

Journalistic Use of WhatsApp: Measuring Perception of Journalists in Islamabad

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Keywords	Abstract
Journalists, News Gathering, Use of WhatsApp.	<i>This study attempts to explore the view of the local journalists regarding the use of WhatsApp as a news-gathering and sharing forum. Under such ambitious circumstances, many are associated with the profession of media, so the study envisions probing their working practices in the age of the internet in order to understand and identify possibilities that could make their work easy and result in the promotion of ethical, unbiased, objective and informed reporting. The study also explores the main factors behind the use of WhatsApp as a news-gathering tool by the journalists and what features of WhatsApp are most regarded by the journalists. Moreover, it measures the frequency of WhatsApp use by local journalists for processing news stories and comprehends the level of confidence media professionals have in the chat application. The study is quantitative research. It has used the primary data gathered through a questionnaire from the targeted population (207 male and female journalists and reporters based in Islamabad) using a survey research method. A non-probability sampling technique is used while the data is gathered using a research questionnaire comprised of close-ended questions with five-point Likert scale responses. The study finds that the majority of the respondents (local journalists) rely on WhatsApp Messenger for the purpose of gathering and sharing news; they valued its prominent features, perceived it as a trustworthy tool for information sharing and shared confidence in its security and authenticity as well as the reliability of the information received through it. The study also finds that in the current age of technology, the use of advanced tools for gathering and sharing newsworthy information is inevitable for media professionals.</i>

INTRODUCTION

The changing trend of gathering and sharing news with technological development and the internet has also changed the overall perspective of media houses and their audience. There are no more delays in preparing and sharing breaking news, as the internet has made things easier for news producers to reach their consumers in no time. Social media provides great ease to share information promptly and get feedback on the spot. Similarly, media professionals also have changed their working style by adopting new approaches and using the latest tools to timely reach their audience and provides information and news without losing its currency.

WhatsApp, commonly known as a modern tool for sharing text messages, videos, pictures and much more, has been around since August 2009 (Dodds, 2019). Media practitioners agree with the notion that mobile instant messaging apps have been used more frequently and have gained

the status of essential tools for day-to-day communication patterns (Andueza & Perez, 2014). The advanced features of WhatsApp as a tool for communication have gained much popularity in a short span of time, as, unlike Short Message Service (SMS), it provides more advanced features to users, such as audio and video sharing, location and maps sharing, still images and screenshots, documents and apps and many more (Church & De Oliveira 2013). The access to information and messages through WhatsApp has boosted because of increased use of cell phones that can handle such applications as well as easy access to the data and internet on such devices for users (Bouhnik & Deshen 2014). The research on this topic, previously done by social scientists, primarily focused on the nondemocratic circumstances of using WhatsApp in zones where media is facing censorship (Craig, 2017). Similarly, continuous sanctions against media houses and organizations are enacted, and journalists face difficulties while performing their official duties; social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others, are becoming the prime channels of information and platforms for debates (Frere, 2017). WhatsApp, being a messenger having the dominant feature of providing secure end-to-end encrypted information to both the sender and the receiver, has earned a great reputation among working professionals and information providers (Endeley, 2018). It is not only safe but also hard to crack, eavesdrop-free and secure for communicating parties (Waterson, 2018). A moderate analysis of the existing body of literature provides that there are limited publications on journalists' interactions with their sources using WhatsApp.

This study attempts to measure the perception of local journalists about their professional use of WhatsApp. It explores the prime reasons behind using WhatsApp as a tool to share news and factors involved in preferring this means of communication and information sharing over other mediums. WhatsApp usage is as common in Pakistan as in any other country in the world (Amundarain & Torres, 2018). Journalists who are the prime source of gathering, making, generating and disseminating news items have their own reasons to use various forms of communication channels. This study is an attempt to understand the factors and reasons behind the use of WhatsApp as a news-exchanging forum by the local journalists.

The study in hand tends to provide detailed analysis regarding the perception of local journalists about using WhatsApp for news practices. It encompasses key features of WhatsApp as a tool of sharing information and comprehends the advantages of its use for both the initiator and the receiver of the information and news content. The study also expands its scope by including a two-fold objective, which has either positive or negative impacts on using WhatsApp for the purpose of information gathering and sharing. Moreover, it is important to know how greatly such tools have changed the working practices and attracted the journalism.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore main factors behind the use of WhatsApp as a news gathering tool by the journalists
2. To understand what features of WhatsApp are regarded most by the journalist in terms of reliance on this application then others
3. To measure the frequency of use of WhatsApp by journalists during the process of making news stories
4. To comprehend the level of confidence the journalists and their news sources have on WhatsApp for sharing information

5. To learn about the chief reasons of reliance of journalists on WhatsApp for gathering and sharing news content

Research Questions

1. To what extent journalists rely on WhatsApp messenger for the purpose of gathering and sharing news?
2. What are the prominent features of WhatsApp messenger that appeal the journalists to use this application for their professional work?
3. How journalists perceive WhatsApp messenger as a trustworthy tool for information sharing?
4. What are the prerequisites for press and media professional to ensure authenticity and reliability of the information received through WhatsApp messenger?

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to understand the factors behind the use of WhatsApp by local journalists, the researcher adopted the quantitative survey research method for reaching the targeted population and getting their responses on a specified format of questionnaire covering various research variables. The population of this study is working journalists, also known as media professionals, reporters, correspondents and newsmakers who are affiliated with print, electronic or web-based media organizations based in the Federal Capital, Islamabad. A non-probability sampling technique known as snowball sampling, also called referral sampling, is used, and the sample size for this study was initially set as (n=250) potential male and female professional journalists; however, due to time constraints, the researcher managed to interview only 210 respondents, of which 207 contained complete information required for this study, while the remaining three questionnaires were dropped because of incomplete and missing information. There are two types of variables in this descriptive study, i.e., use of WhatsApp - an online messenger - is the sole independent variable, while use of WhatsApp by professional journalists for specifically new practices is the dependent variable.

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistical technique is used to find the findings. The further analysis of each research question and dependent variable was prepared using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The inferences were drawn out of each finding. Percentages were calculated and used to illustrate the data in the graph.

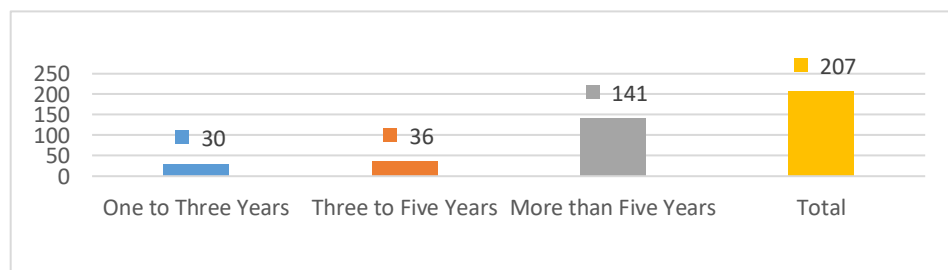


Figure 1: Use of Smart Mobile Phone by Journalists

Out of 207 respondents, 30 (14.5%) responded that they have been users of smartphones for one to three years, which explains that they were familiar with the functions and applications available for smartphones. Further, 36, or 17.4%, of respondents said that they have operated a smartphone for three to five years, which makes them moderate users of cellphone-based applications. The majority of the respondents – 141 (68.1%) – said that they have been using smartphones for more than five years, which shows that journalists are quite familiar with and can run various applications along with making contact for their personal and professional needs through smart mobile phones. It can be concluded that media professionals are more engaged and connected with different information sources; their need has been fulfilled as a result of advancement in technology.

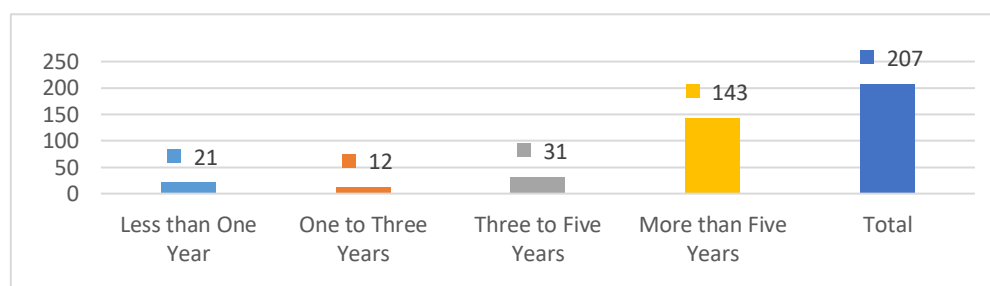


Figure 2: Use of WhatsApp Messenger by Journalists

Another important variable of the study was how long the interviewed journalists have been using WhatsApp. Among the respondents, 21 (10.1%) said that they have been using WhatsApp for less than a year, and 12 (5.8%) responded that they have been using WhatsApp for more than a year but less than three years. Similarly, 31 (15%) responding media professionals stated that they have been using WhatsApp Messenger for three to five years, while surprisingly, as many as 143 (69.1%) out of 207 respondents maintained that they have been users of WhatsApp for more than five years. This shows the popularity of the application among the majority of the journalists. One can easily conclude that most of the journalists are users of WhatsApp because of one reason or another. The fact established from the respondents' data illustrates that, among other mediums, WhatsApp is the most preferred medium for journalists.

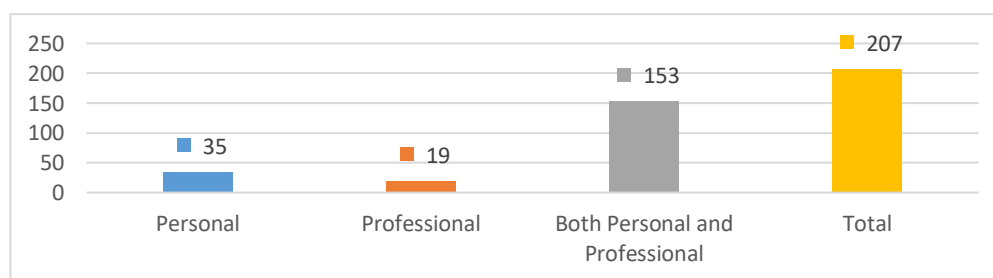


Figure 3: Preferred use of WhatsApp Messenger for Journalists

When asked what the preferred use of WhatsApp is from responding journalists, it was found that more than 70% (153, or 73.9%) of them are using WhatsApp for both personal and professional purposes. Very few of the respondents said that they use it to fulfil their personal purpose (35 or 16.9%), while less than 10% (19 or 9.2%) stated that WhatsApp assists them while performing their professional responsibilities and that they do not rely on this application for performing their personal life routine. Again, the finding of the survey showed the reliance of

journalists on WhatsApp for their professional purposes. Keeping in view the data findings, it can be said that cumulatively, over 80% of the journalists perceive that they can rely on WhatsApp for professional practices.

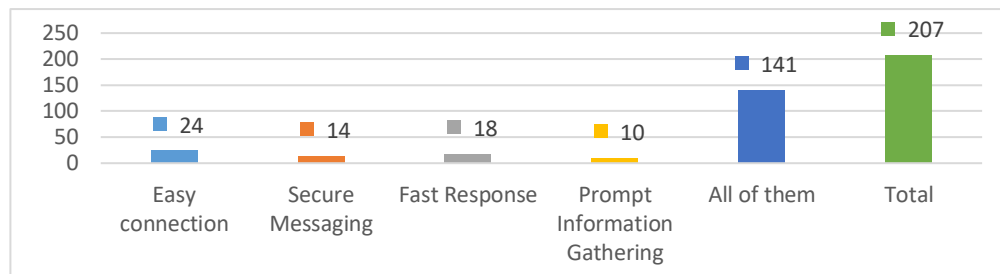


Figure 4: Useful WhatsApp Features for Professionals

The respondents were asked about their rating of features of WhatsApp. As many as 24(11.6%) were of the view that the easy connection feature of WhatsApp is the reason behind their reliance on it. Furthermore, 14(6.8%) were observed to be found of WhatsApp's security features for their main reason for using it, while 18(8.7%) respondents said due to the rapid response service provided by WhatsApp, they are able to put their faith in this application. Another 10(4.8%) respondents stated that prompt information gathering was made way easier due to WhatsApp, and that is why they like to use it. More than 60% of the responding journalists (141 or 68.1%) were observed to be found of all the aforementioned features of WhatsApp and endorsed that they mainly use this application for information gathering and sharing because of its unique pack of features, which are not available in any other freeware messenger application. This finding proves that easy-to-use features of WhatsApp appeal to most of the users, and they are comfortable using it for different purposes, one of which is assistance for their professional practices.

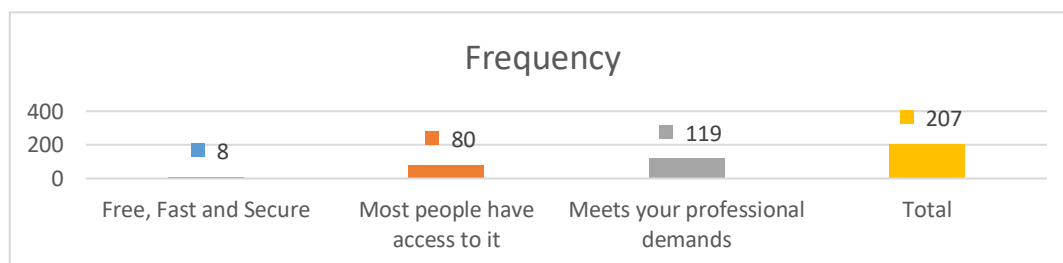


Figure 5: Reasons for Using WhatsApp for Exchanging News and Information

One of the study's proposed objectives was to dig out the factors behind the use of WhatsApp by journalists for their news practices. The respondents were asked about their preferable social media messengers' use for information sharing and exchange of news, and it was found that 8(3.9%) responding journalists believe that it is free, fast and secure, while 80(38.6%) said that because more and more people have access to it, it is easy for them to use it as well. The data shows that as many as 119(57.5%) out of 207 journalists are convinced that they prefer WhatsApp for the exchange of news and information because it meets their professional demands. Here, the findings of descriptive analysis suggest that the majority of the respondents who have been using smartphones for five years or so are users of WhatsApp for as many years for both personal and professional purposes because of its unique features, like easy connection,

secure messaging, rapid feedback and quick information gathering, and all of this is free of any cost, which easily meets their professional demands.

CONCLUSION

The study in hand encompasses key features of WhatsApp and comprehends the advantages of its use for both the sender and receiver of the information and news content. The findings suggested that the majority of the respondents who have been using smartphones for five years or so are users of WhatsApp for as many years for both personal and professional purposes because of its unique features, like easy connection, secure messaging, rapid feedback and quick information gathering, and all of this is free of any cost, which easily meets their professional demands.

The research findings suggest that use of smartphones is common in professional journalists, and they are quite familiar with the operationalization of smartphones and can operate their various features, including online applications. The study found that journalists are very familiar with the use of WhatsApp as a messenger, which shows the popularity of the application among the majority of the journalists. Most of the journalists are users of WhatsApp because of multiple reasons, and in their view WhatsApp is the most preferred medium for sharing information between news sources and audiences. WhatsApp is used for both personal and professional purposes.

The findings of this study also propose that journalists rely on the WhatsApp application for their professional purposes. The features of WhatsApp are found appealing to media professionals, and they like the easy-to-use features of WhatsApp and are comfortable while using them for different purposes, one of which is assistance for their professional practices.

The study's proposed objective was to dig out the factors behind the use of WhatsApp by journalists for their news practices. It was found that journalists prefer WhatsApp because it assists them in exchanging news and information, which is one of the demanding requirements of their profession. The findings also suggest unique features of WhatsApp, such as easy connection, secure messaging, rapid feedback and quick information gathering, and all of this is free of any cost, which fulfils the professional demands of media professionals. Findings also revealed that journalists think that WhatsApp is helpful in keeping a secure connection with news sources at regular intervals. The journalists voted in its favor over other means of communication, including telephonic communication and face-to-face communication. The finding suggested that authentication of news content before publishing has become easy because of WhatsApp. While the dependency of journalists for information collected is rather a dependent task but is not limited to the online sources. However, the availability of online communication mediums like WhatsApp and others has made things easier for the media professionals to depend on when it comes to the information-gathering process.

Furthermore, it was learnt that WhatsApp as a messaging tool has enabled journalists to instantly connect with groups or individuals having similar interests in sharing or receiving information in different forms. Security is considered the most important concern of every journalist while performing their professional responsibilities. The study found that, in the view of journalists, WhatsApp is a highly favoured application over other mediums because of the privacy of

information. It was also found that in the presence of virtual forums for direct communication with sources, journalists do not prefer face-to-face communication because of multiple reasons. Survey findings suggest that the majority of the respondents believe that WhatsApp is a reliable medium for staying connected and exchanging information with their news sources. Additionally, it was observed that the majority of the journalists are convinced that WhatsApp as an effective tool for sharing information has made things easy for them in the context of gathering information from more than one source. It can be concluded here that technological advancements such as WhatsApp have a lot to do with changing the structure of information gathering and sharing in the modern-day media industry.

The study also found that despite the availability of other advanced sources used by professionals for news gathering and sharing, WhatsApp is rated higher as an effective source with rapid impact, as journalists agreed that it is a helpful tool that assists in the rapid flow of information. While performing their professional duties, journalists are more concerned about the confidentiality of the information. The study found that journalists agree that confidentiality of the information is not compromised when they are connected with news sources through WhatsApp. Meanwhile, their relations with sources are more developed, and they are always welcomed by their news organizations in order to be innovative and involve tech support for the news gathering and making process.

The study found that journalists profoundly relied on WhatsApp Messenger for the purpose of gathering and sharing news; they valued its prominent features, perceived it as a trustworthy tool for information sharing and showed confidence in its security and authenticity as well as the reliability of the information received through it.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research study, the following are some recommendations to be considered for future studies on the same topic, users of social media, media professionals and journalists, and others who are either directly or indirectly involved in this study topic.

The adoption of advanced technology for producing and sharing information is the need of the hour, and it should be adopted by the media industry in general and especially the media professional to make things competitive and proximate for the masses in the modern age. The findings of this study endorse the unique online messenger over traditional communication mediums for news sharing. It is recommended that if a professional has access to such tools, his performance is more enhanced, and he has more opportunities to connect with multiple sources at one time. This not only helps him in producing quality news content but also in verifying and managing more detailed information in much less time. The study findings also suggest professional reporters use information sources which are secure, recognizable and accessible globally.

It can be simplified here that there is a need to explore more on the engagement of news sources in the final news products and how direct or indirect inclusion of information providers is changing the overall news paradigm. The study findings suggest that the mass media professionals employ security-friendly open-source information tools for gathering information to defuse any unforeseen threats. It is recommended to verify any piece of information before

sharing it with others. To avoid incidence of cybercrimes, media workers should get proper training to comply with the state's cybercrime laws. It is recommended that with the presence of online mediums such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and others, media professionals should incorporate and present data-based analyses of new worthy content to the masses. This study was conducted in limited time with limited resources; if the same were done with a larger sample and broader population, it would give more detailed results of technological use and its implications on shifting trends of professional practices of individuals and organizations in media.

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