



Towards a Pragmatic Solutions to Citizen Journalism in Nigeria

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the narrative research method applied in solving the problems of citizen journalism in Nigeria. Narrative literature review is the analysis tool used in this paper. Web of science and Google scholar were the main sources of data for this research paper. It is important to note that the paper focuses on the positive side of citizen journalism as well as the negative side. Citizen journalism allows both professionals and non-professionals the chance to create news content. However, the negative side of citizen journalism is that the information is not edited (there are no gatekeepers), therefore, lack of credibility. In this age of unlimited information, credibility is an important component of the process of information searching.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Gatekeeping, Pragmatic Solution, information.

1. Introduction

The advancement of technology in the today's world has brought about information and communication technologies which make communication and interaction all over the globe easier. New technologies have expanded the horizon of communication and shrank the world with the help of the fast communication processes (Apuke, 2016). Thus, the change from the traditional model of one-way communication to the more effective and dynamic two-way communication is the results of technology advancement that provides common people with the opportunity to use media (Tsegay, 2016). In other words, before this Transformation took place, media unit used its power over audience; media fed its audience with

information without giving a chance to express their opinion on the matter.

With the rapid development of ICTs, people became both producers and consumers of information, resulting from citizen journalism. Those who could not voice their opinions found social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram handy. According to Noel 2012, technologically speaking, the Internet has removed the airs of privilege in which the media were placed-interposing themselves between the source and the user (Berger 2010)-and allowed the public to assume the same social role as the press Domingo et al.2008 and bypass the media's gatekeeping functions Cohn 2010. Computers, mobile telephony, and the Internet put information collection and dissemination within very short periods of time at any corner of the globe in an instant; as Tsegay (2016) noted, it opens up all kinds of possibilities for citizen journalism to be accepted within Nigeria. More properly, it has been very fast in terms of developing and promoting its presence from the United States of America in the 18th century to this present time, in both developed and developing countries worldwide. In Nigeria, for example, it includes activities such as developing websites and blogs to post information about this occurrence.

It has been stated by Dare (2011, p. 22) that there have been citizen journalism websites such as Odili.net, The Nigerian Village Square (NVS), and Nairaland in Nigeria since 2002, 2003, and 2004, respectively. Other online media include Africa.net, Sahara Reporters, Naija Community, and Naijapals.com.

While citizen journalism is now prevalent, most of its practice is marred by the problems of trustworthiness, credibility, and bias. In this regard, Grubisich (2005), in his critical remarks on Ten new citizen journalism sites, states that most of them are substandard in quality and content. Hence, while citizen journalism shows creditable growth in Nigeria and elsewhere, certain aspects of its practice in Nigeria are flawed.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are to:

- Examined the brief history of citizen journalism in Nigeria
- Examine the status of citizen journalism in Nigeria
- Examine the merit and demerit of citizen journalism in Nigeria.

1.2 Research Methodology

A qualitative research design has been utilized in this research study. The data collection technique adopted in this study is desk study which refers to the process of collecting data from secondary sources such as journals, newspapers, books and so on. The data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics approach. The area where the study is conducted is Nigeria. The study aims to analyze how citizen journalism is applied in the context of Nigeria. Nigeria is a federal republic located in the western region of Africa and shares borders with Chad and Cameroon and Benin in the west and Niger in the north. There are 36 states in Nigeria along with the Federal Capital Territory, which contains the capital city of Nigeria, Abuja.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Citizen Journalism

As a concept, citizen journalism can be described as participatory, public, and democratic journalism (Baase, 2008) guerrilla journalism (Case, 2007), or street journalism (Tamara, 2009), whereby a nonprofessional cadre of individuals engages in activities related to gathering, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating information (Bowman, 2003). Jay (2008) refers to citizen journalism as a form of journalism in which people who previously occupied the role of audiences use press tools to tell each other stories.

Further, it is generally understood to be a practice whereby persons at the community, society, state, or national level take an active role in gathering, processing,

and publishing news and information for general consumption (Burkholder 2010, p1). In this sense, a person is equipped with some device-such as a mobile phone or computer-to create a webpage through which one collects news and disseminates it instantaneously with one's gadgets.

What could make this practice develop was the improvement of the ICTs that nowadays allow people to take video, audio, and pictures of the event with a mobile phone and share these with the public through the Internet, particularly via YouTube, Twitter, and other social networking sites. This has been best supported by Gilardi (2016), who argued that the availability of the media technologies to citizens, such as social networking sites and other media-sharing websites, facilitated and increased citizen journalism.

Therefore, with the rise of technology, the citizens set a trend of communicating news ahead of professional journalists. Some of the instances when citizen journalism was evident in great incidents around the globe include: 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Arab spring, Occupy Wall Street Movement, protests in Turkey in 2013, event in Ukraine in 2013 (known as Euromaidan), Syrian civil war, and Ferguson which took place in 2014. In Nigeria, the citizens act as amateur reporters for some of the local media. The TV channel eyewitness reports can be referred to as an instance of citizen journalism in Nigeria. The concept of citizen journalism is in direct contradiction to the traditional media model which is based on top-down communication.

Bowman and Willis (2003) tend to agree with the above-mentioned statement, saying that participatory communication has a horizontal communication model which is not controlled by editing or directing, leading to simultaneous spreading of information through the web social network. According to the researchers, the citizen journalism approach is aimed at creating messages and information as opposed to the editing and filtering of information as done in the traditional media.

2.2 History of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism has a rich history. Various scholars have made efforts to get a complete understanding of the evolution of citizen journalism. As Kern and Nam (2008:12) point out, "The origins of citizen journalism are connected with the movement of civic journalism, which appeared as a reform campaign among journalists in the United States. Due to the readership problems of the American newspaper industry in the late 70s, some journalists, intellectuals, and newspaper heads tried to

improve the connection between press and society using new methods of listening to the public.” (Kern & Nam, 2008:13; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001:217), explain that the first civic journalists acted as advocates of common people. They organized public events and brought local issues to the agenda. The local community participated in the news process as interviewees and focus group members and people expressing their opinions on the public meetings. The journalists tried to listen to the audience and bring local issues into the news.

However, the present-day citizen journalism has been closely associated with the invention of the Internet and its associated technologies. Citizen journalism has been associated with the increased level of interactivity in the Internet. As physicist Tim Berners-Lee launched the world’s first website, <http://info.cern.ch/> in 1991, he presented it with very little level of interactivity to the audience. There was some limitation placed by the technology of the Internet on the amount of interactivity possible. But over the next few years there have been a series of developments in Internet technologies which have made interaction with other audiences or publishers of websites much easier.” (www.theopennewsroom.com). There has been a change in the mode of news reporting using citizen journalism since 2004 due to the introduction of Web 2.0 features on websites. “The Web 2.0 features have allowed consumers or ordinary citizens to create their websites or blogs or feeds in mainstream media...” (www.theopennewsroom.com).

There are some unique features of the Web 2.0 technologies which have been used in citizen journalism. “Some of the features which are normally cited as characterizing Web 2.0 include blogging, RSS generated syndication, social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, Mash-ups, wikis like Wikipedia and other collaborative applications and interactive encyclopedias and dictionaries....” These are the social media aided with the help of Web 2.0 technology that has enabled the citizens to engage in newsgathering and reporting.

Since its conception, citizen journalism has undergone series of tests in some form; one of such is 2004 Indonesian Boxing Day Tsunami and Bombing in London, Virginia Tech disaster where the citizens involved themselves in the act of journalism through the taking and posting of pictures, messages and texts about the happenings. There are also others which include Arab Spring, military coup in Egypt in 2013 and its protests, Occupy Wall Street Movement amongst others where the citizens gathered information on the spot and posted it on the internet for world consumption.

Status of citizen journalism in Nigeria

Status of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria Citizen journalism has gained much prominence in Nigeria. This has been possible through the use of social media where the political elite and the common citizens make use of the available social media tools to gather and disseminate information. Based on this, Dare (2011:44) observed that “national recognition came for social media when on June 28, 2010, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, launched his Facebook fan page to reach out to the youth and Nigerians with a view to getting feedback on electoral reform and other national issues.” He also found that “in the 2011 election campaigns, many Nigerian politicians resorted to the social media (Facebook, Twitter) as the tool for selling their political ideology and winning the voters’ support.”

It is, therefore, no surprise why UNDP (2010:67) pointed out that “the Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan was said to have ‘more Facebook fans than the combined tally of British Prime Minister, David Cameron, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and South African head of state, Jacob Zuma’”

Nigerians have embraced social media and it has become popular among the people because Nigerians have started reporting news from their communities and commenting on happenings in the country. One of such websites that participate in citizen journalism is Sahara reporters, although some people criticize it. However, others acknowledge the timeliness of the reports. In this context, in a study conducted by Dare (2011:44), out of 120 respondents, 86 indicated that Sahara reporters is very good in providing breaking news. As a result, due to its interactivity, immediacy, and spontaneity of the information dissemination, citizen journalism has created significant threats to mainstream media in Nigeria. For example, there is a case of Dana airline crash that happened on June 3, 2012, where more than 150 passengers died. The incident has been reported in real-time by citizen journalists via social media and commentaries have been provided as well. This way, mainstream media has realized that citizen journalism poses significant challenges and has accepted it. “If you can’t beat them, join them”.

Despite this, numerous experts have criticized the type of citizen journalism being performed by the mainstream press in Nigeria. An example of this theory can be cited from Salawu (2011:192) who carried out a study on offline citizen journalism using Nigerian Punch as an example of this trend. He discovered that despite the advantages of citizen journalism as operated by Punch, such as citizens being able to write their own stories, this

is still not the same as citizen journalism done online, and so professional editing of the offline Punch goes on, with journalists acting as gatekeepers in selecting and editing the stories and therefore distorting the real intent of the participants in the citizen journalism practice. That is why the example of CNN's "ireport" citizen journalism is completely different to that of offline Punch journalism.

3. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Citizens Journalism

The topic of citizen journalism has attracted much controversy. Some argue that it is a positive development in journalism in that it eliminates the monopolistic powers of top-down communication, while others argue that it lacks credibility and hence poses a threat to the flow of information in society. Alemoh (2013) pointed out that citizen journalism has started to do us good since it manages to capture some of the events that traditional media fail to report. For instance, citizen journalists were able to instantly cover some of the incidents occurring in remote areas. An example of that is the case of a plane crash involving the ex-Governor of Taraba state of Nigeria, Governor Danbaba Danfulani Suntai, which was immediately broken by citizen journalists yet took traditional media over 24 hours to get it out.

Also, there are citizen journalists such as Amanda Harper who has a blog titled "Journalism: The Future" who states the following; "Citizens who were equipped with mobile phones and had a sight of the Hudson River were the first to break news about the crash of the US flight #1549 in New York in 2009. People using social media websites such as Twitter and Flickr were able to break the news to the world and provide live updates about the accident within minutes."

In addition, Alemoh (2013) mentions that almost all bomb blasts conducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria get covered instantly by citizen journalists complete with photos from the scene even before any main-stream media station reaches the place. This has happened in such states as Borno, Yobe and Adamawa in Nigeria. Instant reportage of bomb blasts can be seen in such social media websites as Facebook and Twitter among others. This shows that citizen journalism provides an avenue where both professionals and non-professionals can generate news stories for the audience/public. As a result, journalism has become more democratic and participative due to emergence of citizen journalism unlike the mainstream media.

Further, one more important feature of citizen journalism is its instantaneous delivery of information. Citizen

journalism delivers its message at the speed of light because there are no gate-keepers. Therefore, it involves instant feedback from its consumers as in the case of Facebook likes. This is the reason why many people refer to citizen journalism as "we media" because content is created by the people, by the people and for the people. Thus, having mentioned the advantages of citizen journalism, there are disadvantages of citizen journalism too. One of the problems with citizen journalism is unreliable nature of its content. There are many commentators who have criticized citizen journalism as the phenomenon of spreading falsehood and other unethical practices in the name of journalism.

Also, the efficiency and advantages of citizen journalism have been discredited by the traditional media owing to the fact that it lacks objectivity. Many journalists and media organizations are very skeptical towards the concept of citizen journalism because of its inauthenticity. They argue that the job of journalism is meant to be done by professional journalists alone, those who are aware of objectivity and balance as well as canon of journalism. Regarding this point, Mgbejume (2008) says that the journalist needs to go through training in order to be able to publish something efficiently. He compares an untrained journalist to an armed madman and says that he can start shooting at will leading to disaster. In addition, Mgbejume states that in order to publish some news on the Internet, one has to get trained in journalism.

Furthermore, according to Educause Learning Initiative (2007), citizen journalism becomes a matter of shortsighted personal vision through allowing everybody the freedom to collect and disseminate the message. Nevertheless, through blogging, Facebook, twitter and others, citizen journalists have created revolutionary information concerning political oppression, corruption and economic theft in the society and the globe.

False news reports are just one of the many potential consequences arising from the reliance of news reports from anonymous sources. The news report may be true, factual and correct. However, it may be faulty, and contain such problems as lack of ethics, impartiality and bias. News report may contain hidden agenda and opinions in disguise of the truth as well as libelous or defamatory statements about people in it. Through gate-keeping process, it is possible to solve the problem of mainstream media. Gate-keeping, as it is called, is carried out by experienced journalists and editors using different methods such as knowledge of law and in-house or commercial style books such as Associated Press Stylebook (www.theopennewsroom.com).

Having reviewed benefits and drawbacks of citizen journalism generally, it is necessary to consider the criticism of citizen journalism in Nigeria.

4. Criticism of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria

Citizen journalism has faced criticism in Nigeria from its opponents. Critics claim that citizen journalism lacks credibility. According to Dare (2011:44), a large number of 120 respondents surveyed did not have trust in Sahara reporters. This implies that a majority of Nigerians do not believe in the stories of citizen journalists. Some people have accused them of spreading lies. Apuke asserts (2016) that the major problem of citizen journalism is the absence of gatekeepers or editors who check or censor the information before it is conveyed to the public, which is connected with credibility and authenticity, which are the basic principles in journalism.

On the contrary, some critics according to Okoro et-al (2013) argue that citizen journalism is responsible for creating conflicts civil unrest as well as political instability. This view reached its peak during the protests following the annulment of the fuel subsidy in January 2012. While some claim that it was citizen journalism which misled the protesters causing some turmoil against the government, it should be noted that the aim of the protest was achieved to an extent considering that the prices of petrol were somehow lowered.

Additionally, citizen journalism is criticized for being a means through which significant issues, as well as events of national calamity, have been belittled and treated with contempt. Of note, there has been much outcry; especially from the political elite over the actions of citizen journalists during the Dana Airline incident on June 3, 2012. Reports indicate that while the rescue team was doing everything possible to search for survivors, citizen journalists could do nothing else but take gruesome photos and send them to their contacts. One recommendation has been that in the event of disasters, citizen reporters ought to abstain from posting any information or images that would interfere with rescue activities.

Another challenge, according to Apuke (2016) is that citizen journalism in Nigeria is full of replication and malpractice. It has been revealed that citizen journalism news and information are many times inconsistent or false; as most of them are propaganda messages meant to incite resentment or cause anger or even injustice to their targets.

5. Theoretical Review

5.1 Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping' as a term was introduced by a German psychologist Kurt Lewin, who introduced the concept in 1951. The term describes the process of narrowing down a virtually endless flow of information into a limited number of messages sent out to the public on a daily basis. Gatekeeping can be seen as the main function of the mass media in the modern life of society. The information of millions of events becomes narrowed down to only a few news pieces that the public gets to know about on an everyday basis. The process of gatekeeping can be considered as a very complicated one since it seems impossible to transform so many possible messages into so few actual ones. The process of gatekeeping not only makes it possible to select the information, but also determines the nature of the selected messages. According to the Gatekeeping Theory, the process of delivering news includes various stages that are responsible for a news story to go to the public. It explains why and how certain pieces of information get accepted and published in the news.

The gatekeepers are responsible for deciding which information can be provided to the audiences and which information cannot. The gatekeeper mentioned here is the people who are in charge of the whole social system. The gatekeepers have their various influences like social, political, ethical and cultural influences. The order in which the gatekeepers allow the information to flow to the group depends on these influences. By doing so, the information that is not important, suitable and controversial is filtered out. This means that the society or any particular group is controlled and brought to a proper way of development. In families, a mother is the one who acts as a gatekeeper and provides the children with needed information and excludes the unneeded one.

In media outlets, the editor's role is that of a gatekeeper. It is upon the editor to decide on the news items that need to be published. Daily different news items arrive at the news media from various sources. The news media generally has certain principles due to which the editor decides on which news items to publish. In some cases, certain news items may be rejected by the editor either due to the policies of the organization or the characteristics of the news items that make them unsuitable for publication.

5.2 Democratic Participant Media Theory

The foundation of the present study is given by the Democratic Participant Media Theory. This theory emphasizes the foundations of society and indicates the importance of horizontal as compared to vertical communication (McQuail, 1987, p.122). One of the significant issues related to this theory is the importance of the breakdown of bureaucratic structures, professional and commercial hegemony in media organizations which makes media access easier for many potential users and consumers of information (Folarin, 2005, p.43). The author of this theory is McQuail (1983) who created the theory based on the notion that had been mentioned earlier and aimed to deal with the problems of society (McQuail 2000, p.160). The theory appeared in the 1960s and 1970s due to the interests in local and community radio and television development (McQuail 1983). McQuail mentions that the essential factor for the usage of this theory as cited by Ezensberger (1970) is the new technologies that appeared during the period. The media supported by the theory is non-commercial, small scale and usually connected with some issue. The concepts of interaction and participation accompany the theory.

This theory is applicable to this study as it is based on the idea that every citizen has a right to access information from media. However, the study deals with inviting citizens to take part in the process. So, this theory will serve as a basis for citizens' involvement in collecting and spreading information.

5.3 Social Responsibility Theory

While the concept of citizen journalism has faced some criticism within the literature (for examples see Dare, 2011:44; Mgbejume 2008; Maher, 2005), the many benefits associated with citizen journalism are well documented (see Alemoh; 2013; Okoro et-al 2013; Apuke, 2016). Because of this, it is important to refer to the social responsibility theory of journalism to provide a theoretical backing for the present paper. This theory was first proposed by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956 (Apuke, 2016). The social responsibility theory suggests that while the media have the right to publish anything they want, they also have to act responsibly as members of the society. This means that the media have to think carefully regarding what they publish so that it does not incite violence and create biases, but be fair and objective in their messages. The author Apuke (2016) believes that the media may enjoy their freedom, it also needs to be socially responsible when performing its mass

communication functions. Therefore, the ideal journalist should be responsible for his actions.

The theory of social responsibility can be used in this paper due to the fact that in the context of citizen journalism any individual can be a producer of news. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure the social responsibility of a person creating the news in the frame of citizen journalism. The social responsibility in this respect means providing information that is useful, fun and informative and does not lead to the social turmoil. It should also be mentioned that not every news first reported is trustworthy.

5.4 Empirical Framework

The influence of citizen journalism in Nigeria has been examined by Apeverga (2010) in his study. The aim is to determine the effect of citizen journalism on Nigeria's population. The researcher aimed to determine and assess the influence of citizen journalism on the lives of Nigerians. The result showed that citizen journalism has greatly influenced the life of Nigeria's population. Moreover, the researcher established that everyone is a journalist and everyone has the right to express his/her opinion without going to a media organization. According to the research findings, people do not make attempts to get the full information about an event, but people try to publish information about the accident faster than anyone else, just to be the one that writes about the event first. Additionally, Idoko (2012) looked into citizen journalism's capabilities, difficulties, and prospects present in Nigeria. The study results revealed that some of the major issues of citizen journalism are: computer illiteracy, getting access to the internet, and high costs of 'surfing' the internet. This means that the high costs of internet subscriptions have a negative impact on the effectiveness of citizen journalism in Nigeria. Because there is no genuinely free internet service, anyone that wants to publish information must purchase data, which could be very expensive for some people. Nevertheless, he found out that the drawbacks of citizen journalism are not so important. It offers many benefits such as covering a great number of events, being timely in reporting, and improving ICT in the country. In addition, Okoro et al. (2013), in their analysis of advantages and disadvantages of citizen journalism in Nigeria showed that the role of citizen journalism is growing in Nigeria with the help of popular websites providing citizen journalism news. For example, Sahara Reporters is one of those websites and is famous for publishing information timely, as it was found out during the research conducted by Dare (2011:44), where out of 120 respondents, 86 participants admitted that Sahara Reporters is the place where one can find

breaking news. Thanks to its interactive and timely nature, citizen journalism has created a competition for the traditional media in Nigeria. Citizen journalism has given Nigerians access to wide-ranging and diverse news. However, it is vital that citizen journalists refrain from publishing news or images that might thwart rescue operations in an emergency situation.

6. Conclusion

The rise of technology in the current 21st Century has introduced huge Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which have changed the existing communication dynamics through various mediums through which the person interacts with his environment. Several new media communication channels born of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have given rise to “citizen journalism”. The modern information channels coined from ICTs include online news websites, cable news channels, internet and World Wide Web, etc. Modern media has paved the way for revolutionizing the communication domain by making the world a global village.

The paper covers the practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria. It is seen from the discussions that the practice of citizen journalism has a bright future in Nigeria, nevertheless, some things should be worked on like ensuring that the citizen has sufficiently good knowledge of what he is going to share with the audience in the light of the opportunities offered by citizen journalism.

7. Recommendations

To resolve some of the issues facing citizen journalism/participation, this article proposes the following recommendations:

- All citizen journalists must ensure that the information they gather goes through the editing process by a professional before being released.
- All the participants in citizen journalism must know and understand the principles of journalism regarding balance, fairness and objectivity.
- The government and other bodies must help reduce the costs of ICT equipment aimed at ensuring the development of citizen journalism in Nigeria.
- A number of measures must be taken to punish those who abuse the medium for purposes of inciting hatred and causing disunity, riots and other disturbances.

- Citizen journalists must have a clear and true vision of the event before disseminating it. Journalism is not just about being the first to report; it is also about doing it accurately and correctly.

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