

Information Communication Technology and Citizen Journalism in Nigeria: Pros and Cons

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Abstract

This study explicates the relationship between citizen journalism and ICT in Nigeria. It explores the pros and cons of ICT and citizen journalism. Qualitative research method was employed for the collection of secondary data which comprised of books, magazines and journals. The study reveals that in as much as citizen journalism and ICT are interwoven, numerous issues and challenges associated with ICT are confronting the efficiency of citizen journalism in Nigeria. Blogging, podcasting and mablogging among others have made internet users (Netizens) to no longer passively consume media news but actively participate in them. Another issue confronting citizen journalism and ICT is the fact that there are no editors (gatekeepers) in the news and information disseminated through citizen journalism using the available ICT media. No editors to verify the truth within what someone has written, unlike in the traditional journalism and in the world of endless information, credibility is a very essential ingredient for information seekers. To curtail some of the issues affecting citizen journalism/participation, the study recommends that participants (citizen journalists) should try as much as possible to ensure that their news and information are edited by professionals before they are published. ICT facilities should be made available in areas where they are not available and at cheap cost to ensure that its range of targeted audience is vast, thus making it more efficient.

Key words: Citizen journalism; ICT; Gatekeepers; Traditional journalism; Media professionals

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INTRODUCTION

Technological advancement in contemporary society of the 21st century heralded the arrival of information and communication technologies (ICT) that have enhanced the existing communication process and the entire material in which individual interact with the world. The ICTS expanded frontier of communication channels refer to as new media have given birth to “citizen journalism”. These ICT driven communication channels include online information services, cable television, the internet and World Wide Web, among others. They have enhanced the reach and understanding of traditional mass media newspaper, magazine, television and radio. The new media have expanded the horizon of communication, and made the world smaller and communication process more rapid.

1. INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

ICT known as Information and Communication Technologies are communication gadgets, hardwires, equipment or facilities that have modernized, improve and ease exchange of ideas and information of various kinds between people within or across distant boundaries or frontiers. According to Nwabueze (2005, p.5) they are also called New Communication ‘Technologies (NCTs)

2. CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Citizen journalism practice is a term which describes the act of individual within a given society, community,

state or nation engaging in the gathering, processing and publishing of news materials (Burkholder, 2010, p.1). In this case, individuals on their own create web pages where they publish news materials collected within the society using prevalent modern technologies (in most cases mobile phones).

None like the conventional way of the old media. *Citizen Journalism* is the participation of ordinary citizens in news gathering and reporting. This practice is made possible by the sophistication of ICTs which makes it possible for people to use their mobile phone to record still pictures, videos, and audio of events and post them to media houses and online channels such as YouTube, Twitter and other social media, for consumption by the general public. Some media houses receive and present information from citizen journalists and classify such reporters as amateur reporters or i-reporters. The typical example of citizen journalism is channels TV eye witness report.

3. ICT AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

Before now, newspapers and magazines were the only forms of print media until 1430-1450, when in Europe letters, books, posters, and other printed materials were added to the print media. These media of communication are essential tools for creating, expressing and molding public opinion on topical issues. The implication however is that much time and effort were expended in a bid to communicate with friends, families and business partners. However, Nsereka (2012) posits that journalism has moved from what can merely be seen in the content of newspapers to “cover the chronicling and interpretation of current events through many media which include newspapers, radio, television, magazines, films, etc.” (p.3). The internet and its accompanying social networks are, of course, not outside this spectrum in contemporary times.

The business of journalism in present day Nigeria has taken cognizance of new Information Technologies (ITs) just like other developing countries of the world. The term is commonly used with computers and computer networks, but it also encompasses other information distribution technologies such as television and telephones. Asadu (2009) notes that the “transformation of the mass media landscape by information and communication technology (ICT) has opened a vista of opportunities and challenges for journalists” (p.82). In this new and technologically driven world, the profession of journalism has continued to prove interesting and challenging and modern-day journalists succeed in a lot more ways. They work occurrences, facts, ideas and opinions into intelligible and comprehensible messages received by thousands of millions of people, all over

the world. They are gate-keepers who make important decisions before taking their piece to the editor and the receiving audience. Udeze (2012) has further noted that “in most developed and developing cultures, the internet is used to mobilize or encourage people to embrace a particular programme or idea” (p.54). Indeed, journalism practice in the modern world has experienced a paradigm shift necessitated by changes and innovations in information technologies. We see that journalism is experiencing a renaissance and communication scholars agree with the fact that the internet is a rapidly evolving medium disparate from the traditional media, and is redefining the conventional process. For instance, the phrases: “open source journalism,” “citizen journalism” and such other terms which refer to unpaid citizens, pseudo journalists who submit quasi-information to websites (such as Facebook, YouTube, Tweeter etc.) Web account of an African roasted for a barbeque in China; June, 2009 Facebook upload of the demonstration over the execution of an African in China are some typical examples. This kind of “journalism by the people” has been a controversial subject: Professional journalists are yet in a state of confusion, especially because of the high level of unethical indulgence by the so called citizen journalists.

According to Okon (2001), since these technologies and media forms are alien to the Nigerian society, in particular, media houses and journalists should try as much as possible to acquire the required skills while adopting and adapting to state-of-the-art equipment in gathering, packaging and disseminating news and other relevant information to the public. The internet has made journalism practice easier for journalists via the exchange of messages with professionals and experts in various disciplines. This has introduced new market and new form of journalism in which journalists specialize as online journalists, content managers and editors for some websites/media organizations. This has made it imperative for them to train to acquire blogging skills, creating hypertext, adding contents to web pages, taking and uploading digital pictures. This study therefore sets out to ascertain the extent to which Nigerian journalists have integrated the use of information technology into their professional repertoire.

The presence of information and communication technology (ICT) in the journalism profession of Nigeria has presented challenges and opportunities as well as development. However, studies have revealed that most Nigerian journalists lack the requisite knowledge/finesse to operate in the new media environment that is transforming the nature and mode of operation of the media in bringing about development (by providing information or programs that will expedite rapid development). It is however, unfortunate that the requisite state-of-the-art media gadgets or equipment needed for the media to function effectively in the above area

are scarcely available to the journalist. The new info-tech has helped editors/gate keepers in alleviating workload and the reporter in preparing copies (reduction of errors and the pressure of meeting up with deadline etc.). The importance of ITs cannot be over-emphasized thus making it imperative for Nigerian media organizations to adopt and adapt to the new media environment. It is however, germane, though unfortunate, to add here that despite the new technologies in the sphere of journalism, it has increased the craze of unethical practices (where anyone can just write and disseminate information on the web without editing) thereby threatening the integrity and dignity of the journalism profession. However, the personal computer, the digital camera, the mobile phone and internet have challenged traditional journalism on almost every frontier. The global update of digital media has spawned user-generated contents and citizen journalism; the video journalist and the blogger, social networking sites and the massively, multiplayer online game.

The rapidity and sophistication with which information and/or news is disseminated across the globe in the modern world via information technologies—especially the Internet/www cannot be over-emphasized. Fidler (2005) informs that the birth of new media does not precipitate the death of old media, rather than that, it evolves and adapt to changing media environment in a gradual process. Hence, it brings about improved and easier ways of handling communication tasks.

Journalism has continued to undergo much changes occasioned by innovations in information and communication technology in copy writing, reporting, page making, editing and filming as well as the whole production process. The journalism industry has experienced a land mark revolution brought upon it by advances in info-tech. in accordance with the foregoing, modern-day journalists must consider it an obligation to deal with issues pertaining to them. Lending credence to the above, Uwakwe (2012) notes that: in the mid 1990s, the www brought wide changes to the mass media. By this time, newspapers, magazines, TV and radio began to use the web in providing electronic access to information. It became possible to have access to both current and past information.

Today, with a wide range of newspapers, any person can have access to previously published works. Some of these works have hyperlinks to many other texts as well as videos. About 20 years ago, reporters in Nigeria knew nothing about electronic data basis. Today, an array of electronic data basis and archives in addition to ever-growing digital options are playing full time on the field of digital convergence. Today, the newsroom is replete with technological devices not available to practitioners a few decades ago (p.3). At present, the availability of technological devices to some journalists in Nigeria (especially those who have computer related skill) has

made it easy for them to type their stories on computers and/or word processors and this technology helps them to check and correct grammatical and spelling errors immediately. When journalists are done with typing, their stories are stored in a computer. The editor may be able to view the story in another remote screen if the systems are in a network, a kind of intranet. When the editor is done with the work, the story is finally transmitted to another computer, which sets the words in type. Journalism practice has indeed entered the electronic age.

4. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN ICT AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM

In as much as citizen journalism and ICT are interwoven, the numerous issues and challenges associated with ICT are confronting the efficiency of citizen journalism in Nigeria. Blogging, podcasting and mablogging among others have made internet users (netizens) to no longer passively consume media news but actively participate in them.

One major issue confronting citizen journalism and ICT is the fact that there are no editors (gatekeepers) in the news and information disseminated through citizen journalism using the available ICT media. No editors to verify the truth within what someone has written, unlike in the traditional journalism and in the world of endless information, credibility is a very essential ingredient for information seekers.

Irrespective of the truth within the posted information, the most important thing is that, with the diffusion of the information or news. The targeted audience and the large number of average users of the internet are not empowered to receive new information than before.

Another issue of ICT and citizen journalism is the range at which the news and information dispersed there cannot go into the remote audience that reside in places where ICT facilities are not available or accessible. As such, citizen journalism cannot be a very a very effective and efficient media tool to pass news and information in such areas. Many towns and villages in Nigeria do not have access to internet services, computer facilities etc. Even in areas where they are accessible, it will require leisure time (which is almost not available) and frequent entrance or connecting (logging in) by the citizen journalists and the audience to be able to either pass the news or information and to retrieve and use them.

Prominent among the issues of ICT and citizen journalism is the high cost involved in putting it in place. Using ICT facilities to disseminate news and information involves high cost financially. As such, considering the general income level of Nigerians, it will not be a very efficient tool to disseminate news and information especially like that of security and health related news. The cost of acquiring ICT facilities and its accessories

is very high as such reducing the utilization of citizen journalism.

Another issue involved in ICT and citizen journalism is that duplication, malpractices, wrong misleading information is the order of the day when it comes to citizen journalism. Most of the news and information passed using citizen journalism through ICT are not genuine. They are majorly propagandas that are aimed at either annoying or causing anger, promoting injustice or even creating enmity among the targeted audience. For instance, “the role citizen journalism played towards Nigeria 2015 general elections was instrumental considering the outcome of the elections”

CONCLUSION

Technological advancement in contemporary society of the 21st century heralded the arrival of information and communication technologies (ICT) that has enhance the existing communication process and the entire material in which individual interact with the world. The ICTS expanded frontier of communication channels refer to as new media have given birth to “citizen journalism”. These ICT driven communication channels include online information services, cable television, the internet and World Wide Web, among others. They have enhanced the reach and understanding of traditional mass media newspaper, magazine, television and radio. The new media have expanded the horizon of communication, and made the world smaller and communication process more rapid.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

To curtail some of the issues affecting citizen journalism/ participation, the study recommends that:

(i) Participants (citizen journalists) should try as much as possible to ensure that their news and information are edited by professionals before they are published.

(ii) ICT facilities should be made available to areas where they are not available and at cheap cost to ensure that its range of targeted audience is vast, thus making it more efficient.

(iii) Government and other non-governmental functionaries should try to help subsidize the cost of ICT facilities.

(iv) Strict measures should be put in place to punish those that use the medium to provoke anger and cause disunity, mayhem, violence of any kind.

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