

# Do New Media Make the Practice of Journalism More or Less a Profession?

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## Abstract

This review examines the role of new media in the ongoing debate about journalism being a profession or not. The paper gives an overview of professionalism, contending issues in the journalistic profession debate, the new media, and the influence of new media in the debate. Drawing from a huge body of literature on new media usage, journalism, professionalism and practical examples, the paper contends that the new media contribute for and against journalistic professionalism. In terms of contributing for journalistic professionalism, it is observed among other things that the new media provide tools that improve journalism practices, making journalism significantly socially responsible to society. This is a core criterion of professionalism. In terms of contributing against journalistic professionalism, the paper contends inter alia that the extreme freedom associated with the new media render many people, without any formal journalistic training, journalists. With this, very many cases of unethical practices are the case. Similarly, the nature of new media makes it extremely difficult to regulate its usage. All these are in opposition to a number of general criteria of professionalism. With these overwhelming evidences, the position of the paper is that, at present, the new media work against journalistic professionalism than for it.

**Key words:** Debate, journalism, new media, non-profession, profession.

## 1. Introduction

Journalism is said to be the act of gathering news, writing and editing copy, or directing the publication of a newspaper, magazine or news (Reitz, 2004). This definition can not hold today considering the changing nature of information gathering, processing, dissemination, and consumption brought about by advances in technology. Limiting journalism to the activities of traditional media (radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, etc) alone in the contemporary digital age is a conservatively misleading notion. It is therefore safe to see journalism simply as the act of gathering information, processing it, and disseminating it (Stovall, 2005). It is a discipline, in the words of Uwakwe (2010, p.193), “that focuses on finding, collecting, verifying, analyzing, interpreting and presenting accounts of events, issues and people in a responsible and meaningful context.”

The discipline of journalism has a complex nature and remains in a state of constant flux so much so that the debate whether it is a profession or not has continue to linger on. Every new development in society that directly or indirectly impacts on the discipline pushes the debate forward. This is the case with the new media, which are here with us and are re-defining the practice of journalism and consumption of journalistic products, as well as the nature of its audience. This re-definition has provided a good deal of ideas that attempts to answer the question of whether or not journalism is a profession.

The onerous task of this paper is to examine the contribution of the many features of the new media to the continuing debate of whether or not journalism is a profession. The paper examines the contribution of the new media to both sides of the debate with a view to contributing to the articulation of a definite position on whether or not journalism is a profession. This position is necessary since it will reduce uncertainty about the discipline and place it in a clearer light for best practice.

## 2. Overview of Professionalism

The word profession is derived from the Latin word *professio*, meaning to declare publicly, to make a vow or to take an oath (Kimball, 1992). The word was first used in religious congregations, where the ordained people professed to serve God, and to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. The word was later known to refer to membership of a group of religious people who took a vow to serve God in a religious congregation (Kimball, 1992). This was the case as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Later, at about 15<sup>th</sup> Century, according to Larson (1977), four vocations or occupations were addressed as professions. These were Theology, Law, Medicine and Teaching. These four are often cited as clear examples of a profession even in contemporary times. Among the

four professions, Teaching was ranked highest, followed by Theology, Law and Medicine in that order of importance (Kimball, 1992).

Professional status is not inherently built in an occupation referred to as a profession. Occupations evolve to professions. This informs reference to concepts such as “emergent professions,” “professions in transition” and “professions in process” (Pavalko, 1976). In other words, work endeavours regarded as profession today were merely occupations and passed through a process to become professions. This process, according to Hall (1975), involves five stages as follows: (1) A substantial number of people begin doing full-time some activity that needs doing; (2) a training school is established; (3) a professional association is formed; (4) the association engages in political agitation to win the support of law for the protection of the group; and (5) a code of ethics is developed.

There are other perspectives to the usage of the term profession. Pavalko (1976) observes that the term is many times used in a simplistic manner to denote full-time performance of a particular kind of work for pay. Similarly the term is sometimes used to mean proficiency or exhibition of great skills at performing a task. In this sense, reference to a person as a professional means the person is skillful or proficient at performing a task. It is also in this regard that many occupations and businesses refer to themselves as professions and their members as professionals. The idea, for them, is to give the impression that their occupation and their members are competent and can be relied upon for excellent performance.

Closely related to the foregoing view is the idea expressed by Freidson (1986) that what is important for every individual in an occupation is to act like a professional. This means, according to Freidson, that the individual should have: (1) A sense of independence; (2) a sense of responsibility to society and the public interest; (3) manifest concern for the competence and honour of the profession as a whole; and (4) a higher loyalty to the standards of the profession and fellow professionals than to the employer of the moment. These professional values stand above prestige, salary level, and recognition from superiors.

The suggestion arising from the foregoing views on professionalism is that a wide range of issues constitute the criteria for defining an occupation as a profession. The widely held assumption is that the more an occupation meets those criteria, the more professional status conferred on it. Journalism, no doubt, has met some of the criteria. The extent to which it has met those criteria, however, is the controversial issue, which is the core of the debate whether journalism is a profession or a non-profession. The new media emerged with interesting influences on the practice and effect of journalism. These influences contribute to the extent to which journalism has met or has not met the professionalism criteria so as to be labeled a profession or a non-profession.

### **3. The Debate**

The debate whether or not journalism is a profession has been raging on since the beginning of the 20th Century. On one side of the debate are mostly journalism practitioners, journalism organizations and students who argue ardently that journalism is a profession and should be treated as such everywhere. On the other side of the debate are mostly scholars in and outside journalism who are of the view that journalism is not a profession, and should not be a profession. The position of the former group is hinged on the assumption that journalism meets most of the criteria that, taken together, constitute a profession. Some of the criteria, identified by Haralambos, Holbom and Head (2000), include: (1) A body of systematic and generalized knowledge that can be applied to a variety of problems; (2) a concern for the interests of the community rather than self-interest; (3) the existence of a code of ethics to control behaviour of members. The code is established and maintained by professional associations; and (4) the high rewards received by professionals, which include the prestige accorded to professional status as well as earnings. The occupation-profession continuum model advanced by Pavalko (1976) also identifies the criteria used in determining a profession. According to the model, a profession should have the following: (1) A theory or intellectual technique on which work in the area is based; (2) be relevant to basic social values; (3) a long specialized training period that places a strong emphasis on acquiring the ability to manipulate ideas and symbols, as well as acquiring specific knowledge and skills; (4) motivation is primarily by the desire to serve rather than by self-interest and monetary gain; (5) the presence of autonomy, self-regulation, and self-control; (6) long-term sense of commitment; a high sense of common identity and common destiny by members; (7) a high sense of commitment to work; and (8) a highly developed code of ethics.

On the basis of the foregoing criteria, proponents of journalism as a profession contend that journalism engages in public service, as its primary purpose; journalists think objectively and inquiringly about matters, thus

providing impartial, disinterested synthesis of information; journalistic work is an expertise one in which non-journalists cannot perform with success; journalists have close solidarity and a solid front through professional societies, unions and other specialized sub-groups; there are minimum entry requirements into the practice of journalism; and journalism has ethical norms that control the behaviour of members (Dennis & Merrill, 2002).

On the other hand, those who argue that journalism is not a profession also base their views on the above stated criteria of determining a profession; they argue that journalism has not met those criteria to a significant extent to be called a profession. In buttressing this assertion, Dennis and Merrill (2002) observe that journalism has no formal entrance requirements; anyone can be a journalist as long as he can do the work irrespective of whether he has an educational qualification in journalism or not. Dennis and Merrill (2002) write further that no professional standards in journalism are commonly agreed upon; journalists are not certified or licensed; there is no strong mechanism to enforce compliance to ethical standards; journalists do not share in common a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge; and journalists do not compromise a homogeneous community.

One important thing about professionalism is that it is an evolving issue; an occupation that is not a profession can attain professional status by passing through certain stages. This is what Pavalko (1976) refers to as the professionalization process, and according to him involve three sequences, which include: (1) Establishment of a professional association; (2) a change in the name used to identify the group; and (3) development of a code of ethics. In Nigeria, journalism has arguably passed through some of these sequences and can be argued to be a profession to some extent.

But opponents of journalism as a profession also maintain that even though journalism can evolve from a mere occupation to a full-fledge profession, it should not be a profession. Views advanced to support this point emphasize that if journalism is a profession, it would throw away its cherished character of being one of the most open, diversified institutions, largely dedicated to offering public service. Instead, it would now acquire a dangerous narrow, monolithic, self-centred status that is devoid of outward-looking service orientation.

Professor William Barrett (cited in Dennis & Merrill, 2002) notes that one disadvantage of an occupation evolving to the status of professionalism is that it turns into what he refers to as “a professional deformation.” This is the idea of professionals seeing things from the narrow perspective of their own specialty alone, without mindful of issues outside their viewpoints, no matter how rewarding the issues might be to them.

The issue of freedom of speech granted to all citizens in most countries of the world is a strong factor against making journalism a profession. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, for example, just as that of many other democratic countries, guarantee to citizens freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly. The fear in making journalism a profession in this regard is, in the words of Stovall (2005, p.483), that “a self-policing journalism profession would mean a fundamental alteration of the way that we exercise basic rights.”

#### **4. New Media**

Talking about new media brings to mind the fact that there are old media, which are today referred to as traditional media, and include radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books and film. The expression ‘new media’ means that the manner of disseminating news and information today is different from that of yesterday. It is this different manner of news and information dissemination especially in the last two decades made possible by digital technology that is referred to as new media. By definition, Lievrouw and Livingstone, cited in McQuail (2005) see new media as the linking of information communication technologies (ICTs) with their associated social contexts, bringing together three elements: technological artifacts and devices; activities, practices and uses; and social arrangements and organizations that form around the devices and practices.

This definition of new media appears to be deficient since the old media too can comfortably fall within the definition. Definition by Ibekwe (2009), which emphasizes the forms and activities performed by digital technology, gives a precise meaning of new media. In the same way, Uwakwe (2009) sees digital media as new media. The term digital media is used to describe all forms of emerging communications media, which combine text, graphics, sound and video using computer technology to create a product that is similar to traditional media in some respects and different in others (Biagi, 2003). This is also explained as multimedia (Eastman & Ferguson, 2006). The three expressions, digital media, multi-media, and new media are more often than not used interchangeably to mean the same thing.

One way of understanding the new media is by examining the differences that exist between the new and the old media. In this regard, Poster (cited in McQuail, 2005, p.138) notes that the new media incorporate the old media and distribute them through “push” technology. The new media are different from the old ones, according to Poster, by:

- (1) Enabling many-to-many conversations;
- (2) enabling the simultaneous reception, alteration and redistribution of cultural objects;
- (3) dislocating communicative action from the posts of the nation, from the territorialized spatial relations of modernity;
- (4) providing instantaneous global contact; and
- (5) inserting the modern/late modern subject into a machine apparatus that is networked.

From these differences between the new and old media, the features of the new media can be identified. These features offer plausible insights to the understanding of new media. The essential ones identified by McQuail (2005) seem to be: Their interconnectedness; their accessibility to individual users as senders and/or receivers; their interactivity; their multiplicity of use and open-ended character; and their ubiquity and delocatedness. Convergence is another feature of new media. It refers to the merger of old media and new media. Dominick (2009) notes three different kinds of convergence. Corporate convergence is the trend toward content providers acquiring other distribution channels; operational convergence has to do with media owners combining their properties into one operation, and device convergence is about combining the function of two or more devices in one mechanism. A fourth kind of convergence is added by Eastman & Ferguson (2006), and that is content convergence. This means new ways of distributing old style content. Other features of new media include: Audience segmentation (audiences becoming less “mass” and more selective); increased audience control; multiple platforms (making content available to consumers using a number of delivery methods to a number of receiving devices; user generated content; and mobile media.

All these features put together cannot be identified with a particular kind of new medium. This means that new media are in categories, and knowledge of the categories is imperative for a deeper understanding of new media. McQuail (2005) identifies four main categories of new media as follows:

- **Interpersonal communication media:** These are new media with content generally private and perishable. What is more important in these media is the relationship they establish and reinforce among the users, and not the information they convey. They include the telephone (largely mobile) and e-mail.
- **Interactive play media:** The notable feature of this category of new media is interactivity. The media are mainly computer based and video games, as well as visual reality devices.
- **Information search media:** The internet (seen as a library and data source of unprecedented size, actuality and accessibility) is a good example of this category. Mobile telephone, broadcast teletext and radio data services are other examples.
- **Collective participatory media:** This category deals with the use of the internet for sharing and exchanging information, ideas and experience as well as developing active (computer-mediated) personal relationships.

## 5. New Media for Journalistic Professionalism

Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998) asserts that new forms of communication, with their superior technological innovations, hardly render obsolete all aspects of the earlier forms of communication. Wilson (2007, p.64) makes a similar point by contending that: “The mediamorphosis of the last five hundred years has not indeed led to the total exclusion of earlier media but that it has led to some of the functions of the old ones being replaced by the new ones. The old media invariably rediscover themselves and consolidate in their area of strength.”

What the foregoing contentions suggest is that if journalism is a profession, the new media have not come to make it less; instead their coming will consolidate the professional status of journalism. Dennis and Merrill (2003, p.104) capture this point succinctly with the observation that:

Old media have mostly embraced new media via the internet without risking their well-grounded core business and are producing useful products on the internet that complement what they are doing with traditional printing and broadcasting. Thus any newspaper, magazine or broadcast, as well as alternative news weeklies, have a web site that mostly reproduces what they do on a daily or weekly basis.

This statement suggests that journalism is practiced better with impetus added by the new media. This invariably means that journalism is now being more significant in its social role. This is the emphasis of one of the criteria of professionalism.

The idea of the new media bringing about convergence (discussed above) falls within the line of improving journalism practice. Integration, interactivity, and multiplicity of use and open-ended character are other features of the new media which have impacted positively on journalism practice for the better. Interactivity, for example, has improved the practice of journalism tremendously and attracted audiences to it as noted by Dominick, Messere and Sherman (2004, p.106) about interactive television:

Viewers in Britain ... can use their television to place bets on races, change camera angles on sporting events, and interact with the game shows. The BBC's documentary **Walking with Beasts** featured extra facts at the bottom of the screen and viewers could explore these facts by pressing buttons on the television's remote control while Banzai lets viewers vote to predict which contestants will win in a rather bizarre game show face-off.

Blogging, streaming, usenet or newsgroups, and e-mailing are practices associated with the new media. These practices, arguably, are facilitators of citizen or public journalism, which is today an improved version of professional journalism. Public journalism (with very few or no cases of gatekeeping) is arguably more professional than the traditional journalism because public journalism is arguably more autonomous, and autonomy in the exercise of skills is a yardstick for measuring professionalism (McQuail, 2005).

One aspect of professionalism is skill or competence in job performance. In journalism this means ethical practice in the areas of objectivity, balance, accuracy and fairness among others. The new media especially the internet are in a good position to enhance ethical practice in journalism. Dennis and Merrill (2002, p.105) explain more succinctly: "Internet journalism has a much better chance of delivering accurate and complete information than does the old system. Fact and source checking is much faster electronically and so is seeking out comparative information from other sources, instantly and with assurance."

It is true that the internet conveys a good deal of information that is unethical. This is not in the intention of the technology but in its manner of usage, which is akin to traditional journalism too. Technology has always been a double-edge sword that could cut for or against, depending on who is using it and for what purpose. In a similar vein, new media's tendency to facilitate ethical journalism is a challenge to traditional journalism to sit up. For example, traditional journalism in many cases is careless on issues of accuracy. New media are serious on these issues. This challenge from the new media sees traditional journalism competing with the new media for accuracy so as to remain relevant. This competitive spirit enhances standard practice, which is a hallmark of professionalism.

The point of emphasis in this sub-section of the paper is that new media have provided a number of alternatives in the practice journalism; democratization of journalism. New media are also a basis for convergence (integration of new and old media). The result of all these is better and more thorough news for citizens, which is a significant social role. The discharge of social role is a strong defining factor of professionalism. On this basis, new media can be said to facilitate professionalism in journalism.

## **6. New Media against Journalistic Professionalism**

One major challenge the new media have brought against the notion of journalism as a profession is the lack of control of entry into the practice of journalism. With the new media, every person appears to be a journalist as long as he or she has access to the technology and knows how to use it. You don't need to be formally trained in the practice of journalism before you are one. People from other professions, with the new media, have become journalists, some of them excellent ones for that matter. Soldiers in the Iraqi war proved to be good journalists as noted by Sontag, cited in Zelizer (2005, p.208): "Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers – recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities – and swapping images among themselves and emailing them around the globe."

Facebook, twitter and other social networking media, aspects of new media, provide news which is sometimes “richer” than what the traditional media give. Blogs readily come to mind here. Also called weblogs, blogs are individually maintained websites with regular entries as in description of events, and commentaries as well as materials such as video or any other graphics (Uwakwe, 2010). They represent another source of news, free from economic, corporate, political or advertising considerations that are characteristic of the traditional media. Zelizer (2005) writes that bloggers were significant in telling the story of the Iraq war. The bloggers who called themselves “personal journalists” linked together information, opinion and ultimate detail in ways that supplemented stories from mainstream media. Stories about the war not told by journalists in mainstream media were reported by bloggers. Such stories included humorous account of the war and angry responses from within and outside Iraq. Few traditional media told those stories. Anybody who has access to the internet and can manipulate it could be a blogger. Dominick (2009, p.302) notes that “blogs have made it possible for everybody to be a newsperson and have opened the way for what’s being labeled as citizen journalism.”

Citizen journalism, an aspect of new media, is another factor that stands against journalism as a profession. With citizen journalism, there is no control of entry into journalism practice; local residents with no formal training in journalism report on news items of interest to a relatively small number of people. Citizen journalism, according to Boczkowski (2004), has made journalism less journalist-centred and more user-centred, and more importantly has made journalism to lose its clear boundary as a profession.

Having autonomy or freedom in the exercise of skills in an occupation is a measure of professionalism. But where this autonomy is not used responsibly, a problem of unethical practice arises. To avoid this problem, there is need for code of ethics and standards to regulate practice. This is also another measure of professionalism. The code of ethics should be enforceable, without which it will be meaningless. The autonomy granted by new media is, in my view, excessive. With it we can see the very many cases of abuse and irresponsible use of the new media. The many cases of immorality, vulgar, bias, bad taste, sycophancy, sensationalism, falsehood, manipulation, moonlighting, ethnic chauvinism, intrusion, and other unethical practices abound in the use of the new media. This type of journalism is not socially helpful. Regulating these practices is still a herculean task. Journalism code of ethics in many countries has not considered including the new media in its area of regulation. Even if it has, it is extremely difficult regulating the online life of people in a virtual community. Regulation, at best, is on content and not on the behaviour of users. Similarly, regulating is a bit of a challenge because internet has become a big business. It is increasingly a medium for commerce (selling goods as well as information services (McQuail, 2005). The more content is regulated, the less the business. So, industry players, many of whom are market leaders in the internet business are reluctant in regulation measures that would affect content that is “lucrative” business wise.

What is generally acceptable is that the internet is a new kind of journalism, or an extension of journalism (Dizard, 2000; Deuze, 20003; McQuail, 2005; Stovall, 2005; Dominick, 2009; Uwakwe, 2010). What this implies is that internet users to a good degree are journalists. This is the case especially for the internet users who practice journalism defined as referring to the product or the work of news people on finding, collecting, verifying, analyzing, interpreting and presenting accounts of events, issues and people in a responsible and meaningful manner (McQuail, 2005; Uwakwe, 2010). If internet users in their large numbers are all journalists, then journalism certainly cannot be a profession. The users cannot be professionally trained to practice meaningfully and efficiently as it is the case with core professions like Medicine, Law, Clergy, Engineering, etc. If any technological innovation will create a brand of journalism (as the online journalism we have today) that does not encourage well-trained and dedicated core of people practicing journalism (journalists), then the acclaimed professional status of journalism is rubbish.

## 7. Conclusion

The onerous task of this paper has been to examine the contribution of new media to the debate of journalistic professionalism; whether the new media contribute to making journalism more or less a profession. The analysis shows that journalists tap a great deal from many aspects of the new media to improve on their practice. In this regard, new media contribute to journalistic professionalism. Conversely, the freedom associated with new media usage has made it extremely difficult to regulate the practice and entry standard. The freedom has also led to many cases of irresponsible practice/usage; new media are often associated with unethical practices that cannot be the case with a true profession. These unethical practices go on unhindered because of the nature of the new media (virtual community and largely a business), which make regulation extremely difficult.

What appears to be clear in this discourse is that the weight of argument (in terms of quality and quantity) has tilted more towards the reasoning that the new media (as they are today) render the practice of journalism less a profession. Their nature and usage render journalism, at best, an open profession for every one who can have access and know how to use the internet technology. This fact is well noted by Zelizer (2005, p.200) in his discourse on the culture of journalism:

Unlike the profession, which emphasizes the values, beliefs and practices by which journalists are constituted as professional beings, the culture of journalism presupposes a wide range of internal and external conventions that identify certain activities as journalistic but without the honorific aura attached to “being professional.” By definition, this opens journalism definition to activities that go under the radar of professionalism – in alternative venues such as the alternative press and the internet, in opinion-driven formats such as political satire, blogs and cartoons, and in forums situated explicitly on the margins of journalism if not beyond.

McQuail (2005, p.289) says that “journalism is an incomplete profession and faces obstacles in ever being complete.” One of the obstacles McQuail is talking about is new media. The influence of new media on journalistic professionalism has given credence to Max Weber’s thought many years ago (1948) that the journalist is belonging to “a sort of pariah caste” and, like the artist, lacking a fixed social classification (cited in McQuail, 2005).

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