6
Disfavors the President	150	60.0
Neutral to the President	36	14.4
Total	250	100

The description in table 1, as above, indicates that majority (60.0 %) of readers who reacted to *Premium Times* news on President Buhari’s illness did so in negative tone. This means the comments mostly disfavor the President. Those whose comments favor or are neutral to the president were minority, drawing on the data analyzed here.

5.2 OBJ2: REASONS INDICATED FOR TONES OF COMMENT

The second objective was to determine the context in which the readers' comments favor or disfavor or are neutral to the President. This is presented here as reasons indicated by the readers for the tones of their comments. Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of comments that occurred on the path of the individual categories of reason in relation to the overall population of comments, while table 4 places the reason in the context of the tones of comments.

Table 3: Reasons Indicated for Tones of Comment

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Discontent with Economic Recession	101	40.4
Vice President Osinbajo is doing better	7	2.8
Buhari is needed for Good Governance	58	23.2
Empathy towards President Buhari	40	16
Cultural Aversion to President Buhari	42	16.8
Others	2	0.8
Total	250	100

Table 4: Tones of Comment*Reasons for Tones of Comment Cross Tabulation

Tones of Comment:	Reasons for Tones of Comments						Total
	Economic Recession	Osinbajo is Better	Good Governance	Empathy	Aversion	Others	
Favors	0	0	58	6	0	0	64
Disfavors	101	7	0	0	42	0	150
Neutral	0	0	0	34	0	2	36
Total	101	7	58	40	42	2	250

As table 3 shows, a total of 250 comments were coded to determine therein the frequency of occurrence of the categories of reason for tones of comment. The tones of comment and the reasons for tones of comment were further cross-tabulated on table 4 to reveal the proportions of occurrence of the individual categories of reason in relation to the tones of comment. As the result shows, 101 comments, representing 40.4% of the overall comments (table 3), and 67.3% of the 150 comments that disfavor the President (table 4), indicated economic recession as the reason for the

direction of the comments. This brings economic recession up as the strongest context in which readers' comments that disfavor the President occurred. Other reasons indicated in the comments that disfavor the President are 'cultural aversion', which as earlier explained refers to personal dislike for the person of the President or his ethnic or religious identity, and 'Vice President Osinbajo is doing better' (table 3). These reasons respectively constitute 16.8% of the overall comments (28% of the 150 comments that disfavor the President) and 2.8% of the overall comments (4.6% of the 150 comments that disfavor the President).

On the comments that favor the President, 'Buhari is needed for the success of anti-corruption policy and institutionalization of good governance in Nigeria' came up as the strongest context in which they occurred. This reason was indicated in 23.2% ($n=58$) of the 250 overall comments, and 90.6% ($n=58$) of the 64 comments that favor the President. The other reason indicated in the comments that favor the President was 'empathy towards the President'. Comments that occurred in this context generally took 16% ($n=40$) of the overall comments. However, a careful analysis reveals that only six (6) of them fit into the category that favors the President. This number represents an upward approximation of 9.4% of the 64 comments that favor the President. The remaining 34 comments that came under the empathy category occurred in the neutral context (table 4). The 34 comments represent 94.4% of the 36 comments that occurred in the neutral context, while the remaining two (2) comments came under the residual category of 'others' as they could not fit into any of the predefined contextual categories (table 4).

6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Readers' comments offer a new research opportunity for improved understanding of public opinion in Africa's growing online community. Although it comes with limited representation of the public in low literate and technologically weak parts of the continent, a critical segment of the public can be easily studied on diverse issues in determined scope, with greater empiricism and visibility of the opinions. In addition, with the enhanced feedback offered by online news compared to traditional hard paper or radio/TV news, readers' comments also provides an avenue for improved political participation, which is globally used as an index of the

quality of democracy. As the findings from this study show, the favorability of newsreaders comment on President Buhari's illness was embedded in a variety of opinions on the current challenges of governance in Nigeria. It is these opinions, rather than mere sympathy for the President, that defined the tone of the comments on the news of his illness. Hence, contrary to the widespread sympathy for the President over his illness, a majority ($n=150$, 60% of 250) newsreaders' opinion disfavors the President. The major reason indicated for this tone is "discontent with economic recession". The economic self-reliance policy introduced by Buhari's administration came with widespread criticism partly because of the inflation resulting from ban on importation and restriction on foreign exchange. For most of the public, as the finding from this study reflects, economic recession seems the least to expect from the "change" for which they recently voted. Hence, majority of the readers whose comments disfavor the President indicated economic recession as the reason for the direction of their comments. As the result from this study equally shows, there are readers who believe that the institution of good governance in Nigeria can be achieved through President Buhari's anti-corruption policy. Such readers, whose comments favor the President, though in weak proportion relative to those that disfavor the President, may be seen to have a transformative understanding of the economic recession. A possible implication of this finding is that majority of the comments that disfavor the President were driven by frustrations over the issues with governance that needed to be fixed rather than the emotions of his illness.

Also contrary to the widespread assumptions that majority of the public prefers Acting President Osinbajo, findings from this study show that only a few of the comments that disfavor the President ($n=7$, 2.8% of 250) indicated that Acting President Osinbajo was doing better than Buhari. Instead, next to discontent with economic recession as the reason indicated for comments that disfavor the President is cultural aversion to him ($n=42$, 16.8% of 250). The strength of this tone is not surprising because of the deeply rooted ethnic and religious problems in Nigeria, which often determines attitudes towards national issues. Adeyanju (2014) had similarly found in his textual analysis of online newspaper readers' comments on the coverage of the Chibok school girls kidnap that the comments were largely influenced by ethnic, religious and cultural affiliations. The resurgence of

Biafra secessionist agitations among the Igbo ethnic group and the cry over purported Islamization of Nigeria by Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) are more recent indicators. However, as the findings from this study show, cultural (ethnic and religious) determinants still lie below an overriding interest of the larger public in inclusive and integrated national development.

Comments that favored the President ($n=64$, 25.6% of 250) were largely appended to the reason that Buhari is needed for the success of anti-corruption policy and institutionalization of good governance in Nigeria. Six out of the 64 were embedded in empathy towards the President. Although this strength of the favorable tone lies below the unfavorable tone, it reflects the strength of popularity of the Buhari administration among the Nigerian public.

The empathy shown towards the President was recorded as neutral comment. This was so because the empathies were expressed clearly on humanitarian grounds, without indicators that are suitable for any of the biased categories. Within this neutral category, there were two comments that could not be coded into any of the reasons indicated for tone of comment (see tables 3 & 4). They sounded neutral but not empathic to the President; hence they were coded into residual category of “others”, giving rise to $n=36$, 14.4% of 250 incidence of neutral tone, which turned out to be the weakest of the three predefined tones investigated in this study.

Placing these results in the context of limited researches on online newsreaders' comments as a new form of public engagement in governance debate in Nigeria, this study is a contribution of case-specific empirical evidence of the emerging success of online media in stimulating political debate, enhancing political participation and making public opinion more visible in the country. It is noteworthy that the opportunity for *Premium Times* readers to participate in the debate of President Buhari's illness could have been limited if the newspaper were operating the traditional print form, or if it had not consciously stimulated the debate by posting the story on its *Facebook* wall. Such exploit by *Premium Times* of its technical synergy with *Facebook* not only leads to evidences of its success in enhancing political participation and visibility of public opinion, but also broadly

suggests that online news media holds a vestige of becoming more successful than their print counterpart in bridging the gaps between the government and the public in Nigeria.

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