

KNOWLEDGE AND UTILIZATION OF INTERNET RESOURCES IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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Abstract

The Internet has transformed every aspect of life. It has remodelled processes and led to evolution of effective and more interesting ways of handling issues. The paper on knowledge and Utilization of Internet Resources in mass communication research sought to highlight internet resources available for successful mass communication research. The paper gives an overview of Mass Communication research and data gathering techniques. The paper will also expose online research methods including online content analysis, online focus groups, online questionnaires, social networks analysis, web-based experiment among others. The paper x-rays various internet resources such as e-mail interviewing, skype, tele-conferencing, Internet data, etc, as ways of gathering data for research through the Internet. The paper examines the benefits of using these sources of data gathering against the traditional data gathering sources. Direct contact with sources .as well as immediate feedback/responses are some of the benefits associated with online research methods. In addition, the paper explains how the resources are utilized for effective Mass Communication Research discusses, as well as disadvantages of relying on the Internet Resources for research. Some of the challenges include anonymity of some sources or contributors as well as proliferation of Internet data which make for no control over materials posted on the Internet some of which cannot be verified or authenticated. Finally, the paper makes recommendations on how to leap above the challenges in a bid to harness all the benefits which abound in the Internet for effective Mass Communication Research.

Keywords: Knowledge, Utilization, Internet, Internet Resources and Mass Communication Research

Introduction

World over there is a quest for solving problems and achieving goals within the shortest period of time. The Internet has indeed made this possible as answers to problems can now be received on line and in real time. The Internet has made it possible for people to access information or data within seconds from across the globe with just the click of the button.

The Internet has transformed every sphere of life including research. According to Ezinwa (2015), every research effort entails a systematic way of gathering dependable data that will be useful for problem solving; the objective of most research efforts is to proffer solutions to exiting problems. With all the resources which abound in the Internet, carrying out research is no longer cumbersome or tasking.

Ahamefula and Ibiam (2014), stated that Research is a human activity based on intellectual application in the investigation of a subject matter. The primary aim of applied research is to discover, to interpret and the development of methods and systems for advancement of human knowledge or a wide variety of scientific matters of our world and the universe.

Research is very important element in Mass Communication process. In Public Relations for instance, Baskin et al in Ezinwa (2015) stated that research is a vital function in the process of Public Relations. Ezinwa (2015) further stated that research provides the initial information necessary to plan Public Relations action and to evaluate its effectiveness. This is the same for all other branches of Mass Communication including broadcasting, print, advertising etc.

Simply put, the whole essence of research is to identify an existing problem in the society, examine how and why of the situation and proffer solutions for the benefit of members of the society. Research can be classified into three types. They include: Quantitative research which converts data received into numerical form can be used for statistical calculations from which conclusion on issues can be drawn: under quantitative research, we have Survey, Content analysis, Action research, Meta-analysis, Correlation analysis.

Qualitative research which according to Alzheimer (2013) "is about recording, analyzing and attempting to uncover the deeper meaning and significance of human behaviour, experience, including contradictory belief, behaviours and emotions". According to him, this type of approach is inductive as researchers develop a theory or look for a pattern of meaning on the basis of data that they have collected. Under quantitative research we have In-depth interview, Hermeneutics, Observation, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Ethnography which is the study of meaning, mixed method (also known as hybrid) which includes Exploratory Mixed Method, Explanatory mixed method and Triangulation.

Alzheimer (2013) recognizes a fourth type known as Advocacy/Participatory approach to Research (emancipatory) which mainly responds to the needs or situation of people from marginalized or vulnerable groups. According to him, researchers who adopt this method aim to bring about positive change in the lives of the research subjects. The findings of the research might be reported in more personal terms often using the precise words of the research participants.

The conventional research method has two (2) main sources of data: The Primary source of data which include speeches, interviews, eye witness accounts, historical documents, result of experiments, legal documents, observation, other forms of raw data etc.

The secondary source of data includes newspapers, magazines books, journals, scholarly journals etc. Research covers various fields of human endeavour, however the focus of this study is on Mass Communication Research. Generally speaking, Mass Communication Research is the type of research bordering on issues concerning dissemination of information and the resultant effect of such communication on the society. It dwells on how communication disseminated through the various media affect the audience and how the audience reacts to such messages correlating with other parts of the society.

This study therefore sought to examine the knowledge of internet resources as well as their utilization in mass communication research.

Statement of the Problem

In recent times, scholars and researchers have come to agree that the Internet is a veritable source of transmitting information and creating a virtual village/community (McQuail, 2014). However, scholars have not seen the internet as a veritable source for research execution, and where they appear to see the internet as a means of prosecuting research, they appear not to know how to go about it. Therefore, this study sought to x-ray the knowledge and utilization of internet resources in mass communication research.

Research Questions

1. What are the various methods for mass communication research?
2. What are the various Internet resources for mass communication research?
3. What are the benefits of using Internet-based resources in mass communication research?
4. What are the challenges of using Internet resources for communication research?

Literature Review

The evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has enabled improved service delivery and refined ways of doing things while making tasks easier to handle. Through the World Wide Web, "audiences are now availed of an array of information on almost every aspect of human existence" (Agu in Ndolo 2011). The information existing in the various websites on the internet can be used for successful mass communication research.

The Internet (or the Interconnected Network) is a super system that has transformed methods and processes of communication around the globe. It is a system which provides answers to questions or solutions to problems just by the click of a button. Also called "the Net", the internet is a worldwide system of computer networks which enable users across the globe to access or share information in real time as long as they have access.

According to Amadi in Ndolo (2011), the Internet is a large set of computer networks that communicate with each other through telephone lines; it is known as the information super highway. The Internet makes for the sharing of ideas between individuals, organizations etc very easy through different media like the computer, Ipads, GSM phones, modern television sets with smart screens etc.

In Mass Communication processes, news can be listened to online which newspapers and magazines can be read through the Internet. Also successful Public Relations campaigns are now being done through the Internet while goods and services are also advertised on the net.

According to Lynne & Edward (2006), the Internet is a system of connected sub-networks of connected computers. It is the newest electronic mass medium designed to deliver content to the eyes and ears of the audience. It is very interactive as people can exchange ideas online. The Internet uses common communication protocols.

Calteral and Maclaran in Akturan (2015) opined that the Internet has allowed people to form webs of personal relationships by connecting extremely diverse populations. The Internet uses a partway called the World Wide Web (WWW) which according to Amadi in Ndolo (2011) enables one to see document in richly formatted texts and pictures in different web sites. The World Wide Web (or simply called the web) was

developed by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989. Every document on the web must be assigned a Unique Universal (or Uniform) Resource Locator (URL) which is also called the web address used for easy identification of texts.

The Internet enables access to billions of data gotten from different pages of the web. Surfing through the web (i.e. sourcing of information through the web) is called browsing and this is with web browsers like Internet explorer, fire fox, chrome, safari etc. All these platforms or open to users across the globe and by this anybody anywhere can obtain data either to keep abreast of trends or to carry out a research.

The Internet has made globalization possible. According to Nwodu in Konkwo (2009) Globalization is "an intensified process aimed at bringing various people, communities and nations of the world together via Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) with a view to fostering common socio-cultural, political, economic, environmental and technological practices values and interests in an inter dependent world and regardless of material frontiers". The use of the Internet therefore removes social economic or geographical barrier, making it possible for anyone who has access to get data from the Internet.

Furthermore, Nwodu in Konkwo (2009) stated that ICTs like Digital/cellular phones like GSM, Fiber optics, Internet etc. have enhanced global information flow. In addition to this, Williams and Sawyer (2003) opined that the directions of communications development are tending toward connectivity which is the ability to connect computer to one another by communication line, so as provide online information access.

Mass Communication research can be done online using the various platforms offered by the Internet. Online research therefore is a research method that involves the collection of data from the Internet to analyse a situation in order to explain a phenomenon.

Following the invention of the Internet, online research no longer involves the use of paper and pen to gather data but uses various information and communication technologies at one's disposed for gathering and analysing data.

Empirical Review

In a researcher entitled "*Using Internet Data Sources to Achieve Qualitative Interviewing Purposes*" carried out by Lynch and Mah (2017), the function, merits and challenges of using Internet data sources including social media discussion analysis and email interviewing were examined in comparison with traditional face-to-face interviewing. The study investigated kindergarten teachers' perspectives and experiences with play-biased teaching in kindergartens. The researchers contended that social media and e-mail interviewing offer complementary benefits to approaches used for qualitative research. The article dwelt in practical and practice-based aspects for qualitative researcher seeking alternative research methods.

In comparison with Meghan & Man's work, this paper provides insights on resources available on the Internet or mass communication research as good alternatives to the traditional research methods. The two works are also similar explaining how the Internet resources work.

In another research by Ulun Akturan (2015) entitled "*A Review of Cyber Ethnographic Research; A Research Technique to Analyze Virtual Consumers Communities*", the researcher focused on the process of a cyber ethnographic process. The researcher opined that virtual communities are shaped by the developments in the Communication and Information Technology and that cyber space have become a social space through the accelerated growth of virtual communities. The researcher found out that cyber ethnography is only a decade old in literature and does not have a standardized procedure but rather, different approaches. She equally found out that studies on cyber did not mention the process of cyber ethnographic research in detail and suggested that future researchers should give the method clear frame as a way of contributing to the technique.

Another study entitled "*Using Internet Technologies (such as skype) as a Research Medium: A Research Note*" by Paul Hanna (2012) dwelt on adopting a flexible approach to conduct semi-structured interviews. The paper revealed ways in which skype can be used as a research medium to reap the well documented benefits of traditional face-to-face interviews in qualitative research. In relation to Hanna's work, this paper highlights skype as a data gathering instrument in the Internet using instance messaging and voice chats. The pictorial quality makes skype technology comparable to, or an alternative to face-to-face interview.

Theoretical Framework

The choice of carrying out mass communication research using Internet resources over the traditional research methods was hinged on some communication theories namely media dependency theory and technological determinism theory.

Media Dependency Theory: This theory developed by Sandra Ball Rokeach and Melvin Defleur in 1976 is the initial Mass Communication theory that considered its audience as an active part of the process of

communication (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwan-Uwaoma, 2017). The theory which developed from the Uses and Gratifications theory posits that audiences depend on media messages to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals. In this case, researchers can depend on the numerous resources available on the internet to carry out their research endeavours.

Technological Determinism Theory: As propounded by Marshal McLuhan in 1964, Technological Determinism theory stipulates that the nature of media technology prevailing in a society at a given point in time greatly influences how the members of that society think and behave. According to him, “the important characteristic of the audience - media interface is the technological properties of the medium”. This therefore shows how important the medium of communication is. The medium cannot be underrated. In relation to this study, the Internet is a very important medium for mass communication research. The Internet greatly influences the way members of the communication research society think, act or respond to materials.

Methodology

This study employed secondary research design. According to Qualtrics (2021), “secondary research, also known as desk research, is a research method that involves compiling existing data sourced from a variety of channels. This includes internal sources (e.g. in-house research) or, more commonly, external sources (such as government statistics, organizational bodies, and the internet)”. The researcher compared materials from the internet and other secondary sources to arrive at finding to research questions. The data collected are textually analysed.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

A. Online Research Methods for Mass Communication Research

Just like the traditional research, online research has its own methods known as the Online Research Methods (ORMs). ORMs are ways in which researchers can collect data for research through the Internet. These methods are also called Internet Research, Internet Science (science), or web-based methods. Online research methods help people find the information they need instantly. Online Research Methods (ORMs) include:

- Cyber - ethnography
- Online content analysis
- Online focus groups
- Online interviews
- Online qualitative research
- Online quantitative research
- Social network, analysis
- Online questionnaires
- Web-based experiments.

Cyber - Ethnography

This is also known as virtual ethnography or 'netnography'. Cyber-ethnography is a research tool for gaining knowledge about virtual communities (Akturan 2015). According to Chin, Hsu and Wang (2006) in Ulun (2015), virtual communities are described as online social networks in which people with common interests, goals or practices share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions. Ulun further stated that the virtual community act as a community but have different characteristics from the real life community in terms of distance and communication. Cyber - ethnography is a study of on-line interaction. It is a method used to study communities and cultures created through computer – mediated interaction. Through participating in this virtual interaction, data can be gathered for research purposes in mass communication. Through this method also one can gain information on the behaviour or culture of the participants as issues are discussed.

Kozinets (2006) describes virtual ethnography as ethnography conducted on the Internet; a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of online cultures and communities formed through computer - mediated communications. Netnography is coined from the word Internet and Ethnography. Netnography Research can

be done by editing data from chat rooms, virtual communities etc. It can also be done through online observation and online interviews.

Online Content Analysis

Content analysis simply put is the collection of recorded human communication in form of books, journals, videos etc. Online content analysis is the analysis of online recorded data or internet — based communication on a particular issue. It involves online media in form of online newspapers, magazines, video especially from you tube etc. Online content analysis is very useful in researching the number of publications on a particular issue or analysing the level of exposure of internet users to a particular incident or trend. Through the Internet, the researcher for instance can review all the publications or airings by various online media on a particular issue and how much exposure or coverage an event has received. This is possible by checking visiting older editions of such publication which are usually store online. The research can recall older publication in order to extract the required dam for analysis.

Online Focus Groups

Focus group is a research method made up of between 8 to 12 participants headed by a moderator. The group is usually formed to discuss in-depth a particular issue with each participant making contributions to the topic. Focus group provides an insight on a particular problem and participants' contributions generate data for research. According to McDaniel & Rates (2002), the intent of the focus group is to find out how people feel about a product, concept, idea or organization, how it fits in their lives and their emotional involvement with it.

Focus group is the most popular form of qualitative research (Perreault & McCarthy, 2000). Online focus groups run through email or via web, they can be screened, or reached through a particular web address, they are greeted electronically and instructed on when to proceed. A chart room window is used where participants can type their messages in response to comments from other participants or question from the moderator. A picture of an advertisement may be shown to participants using a pop-up window and group members asked to comment on it. The client - company can watch the discussion as it unfolds on their screens. Finally, a transcript of the discussion can be supplied within minutes. although analysis as the result may take longer - (CBPP, 2018).

Online Interviews

An online Interview is an internet based research method which is conducted with computer mediate communication like Skype, email, instant messaging, webcam etc. Via the Internet, the interviewer can have direct access to interviewee and in fact, receive direct and immediate responses to the interview questions. It is cheerer than travelling to meet the interviewee. It reduces time wasted on gaining access to the interviewee especially where prominent people are concerned. The responses is immediate unlike the normal interview which is face to face, the online Interview is usually mediated through the net or web.

Online Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a set of written questions used by a researcher to obtain responses to research questions. It can be given to respondents face -to- face or sent by mail. Respondents are expected to write down their responses to the questions asked. Usually the respondents answer the questions through the internet. In online research, the researcher through a data base creates web forms which are filled by the respondents. The data base stores the answers for future use of the researcher. Respondents fill the web pages while browsing through it.

Social Network Analysis (SNA)

Krebs of Orgnet defined Social Network Analysis as the mapping and measuring of relationships and flows between people, groups' organizations, computers, URLS and other connected information/knowledge entities. According to him, SNA provides both a visual and a mathematical analysis of human relationships. Social Network Analysis is a process of analyzing social structures by using networking and graphs. It examines relationship between variables like relationships or associating.

Web-Based Experiment

This is an experiment conducted in the Internet. In their own explanation of a web-based experiment, Salganik and Watts (2009) said “unlike most experiments in cognitive science, psychology, and economics that have individuals as the units of analysis, these experiments have groups of several hundred people as the

unit of analysis, and therefore require thousands of participants, running directly into the constraint of the physical laboratory that troubled Zeldich". Web-based experiments are conducted over large and diverse samples. This is unlike experiments in ordinary research which are either controlled (done in labs) natural or field experiments. Web-based experiments reduce administrative and financial cost. Web-based experiments have been used mainly in psychology and internet studies. Participants for the experiment who are usually recruited from the net operate from their homes or offices.

B. Internet Resources for Mass Communication Research

Sources of data in research include data collected from traditional face to face interviews, books journals, questionnaires etc. Different sources of data abound in the Internet. These sources include e-books, e-mail, interviewing, skype, webcam, pilot testing media messages, online advert campaigns, cell phone, internet data, social media, online research works etc. Some of them are described below:

Skype: Skype is telecommunications application which enables registered users to communicate through instant messaging and voice chats. It allows for the people chatting to see themselves on video (i.e. video chatting). It can be used on computers tablets, smart watches, mobile phones/devices, the xbox one console etc. It enables the researcher have direct access to the respondent as if they are chatting on one-on-one. Skype provides information or data for Internet communication research while saving cost of traveling to the location. Through skype, you can see the facial expressions and reaction of the interviewee to the issue being discussed.

Advert Campaigns: The evolution of ICTs has made advert campaigns easier. Organizations are increasingly turning to the Internet to showcase their products and services. Millions of Internet users learn about new products and services through the Internet just by visiting different sites or using Internet applications. Researchers can visit different websites to find out the various online adverts available in the net. Also they can carry out surveys on how such adverts affect the target audience.

Webcam: The webcam is a device which has video and voice properties for meetings, streaming or video conferencing. It is used for live meetings where the members are scattered demographically. Those connected discuss in real time. It is a video camera which streams in real-time. Webcams exist in laptops. The video streams can be saved for future use. It provides data for online research.

Social Media: Social media refer to different websites and online applications which enable users to create and share content or data or to participate in social networking. Social media which makes for sharing of information through virtual communities uses different platforms like Facebook, you tube, WhatsApp, Instagram, we chat etc. Data generated through social media platforms can be used for Mass Communication research. Data generated from social media can also serve as pointers to public opinion or showcase the reaction of the public to events that unfold in the society. The social media is a very important information channel in the world today and the fastest means of spreading news and information across the globe. The world of research cannot thrive today without the use of social.

Online Research Works: Online research works abound in the Internet. Such works cover different spheres of life. It is difficult to ignore the works of other researchers which have been shared on-line as a learning point or point of reference to other people. Online research works form pointers to and constitute serious references for future research works. This is because there is no subject matter that cannot be found on the internet. Online research works therefore can be seen as primary sources of data for Internet research especially in communication. They include full work or part work of researcher available to everyone who has access to the net. They form the bases for online research.

Pilot - Testing Media Messages: According to SAGE, pilot tests are "dress rehearsals" of full survey operations that are implemented to determine whether problems exists that need to be addressed prior to putting the production survey in the field - Pilot testing reviews questionnaires through expert reviews; focus groups or interviews. This forms an important source of data in the Internet research. Pilot testing in the Internet requires verifying questions in a questionnaire under a real-time operating condition. Here a selected group of the respondents attempt the questions and provide answers before the real questionnaire is administered online. A pilot test in essence is a dress rehearsal which helps detect weak points in the research questions to enable the researcher fix them.

C. The Benefits of Using Internet Resources for Mass Communication Research

Agu in Ndolo (2011) opined that access to some websites like BBC.com or CNN.com downloading breaking news is now possible in order to enrich and balance the news content of their broadcast. According to him, information is now being liberalized, people are happy and free and people will soon be living healthier in the society. Also, Fab-Ukozor quoted Mojaye in Konkwo (2009) disclosing the following advantages of using the net and the web:

- Quick access to reliable information
- Easy storage of information
- Quick news posting and dissemination
- Easy access to background information on virtually all subjects.
- Provides a link to the global advertising market among others.
- Removing physical barriers in news and information flow and sharing in the world.
- Making local issues in the remotest part of the world gain global attention in a matter of seconds.

According to McDaniel and Gates (2002), the advantages of online focus group are:

- Lack of geographic barriers
- Lower cost of research
- Faster turn-around time
- Intangibles such as increased openness on the part of respondents when they do not have an interviewer staring them in the face.

In addition to the above mentioned, advantages of Online group include:

- Attention to topic
- Exposure to external stimuli
- Free participation (Anyone with a computer/laptop and modem can participate.
- No travelling required; respondents are always available
- Openness of respondents
- Word for word transcript are available almost immediately making room for complete sentences/thoughts
- Easy to recruit all forms of respondents
- Observers can communicate privately with the moderator on a split sorer:
- Clients can read live dialogue
- Online groups are easier to in moderate
- Direct contact with sources
- Immediate feedback/response

D. Disadvantages/Challenges of Online Research Methods

However, there are also some disadvantages of online research methods. Some of them include:

- Anonymity of some contributors especially on Wikipedia
- Proliferation of internet data due to lack of control or censorship of internet materials.
- No form of authenticating certain data shared on the net rendering some claims invalid.

In the words of Silverman (2000) *“I think that the inevitable conclusion is that online groups, particularly asynchronous bulletin board and light serve groups have a definite place, but the place is extremely limited and limiting. The usual justifications of online groups namely the - ability to include difficult-to-recruit geographically dispersed participants is spurious at best and dishonest at worst, when compared to telephone groups. That's why with the exception of a series of light serve type, groups conducted worldwide almost 20 years ago, I have not been able to recommend them in good conscience to clients”*.

Other challenges include:

- Lack of knowledge and utilization of Internet resources in research in general.

- Limited research works on the subject matter.
- Limited literature or books on online research methods
- Lack of wide acceptance for on hue sources as authentic sources of data for research
- Preference for traditional research methods
- Lack of Internet access in many parts of developing countries.
- High cost of Internet access in some areas
- Power problem

Conclusion

The Internet has been seen as the live wire responsible for transformation of every sector in life. In today's world, the utilization of the Internet cannot be overemphasized especially in data gathering, information sharing and research, research which is necessary for knowledge advancement has transcended from just the traditional methods to the online methods which have been seen to be faster, timely and accessible to all and sundry.

Solutions to research problems can be gotten using the various online research methods (ORM) which include cyber ethnography, online content analysis, online focus group etc. Through sources like skype, webcam, online journal, online interviews etc, data can be gotten for online research. Whereas some scholars have done research works using online methods, there is still room for more work.

Chief among the advantage of online research methods is responses speed and lack of geographical barriers. Nevertheless, online research methods are not yet a perfect research method in view of the challenges associated with the use of this method. In the near future however, it is expected the use of internet will greatly increase in order to match the rush for internet use to satisfy the craving for association, knowledge and world peace.

Recommendations

- Knowledge of Internet resources especially for research should be inculcated into students especially in higher education. They should be exposed to the advantages which abound in utilization of such resources.
- Researchers should be encouraged to do more research on Internet resources. This will further expose the benefits of the Internet in research and attract more users to the online methods.
- Internet access should be made available to people especially in rural areas. This is because the Internet cannot be used without Internet access. Also network providers should ensure steady access as it has been noticed in the developing world that access fluctuates.
- Government should ensure that Internet access is affordable by regulating the activities of network providers to avoid exploitation of users.

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