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The Internet And Journalism Practice In Nigeria

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Abstract - This paper looks at the implication of new technology on the practice of journalism especially the use of internet to produce, disseminate and receive information. The theoretical method adopted here is on the basis of McLuhan's theory of technological determinism to justify the work that more emphasize will be on the medium as technology advances in the global village. The interactive nature of internet is a crucial factor while some believe its role of citizen journalism is unethical in journalism profession others opine it is sacrosanct to participatory democracy. Library research method was used to generate secondary data for this paper. However no new medium can send an old one to oblivion, it will only be an extension of the old medium. It is pertinent that online journalism ought to provide more information and in some cases provide video clips and series of pictures to back up their stories. The paper recommends that media houses should train their staff on online journalism while government should provide enabling environment in the rural areas so information can get to them.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As the internet changes the face of communication journalists are beginning to have a new way of packaging and disseminating news to the public. Though few journalists in Nigeria have access to the internet and most of them do that in their respective places of work (without personal internet access) because internet connection is limited to senior people especially managing editors and senior staff notwithstanding, they are not left out of the global village. So, journalists access internet from cyber cafes, libraries and media resource centres and most of them still use the internet to send e-mail. Beyond sending e-mail to headquarters and receiving instructions from the same internet has created new opportunities for journalists to sell stories not only to other media houses locally but across the globe. The internet has made the world smaller for journalists to explore. This wonderful technology has also made research on various subject matters available via chatting and exchange of messages. This has created new markets and form of journalism where journalists specialize and work as online journalists, content managers or editors for particular websites. The internet is pushing journalists to learn new skills on how to add content to a web site, blog and create hyper text links the coming of the internet is also leading journalists to basically know

photographic skills such as how to take digital pictures and upload them to a computer or add them to a blog and website. Internet has made it easy for journalists to research on any subject as it is one of the biggest resources – it makes it easy to find out what acronyms stand and also research a certain subject matter. No doubt, the internet is also changing the way we write for newspapers as we now have to learn how to strictly write for online newspapers. However, most of the online newspapers still carry the same material which was produced by the print version without creating hypertext links to help the visitor stay with the page.

II. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to appraise the impact of internet on journalism practice in Nigeria with the aim of bringing to limelight what underlines the underutilization of the new communication technology in Nigeria journalism profession. It also looks at the power of latest technology and how it changes the traditional journalism.

III. METHODOLOGY

Library research was used to generate secondary data for this paper.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Technological Determination is the basis (theory) upon which this work is anchored. The theory states that media technologies shape how we as individuals in a society think, feel act and how a society operates as we move from one technology age to another (Tribal – literate -print -electronic). Griffin (2000, pp.313-325) elaborate McLuhan's theory of 1963 that we learn, feel and think the way we do because of the message we receive through the current technology that is available. McLuhan (1962), *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man*, explains that the radio required us to only listen and develop our sense of warning. On the other hand, television engages both our hearing and visual senses. We then transfer those developed senses into our everyday lives and we want to use them again. The medium is then our message.

With the development of technology the profession of journalism after test running the effects of latest medium then explores its potentials to reach the audience. Today internet is the latest through which journalism thrives.

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V. NEW ERA OF JOURNALISM

The internet is the fastest growing medium in history. The digitalisations, convergence of computer and telephony technologies - which are the linchpin of the internet, have greatly influenced the way news and information are produced and disseminated. Times and things have indeed changed, globalization has since become a buzz word, and has brought with it change and competition. People's lives have been variously affected either for the better or for worse, depending on the side of the divide one finds himself.

The rapid adoption of internet by journalist is a nationwide phenomenon. The process by which computerization or digitalization impacted upon the media of the 21st Century has moved on many fronts and at different speeds. Agba (2007, p.83) notes that "with desktop publishing and word processing packages, particularly the page maker, the production of newspapers, magazines, journals etc has become an interesting business more so with the use of video display terminals (VDTs)"

Desktop publishing which is the use of a computer and specialized software to combine text and graphics to create a document that can be printed on either a laser printer or a typesetting machine has lessened the burden of typesetting on the old manual typewriter. The use of computer in layout and printing enhances accuracy, helping to control newspaper and magazine costs. Electronic editing; proofreading, formatting, spellchecking tools, calculator and other software tools now facilitate the speed and ease of news gathering and dissemination. Also, the use of electronic publishing which involves the process through which print media disseminate printed messages using electronic media has closed the wide gap between print and electronic media as a result of convergence in technology. Bittner, (1989,p.277) merely mentions the power of teletext but today, teletext transmits text between teleprinters and teleprompter via computer with a television transmission system sending data to various media houses as well as home receivers equipped with compatible decoder. A good example of this is being demonstrated the way *The Nation Newspaper* in Nigeria typesets in Lagos but prints its hardcopy simultaneously in Lagos, Port Harcourt and Abuja; no doubt a new era in the history of media technology is here with us. Electronic editions of newspapers have also been delivered to various homes through this system.

Another landmark in the era of internet journalism has been the ability of the media to harness the potentials of World Wide Web (www) among other services provided by the net. The www which is a system for accessing, manipulating, and downloading a very large set of hypertext-linked documents and other files located on computers connected through the internet has afforded both the source and receiver to send and receive messages as well as advertise goods and services.

VI. CITIZEN JOURNALISM VERSUS CONVENTIONAL JOURNALISM

It is now clear that the advent of internet has made everybody a journalist just as Gutenberg made everybody a printer with the invention of printing press and Marconi made everybody a broadcaster by giving us radio, everyone is now a journalist. Citizen journalism has made it a reality for everybody to be media creator, owner and actor instead of passive user (Ezeibe and Nwagwu; 2009, pp.65-66). They add that citizen journalism gradually debases the conventional journalism hence information role that professional journalism does dissolve into public domain. It appears that there is no clear distinction between the role of conventional journalism and citizen journalism. Conventional journalism which is the mainstream profession of journalism requires one form of training or the other, either through education or on the job training for them to discharge their social responsibility role. However, citizen journalism is usurping the role of conventional journalism. Looking at the issue, citizen journalism spells negative effects to the trend of journalism because most times journalists feel threatened by the increase in participation in news gathering and dissemination despite the societal approval which is described such as plus to participatory democracy. With the use of internet and the involvement of citizen journalism journalists have tips available to them in which further investigation can be carried out. Internet has removed the barriers of space and time on human interactions hence information can easily be obtained at a relatively low cost. Nwajinka (2003, p.118) contends that journalists in the digital age have no excuse but to make use of online libraries to enrich their performance. It cannot be an overstatement to describe the convergence of computer and telecommunications as the material forces in the new technology of mass communication. The internet has virtually revolutionised the process of news and information gathering, processing, publishing, distribution of products and services.

Traditionally, news is information about events that are currently happening or that have happened recently, new technologies now allow news to be more current as audiences are virtually transported to the scene of the event. Rodman (2009, p.37) explains that the presence of goggle news, twitter, facebook and other social networking media are also changing the phase of journalism. Now it is possible to build customized news reports from all the articles being read in the morning to the reader's social network. For instance, Digg is a network site devoted to such news stories, Digg's web site provides content that has been selected by other users from prominent news sources according to the votes of Digg's members to give highlights. This is changing radically the concept of professional journalist as gatekeeper hence, changes in the concept of traditional news values come to debate

VII. NEWS VALUE

At a time, journalists could attach news to more of politics; public affairs and government activities and consider these as topics required to keep the audience informed about democracy which is believed to be the best form of governance since it is participatory. However people define news differently: to a business person it may be financial information while team scores may be for sport lovers but one thing is sure; news is about information that is timely, important and interesting to its audience (known as news values) and all these have changed the definition of news as it goes online.

Timeliness : News is information traditionally about current events happening or that have just happened. With the latest technology news is now immediate that audience begin to expect eventually every minute in this country. It is now an habit in Nigeria that audience go to the internet to post, know and read the latest any time there is crucial issue - only those with less media literacy (at the level of this country) wait for traditional news or relax till the following day before they are up-to-dated. Good examples of this were demonstrated during the controversial return of late President Yar'Adua from his Jeddah Hospital in S'Audi Arabia and when he finally gave-up the ghost. Hence, today's 24-hour news environment is kept fresh and the implication is that an hour ago news becomes absolutes the following hour.

VIII. UBIQUITOUS NATURE OF NEW FORM OF JOURNALISM

Looking at the way internet and journalism influence each other it is obvious that the new form of journalism is ubiquitous in structure. Though not everybody in a society has access to the internet to assess the news (because of digital divide), the presence of mobile phones has made it possible for journalist to gather news anywhere especially those who use their phones as mobile internet and send stories which in turn readers have access. The groups in turn have influence on their environment having been opinion leaders to their peers or even those in their vicinity.

IX. INTERACTIVITY OF THE NEW MEDIUM

Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006, p.25) posit that interactivity is a switching pivotal that allows audience more selectivity in their choices of information sources and interactions with other people. Audience of mass media over the decades are known to perceiving information differently and retaining information selectively. The new media give users the means to generate, seek and share content selectively and to interact with other individuals and groups, on a scale that was impractical with traditional mass media. Lievrouw and Livingstone in their argument submit.

Selectivity accounts for much of the sense of interactivity of social presence associated with new

media... in turn, the user proliferation and diversity of content and sources now available have raised concerns about the quality of the content - authenticity, reliability, anonymity, identity of participation on online interaction.(p 25)

X. ETHICAL DISCOURSE

Going by the above submission question of pertinent issues can be raised such as the issue of professionalism. How does professionalism affect the practice of online journalism? The former Abuja Bureau Chief of the *Tide Newspaper*, Alloys Nweke at the 2008 *Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) Submit* in Port Harcourt frowned at the numerous untrained people bestriding the streets with pen and paper claiming to be journalists. Nweke's speech reveals that the number of fake journalists in Nigeria society is higher than the real practitioners. Now if professionals are not happy with the *conventional* quacks in this job what will they say about the current trend (internet) which has made everybody a journalist? Does or can professionalism still be attained in this jet age? Akinfeleye (1990, p.6) quotes an American critic; Dean Rosco Pound who writes that every profession is governed by certain roles: hence if the role of bringing news to the audience is the role of professional journalist then citizen journalism is on the right track. However it goes beyond that to the issue of gatekeeping chain - where a lot of other factors (editors, reporters, advertiser etc) are taken into consideration before the news gets to final consumer. If extended to cover wider areas then traditional journalists may have course to frown at internet journalism for usurping their role or rightly put debasing the profession.

Professionalism cannot stand without attaching on its apron, ethical codes. The early and the nationalist press were not governed by formal ethics and code of conduct in the case of Nigeria. Responsible regulation later came with the ethical code of the Nigeria Union of Journalists in 1967. Surlin (1987, p.88) in his study of values of journalism practitioners before and after undergoing various courses and trainings in media ethics opines that the media ethics course has a noticeable and ethically positive effect upon the student value system. All forms of balancing a story and reporting without prejudice which traditional journalists consider as ethical may not be followed in today era of internet as journalists compete to hit the air wave first.

So many factors influence journalism practice although, the magnitude of the effect depends on the environment where the professional calling is carried out cum the background of the source involved (the reporter). It is now paramount that journalists give to the society what the society is interested in. Obscenity was ones a time a taboo in journalism but it is not absent these days in online journalism and the society does not see it as evil anymore. Even if the media refuse to carry such publications podcast will readily project it. Hence the society influences the media while in turn after the

media discover the taste of those in their environment they better amplify it to the society. Therefore, what constitutes ethical discourse in the era of internet journalism is subject to debate.

XI. ECONOMIC, SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INTRINSIC

Media production is capital intensive and they rely on advertisement for revenue. It costs a lot of money to print and distribute newspapers and this is responsible for most slums and small towns not having much newspaper establishment and circulation in their immediate environment. With only few newspapers serving a community's information needs, basic law of supply and demand dictates the price of advertisement to communities. It is a huge profit industry that has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of few elites who own and control the media production and content. However, the greed to break even within a year or less coupled with wrongful focus to use media for political ambition of the proprietor is lumbered with associated debt. For most publishers the reaction has been to implement efficiency whenever they can - moving out of city centre offices, publishing less frequently and laying off enormous numbers of staff. Now that advertisers create their sites independently print media cannot but move online if they still want to break even. The effects of online advertisement may not have been conspicuous in Nigeria for now but such cannot be dismissed.

Political economy asserts that the production of media products are structurally constrained by economic and political factors, especially the private ownership of media industries (Williams, 2003, p 26). Murdock and Golding (as quoted in Williams, 2003, p.227) believe the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities. Media owners are striving to answer the call to uphold the tenet of journalism and preserve it. However, the attempts to resist the changes that are coming as a result of internet may not be favourable to journalism in this digital era. The web has the advantage of allowing individual to distribute news without the need to buy printing press thus, requiring less revenue to an outfit. Meanwhile, whoever sees reason in democratic society and freedom of the press won't see any reason to look at citizen journalism and dismiss it because it is the most democratic system of publishing ever.

XII. ISSUES OF REGULATION

The most widely noted potential consequence for the media institution is the "convergence" between all existing media forms in terms of their organization, distribution, reception and regulation (McQuail, 2005, pp.137-552). There is a general agreement that convergence occurs at the technological level (European commission, 1997). Digital technology allows

both traditional and new communication services - whether voices, data, sound or pictures - to be provided over many different networks. Internet incorporates all media and distributes them through push (button) technologies. Now it can be said that digitalization means technologies for the processing and transmission of information having begun to use the same language. Though each medium started and developed fairly independently, rapidly merging into digital stream of zeros and ones in the global communication network pose a serious challenge for the regulatory bodies. For instance the body that regulates electronic media in Nigeria (National Broadcasting Commission -NBC) is different from that of print media. Though telecommunications and the press (both print and electronic media) are now in Nigeria under the same ministry called Ministry of Information and Communication but are regulated differently. Nigeria press council regulates print media. In the era of internet journalism who regulates the contents of online print and electronic by the way of convergence? Now, who controls the internet or internet journalism, the telecommunication or the press, the broadcast regulatory bodies or the print regulatory bodies; involvement of internet in journalism practice now press challenges for journalism regulatory bodies.

XIII. VULNERABLE PROFESSION OF JOURNALISM

Journalism today finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information; and it's doing just that on the internet. The internet as a medium for news, is maturing with every major news event, online media evolve. While news sites have become more responsive and better, able to handle the growing demands of readers and viewers, online communities and personal news and information sites are particularly in an increasingly diverse and playing important role that, until recently, has operated without significant notice from mainstream media. A very good thing about internet journalism is that it introduces fresh voices into national discourse on various topics and help build communities of interest through their collections of links.

XIV. CONCLUSION

When people are online they are looking for much more information and that makes journalists provide more information on the subject matter. An online version can provide more information and in some cases provide video clips and a series of pictures

unlike the print version which has limited pages. The internet is much more interesting as it provides journalists with multimedia platform where journalism can provide data, video and voice as Gesher (2002, p.176) believes that online newspaper is meant to capture wider audience internationally. As technology advances more change will continue to occur. Williams (2003, p.227) sums it up:

Early in the next millennium your right or left cufflinks or earrings may communicate with each other by low-orbiting satellites and have more computer power than your present PC. Your telephone won't ring indiscriminately; it will receive and perhaps respond to your incoming calls like a well-trained English butler. Mass media will be re-defined by systems for transmitting and receiving personalized information and entertainment.

On this note it is important to emphasize that the internet in comparison with other media institutions displays the followings as discussed by McQuail (2005, p.141):

- i. The internet is not only or even mainly concerned with the production and distribution of messages. It is at least equally concerned with processing exchange and storage of information.
- ii. The internet is as much as institution of private as well as of public communication.
- iii. The operation is not typically professional or bureaucratically organized in the same degree as mass media.

However, the lack of political will among the national leaders should be addressed. Most governments in developing countries do not help matters as they show lackadaisical attitudes towards investing on their media to make them functional towards serving the people hence, the media audience turn to the internet to get the best they think is better for them. Popular belief has it that news coming from official, mainstream channels is superior in quality and readability than news reported by a blogger or someone with a shaky camcorder. Traditional media keep on being preached as the source of truth, but what they lack is exactly the essence of truth - validation. Through the internet journalism on the contrary, finds its strength in the continuous, ongoing validation process operated by large community. Anybody can easily share his/her opinion; agree or disagree with what is being said by taking the advantages of new technologies and the web. The kind of high-technology interaction journalism is a resemblance of real life conversation again, much like the original journalism occurring in the public houses and coffee houses four hundred years ago. Seen in this light, journalism's function is not fundamentally changed by the digital age. The techniques may be different, but the underlying principles are the same.

What is emerging is a new media ecosystem, where online communities discuss and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These

communities also produce participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking which the mainstream media feed upon, develop as pool of tips, sources and story ideas.

XV. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Media houses that are yet to train their staff should do so as soon as possible.
- (2) Media houses that are having online site should provide avenue for citizen journalism.
- (3) Government should provide enabling infrastructure in rural areas so journalists can access such areas in order to send and get report in such areas.
- (4) An online version should provide more information and in most cases provide video clips and series of pictures unlike the print version which has limited pages.
- (5) Media houses should make provisions for internet facilities in all their offices for the members of staff in order to compete with their counterpart the world over.

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