

Evaluating News in the Internet Age: Key Observations on Quality of Content

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ABSTRACT

It is trite to assert that the Internet has democratized media and communication, and is shoring up the volume of practitioners in the media and communications field. With growing online facilities for information dissemination, interaction, networking and knowledge sharing, there has been a corresponding, or even greater increase in the population of those managing these information. The result is the gradual lowering of the traditional or extant rules for the evaluation of what is news as previously known to the traditional media. This paper, therefore, attempts some key observations of emerging trends in the new definition of news in the online age, and some of the factors that are played up in the evaluation of news amongst traditional practitioners in the media and communications field, in the midst of the burgeoning list of information senders, sharers, receivers, persons-in-interaction, as triggered by the growing sophistication in technologies of communication, where the simple possession of an average hand-held device could make the bearer a practitioner.

1.1: INTRODUCTION

The growth of Internet influence is unparalleled and has a historically special feature relative to preceding media (Castells, 1996, Slevein, 2000; Thussu, 2001). Its uniqueness partly comes through its multi-million record of users few years after the invention. Its notable convergent quality is of no less importance, as it helps "interactivity and networking (that) constitute its most exciting traits" (Sarikakis, 2004:2). Celebrations of the Internet probably cannot compare with the telegraph, radio, and television, despite their equally unrivalled receptions. Many writers, over period, (Naughton, 1999; Slevein, 2000: 40; Castells, 2000: 3; Thussu, 2001: 225) attempt a demonstration of the Internet record in statistical terms. Naughton records, for instance, that the radio did not reach its first 50 million people until after 40 years. He adds that the television reached that record number 25 years less than the radio did. Nevertheless, the Internet beat those records by attaining the landmark in only three years. Slevein (2000: 40) notes that between 150 and 180 million Internet users were recorded in 1999. By 2000, the figure had risen to 320 million in Thussu's (2001:225) own estimate.

A year after, Castells 22 (2001: 3) notes 400 million, adding that the number of users was one billion in 2005, "and we could be approaching the 2 billion mark by 2010". Tehranian and Tehranian (1997: 160) says, "a million new users are estimated to be joining the network each month". As at May 2007, an estimated 1.1 billion people were users (accessed at www.Intemetworldstats.com on 21/05/2007). In late 2015 the figure is closing up to over two billion, and still rising fast. Even then, the medium is still at an early stage of development, as an AOL Chairman, Steve Case (Waters, 2000, cited in Thussu, 2001:232) once attested. Beyond the statistical interpretations, is the question of use: how well has the Internet improved communication, and how has it impacted on the quality of news?

1.1.1: METHODOLOGY

Participant observation is used for this study, because of our believe that it is a more fruitful method when compared with simple observation. Instead of simply observing, the researcher is involved in the investigated activity, which means that contact with participants and material become closer with the potential of better understanding of data. A form of qualitative research, participant observation requires the establishment of understanding with subjects (Hammersley, et al, 1983). Though the atmosphere may become less controlled upon involvement, the responsibility is on the researcher "to balance two roles: that of being participant and that of being observer" (Berger, 2000: 161). There is a need to avoid "going native" (Berger, *ibid.*), meaning "becoming so identified with this group that they lose their objectivity" (p.161). Objectivity, credibility and reliability require the researcher to be reflexive and to be reviewing of her/his role in relation to the study. A concern for this could help to minimize its drawback, which is to a degree, the difficulty in determining the complexity of human action (Jones, et al, 2005:138). Berger (2000: 166-7) also raises several problems.

As an ethnographic method, participant observation is helpful in the generation of meanings, not necessarily in the quantitative, positivistic dimension but through a complex interplay of actions, and in the interpretation of the actions. In the precise case of the Internet, which Tapper (2001:15) calls "internetnography", it involves integration, or immersion with the group studied.

What is written is not necessarily selective but largely inclusive to depict the routine lives of the people, in the bid to examine their behavior and thoughts (Fetterman, 1998:1), as expressed online. Moreover, for a broader ethnographic context, participant observation becomes important for the study of the Internet. Now an important location for the modern ethnographer (Fetterman, *ibid.*), the Internet has become a huge resource base for the ethnographer's search for meanings, embedded in the cluster of human offline activity.

In evaluating online news sites, therefore, we are wary of the crowd of sites, blogs and pages, and appreciated that a simple random sample, with considered sense of objectivity and fairness, and without going native, could help get the required data. Our observations were done over time, within a period of time, while some of the processes were repeated at intervals for double checking. Overtime relates to our regular dependence, as the new age demands, on online media for news, for simple communication, or for news sharing. Evaluations were also done over a one week period, and this happened in the last week of November 2015, of selected news sites. Five of these sites were selected by each author, evening up to a study of ten websites, within that one week. Observations were repeated as we drew up conclusions, just to be reasonable sure of our assertions. We tried to be conscious of our roles as researchers, to be as objective as possible, so as to be as close as possible to the truth.

2.1: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS: DIFFERENTIATED PRACTITIONERS, NEBULOUS SKILLS

Many attempts have been made to define news. One famous attempt uses the analogy of the dog. When a dog bites a man, it is no news. But it is news when the man bites the dog. The sense in the definition is to elevate the evaluation of news from a necessarily routine process to one requiring some critical assessment. News should not be in every occurrence. But an occurrence can generate news if it strays into the abnormal, or the unusual. News is not about the regular, it is the irregular, even if some routine occurrences may sometimes qualify as news.

When it is about some abnormalities like accidents, plane crashes, murders, or it is about official pronouncements, it does not require too much expertise on the part of the practitioner to reckon that something extraordinary has occurred. Sometimes however, the definition of news might require that the practitioner have the ability to squeeze water out of the proverbial stone, in which case a greater level of expertise is needed. Some creativity, a good power of imagination and an appreciable presentation and writing skills would be required. It is the reason why a correspondent will, for instance, make a good story out of a failed interview attempt, and why an editor could discover a good reporter by simply asking him to do a story from a ten minutes stroll on a busy street.

Because of this understanding that the news judgment process needs some form of initiation, trainings have been introduced over educational history, and by organizations, through the growth and expansion of the media, journalism and communications course. It is partly why lines of editors have been put in place to control, regulate and organize the evaluation, and flow of news in an ideal newsroom. A typical newsroom will thus have reporters/correspondents, who are supposedly competent, and experienced, and would have applied their judgment to the evaluation of what is worthy of being dispatched as stories to the head offices. The Sub/Desk Editor is on hand to receive the dispatch for further evaluation, before the report moves further upwards to the line editors, the deputy editor, and then the editor, or even the editor-in-chief, as the case may be. In that chain, the report might be spiked, re-written, or kept-in-view, ahead of further information.

The end of the chain reveals the publication of a quality story, compliant with the house style of the publication, with caution and care for legal concerns, like decency, slander, libel, sedition, amongst others. This process had largely defined the operational style of the old, traditional media, or what I can call the media in the pre-Internet period. With the dawn of the Internet, and as mentioned above, information dissemination process has been democratized. Ownership of media outlets has been pluralized, as online processes are easier, faster, cheaper and fluid. Online platforms, portals, applications, and facilities are emerging and expanding by the day.

A largely imprecise process, it has already raised a population of practitioners catching up with, and enjoying the burgeoning facilities and applications, but less with the time won rules for news gathering and dissemination.

There are now many online newspapers, countless bloggers, millions of twitter handle owners and multi-million Facebook account holders. The figures are still rising. The online news reporters work through websites, through their accounts on other platforms, and even sometimes via their email addresses, and are feeding the facilities through their computers, tablets and smartphones. The connections are multileveled and still counting.

2.1.1: DEFINING NEWS: FROM A TEAM TO A PERSON, AND ABOUT THE PERSON

With these multiple connections, the highlighted chain of news evaluation are often hurried: the evaluation is now mainly done by one (or at best with an additional person), “expert”, sitting behind a computer, or a working on a device in a closet, and probably thinking less of some rules, some ethics that should guide news management. Defining what news is, is not by a group, a team, or a collective as it could be the case with an editorial board. There are no longer many conferences on how the hour, or day, or the week, or monthly or even quarterly report should be laid or structured. Everyone is to himself online. The blog, portal, or online account holder indulges in modern virtual fancies: selfies, personal stories, views, opinions, and such likes, are all put in the public space with greater ease, and at will. Though the online platforms of credible offline media, often moderate the avalanche of multifaceted online reports, through the provision of tempered versions, and interpretations of news, the nearly overwhelming online media, alongside the interactive version of it (the social media), challenges the influence of the traditional offline media.

From online reports, going shopping can become a big story. Wearing a new dress, buying a new car, or a new house can all be news. Eating, drinking, cooking, washing-up, visiting a friend, can all be news in these new days. News is no longer for the determination of the trained reporter, or editor, or publisher. Everyone can now be a reporter, an editor, or a publisher: courtesy of the social, online media. With the growth in the volume of participation, which maybe gratifying for freedom of expression, and for democracy, quantity has somewhat taken a plunge. There are no rules or guides on news judgment, no concerns for ethics and defamation, no respect for privacy, modesty, decency, and no interest in credible dissemination of information. Reports and views are mostly dispatched at the speed of light every minute, across the busy internet space.

The place of the individual as against the team in the online media age is increasingly overwhelming. For the agitated user, the virtual world is fast replacing the physical when the exchange of meanings comes to play. Slowly and surely, the physical media is taking a backstage. It then leads us to asking some questions: What is the percentage of people who still crave for the old early morning newspaper for update on news, compared with those who get updated in real time on smartphones, iPad, laptops and Desktops? Besides some other advertisements, which could sometimes be instructive, what does an elite miss, by not reading the newspapers and magazines after getting information from the credible online media?

2.1.2: NEW POSERS AND AFTER EFFECTS

And there are more posers: Is the problem of storing back copies of newspapers and magazines not discouraging patrons, who are now pleased with the qualities of the electronic media? Is it not cheaper? In a problematic economy like the Nigeria’s, are people not relieved that they are feed with information on the go, rather than being fed the next day? Why are some physical newspapers closing shop and resorting to just the virtual version? Why are the virtual media, in all their classifications, the credible and the incredible, easily becoming more popular than the old, physical media? How many new physical media have broken even in the last couple of years in Nigeria? In examining these questions, the point is made that online media has grown in influence. The corollary is also in evidence that with the rise in influence, freedom and accessibility, comes the crisis of quality.

One of the authors has argued elsewhere that online publication may actually be seen as anyone’s call. It can be cheaper to set up. It is less cumbersome in terms of logistics. It is more accessible, and available through the hours. Archiving is less problematic. So is its reference quality. More importantly, it is the proverbial rave of the moment. It is a 21st century crave. Its platform, the Internet has, off course democratised communication. Everyone and anyone can self-publish. Communication is no longer unilineal, or mono-directional. It is no longer a sender to many receivers, but can now be from many to many. The world has progressed from a place of information to communication and now interaction, with due credits to Prof. Ralph Akinfeleye.

And with mushrooming devices and applications, an end seem not in sight. It is the reason why networking sites come and go. It is also why applications rise and they fall soon after. Bloggers also debut aplenty. Many die moments after. The few that stay on are sustained by the possible power of their thoughts, their creativity and an ability to re-invent themselves.

Reuben Abati argued as follows on the rise of online media: “The people are interested in easy stuff, in fashionable opinions that align with their own partisan interests. Nobody wants to read any long commentary; there is an obsession with short thinking, and whereas brevity may be a good technique, there are certain ideas that just cannot be reduced to a tweet. It is really sad that today, intellectualism is seen as a threat”, assessed at <https://www.thecable.ng/where-are-the-public-intellectuals06/02/2017>.

He continued elsewhere: “The gap that has been created seems to have been easily filled by internet gladiators who spend the day shuffling from Instagram to Facebook to Twitter and other social media threads. These new culture activists project a democratic impression of public intellectualism – and yes, there is a sense in which everyone is an intellectual, from the village priest to the village idiot- but I don’t see the rigor, the breadth and depth and the aesthetic alienation that can elevate this genre and its promoters to the grade of public intellectualism”

In what appears a derision of online media, Abati concluded thus: “For the most part, social media in Nigeria is predominantly at the level of tabloid sensationalism, and it accommodates and offers the same degree of freedom to the ignorant and the mischievous, as well as the entrepreneur and the uncouth. There is no doubt however that it’s content and the quality can be raised, but that will require innovation, the intervention of thinkers and the creation of new audiences that will be interested in something more than the quick and formulaic”. Assessed at <https://www.thecable.ng/where-are-the-public-intellectuals, 6/02/2016>.

His argument is supportive of what seem predominant in our data: the rise of online journalism and a decline in quality journalism. Online media might have expanded participation; the expansion has also brought in the less trained, or the untrained. Regulation is more challenging with the obviously increased participation, leaving rooms for many risking or committing slander, libel or indecency. Because the device is also borderless, challenges arise from jurisdictions. National laws are different, leading to disparate interpretation of offences. How then do you sanction as adjudged seditious online publication by a Chinese on China that is administered from the US, where such is not regarded as sedition? How convenient is it for the aggrieved Nigerian public figure to sue a site administered in New York over a story widely circulating in Nigeria? These perplexing features of the online media tasks control process, and hence a rising reduction in quality of news content.

2.1.3: THE INTERNET: INCREASED ONLINE PRESENCE, VARIEGATED CONSEQUENCES

A network of networks, the Internet is a worldwide system of communicating computers, which combines with other technologies of our times to define and advance social, economic and political relations, amongst peoples, societies, communities and countries (Jones, 1998; Castells, 2001:3). It does this through a dense flow of data, capital, information, sounds, images, and symbols (Castells, 2000:442). In the Internet age, information takes over from steam power of the old industrial society (Webster, 2002: 3). Some others analyse the evolving trends, as mediascapes (Appadurai, 1990) or rhizomes (Silverstone and Georgiou, 2005: 438). Human activities are interconnected in this understanding following the "death of distance" (Caincross, 2001). The changes add up to compress time and space (Giddens, 1999), or eclipse distance (Brubaker, 2005:9). These lead possibly to boom in economies following an increase in the pace of communication across geographies (Giddens, 1999).

Combining the audio-visual functions of television, the audio effect of radio, and the textual details of print, the Internet offers users multiple opportunities for interaction, across space, in chosen time and at a great speed. In basic terms, the Internet allows users to send and receive e-mails, and e-mail attachments. They are also able to chat with others (known or unknown), and to participate in discussions in newsgroups, listservs, usenets, on facilities, like twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, snapchats, and on networking site like Facebook, amongst other emerging ones, across disparate peoples in different geographies.

Besides, they are able to source and/or circulate personal or group information; to engage in audio or video teleconferencing; to transact businesses; to fall in and out of relationships; and to process, share, store and retrieve images, signs and symbols (Lax, 1997). These partly lead to the description of the network as one that facilitates the "freedom of intimacy" (Chalaby, 2000: 19 &20), implying the inherent and evolving new rights available in Internet's space. Additionally, the Internet integrates the functions of the fax machine, production and consumption of films, and of educational and entertainment materials. The tasks are doable at the individual level, as a group or collective, and importantly between many to many-another important feature of the Internet (Slevein, 2000: 2; Castells, 2001:2).

The Internet is not only a one-to-one communication medium, but also a tool of interaction between many. These possibilities and opportunities open up new social spaces, at the same time as they enable the remaking of

previously existing ones. New meanings emerge in social interactions on a global scale in an incomparable scale. The changes in social and political relations, which the network enhances, can be of major significance to individuals, groups and institutions. Thus, the Internet and its potentials require further and more expansive theoretical and empirical investigation. Several analyses restate the significance of the Internet in the imagination and reconstitution of groups and societies.

The technology is not only one for simple communication, but also one with the added benefit of integrating and re-integrating peoples, no matter the distance. Rather than people relating to machines, the machines now relate people-to-people (Wellman, et al, 1996). The Internet fosters a new logic of unity and sometimes disunity (in the face of flaming) when users are brought together. Through it, there is "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation" (Gibson, 1984:51). The operators and users engage the space behind the computer screen, which is out-of-sight but real, effective and unifying (Gibson, *ibid.*; 12 Flaming implies abuses and heated disagreements in online discussions (Buckley and Clark, 2004: 218). 24 Elmer-Dewitt, 1996). The virtual integration of people through its space is an introduction to a different sense of place.

2.1.4: THE DIALECTICS OF THE COMPUTER SCREEN

The previously leading place had been the physical and traditional offline life. The new life online provides an alternative or a complementary space for social interactions. The interface has most times being a forerunner of mutual, communal, and societal understanding, knowledge and ideas sharing, which gives participants a sense of companionship, even if virtual. This sense develops further in manners that have either turned strangers into friends or acquaintances, aside the option of withholding ones' identity, or remaining anonymous in the process. Therefore, human lives are affected by the technology, as the technology is also transformed (Castells, 2001: 5).

The dialectical process challenges an essentially technologically deterministic course, given the mutual shaping between society and technology (Castells, *ibid.*; Ward, 2005). A medium that initiates and stabilizes communities, Rheingold regards this trait of the technology as a "lifeline" (2001: 171). In further celebratory terms, he notes: The net is the world's greatest source of information, misinformation and disinformation, community and character assassination, and you have very little but your wits to help you sort out the valid from the bogus. Evolving online communities lead to the imaginations of associations, which bridge gaps and close divides. Fundamental changes emerge from this circumstance, which again initiates thoughts on modes of communal relations. These could be within cultures and between cultures, as Homi Bhaba puts it, on a micro, meso, or macro scale.

The place of the computer screen as anew, optional gateway to associating and relating extends the self-potentials through the power of technology. However, as Castells (2001) notes above, the exchange is not one-sided. It crops up in a dialectics as user's engagements with it also have impacts on it. The changing self in "being digital" (Negroponte, 1995) happens through disappearing "boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self, which is occurring both in advanced fields of scientific research and in the patterns of everyday life" (Turkle, 1995: 10). To Shields (1996:7), these disappearing boundaries become a crisis that exists between not only the concept of the real and the virtual, but between time zones and spaces.

The crisis occurs again: Between bodies and technologies, between our sense of self and our sense of our changing roles: the personae we may play or the 'hats we wear' in different situations are altered (Shields, 1996:7). Though seen as utopian by some writers, particularly in postmodern times (Robins and Webster, 1999; Hine, 2000:6), online interactions do affect individuals. The construction of the self, for instance, takes place in a process. First, it is possible to reflexively review the self through individual engagements with online facilities. Second, it comes through a group, or social definition of what the self is. Again resulting from the setting is not only a new sense of self, but also an inabsolute being, whose identity is a mixture of being and becoming (Hall, et al, eds, 1996), which is also not a fixed or absolute construction (Gilroy, 1993). Donath (1999: 29) argues that the body in the virtual world is not like that in the physical world. On the Internet, he stresses, information instead of biological structure prevails.

Additionally, the information is free, and available, with little regulation. "The inhabitants of this impalpable space are also diffuse, free from the body's unifying anchor. One can have, some claim, as many electronic personae as one has time and energy to create" (Donath, 1999:29). These possibilities leave room for deception or fake identities and then a possible "capacity to concentrate political power, to create new forms of social obfuscation and domination" (Theodore Roszak, 1986: xii, cited in Smith and Kollock, 1999: 4).

The Internet can also enable people to resolve the crisis of a problematic self-a self who earlier lacks confidence regains composure in its interactive space. The confident self also has opportunities for reviews, through the Internet's space. From there "we at least partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities for reflection, perception, and social experience" (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 61). The constant sense of co-presence through engagement with the Internet features chances of simultaneity in interaction course. Self-alterations go on in many ways. Though the self ironically manifests in modern society where identity is an important source of meaning, it yet occurs in "bipolar opposition between the net and the self" (Castells, 1996: 3), representing the new world setting.

3.1: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Internet's considerable level of freedom leads to its celebration by many of its users and by academics and policy makers. This embracing of the technology arises because of its relative low cost, its interactivity, its transnational nature, and the possibilities it provides for citizens and consumers to turn into producers and informed citizens. The fact that Internet use can be individual, involving a person and a connected computer reaching places behind a screen (Gibson, 1984), is also a reason why it qualifies as pioneering as a democratic medium. Though regulation is minimal, the space can still be a source of high quality views, as different views are available online on an everyday, or even an hourly basis. These can get value through a systematic grouping of the views. Because the views are varied, the process would be engaging. However, can these different views not be systematized into groups, themes, resources, and other forms of classifications? For instance, can migrants' ideas on the *homeland* projects like road construction and maintenance, health care delivery, portable water supply, provision of regular electricity and the building of stable political institutions not be structured for the development requirements of the *homeland*? In addition, if this occurs, can it not be useful for policymaking individuals, agencies, groups, governments, non-governmental organizations, (NGO's), and Nigeria constituent state and federal governments still concerned about progress? It surely can be done.

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Adeniyi returned to his native Nigeria in 2009, working as a Communications Consultant on the platform of the World Bank Economic Reform and Governance Project (ERGP) at the Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP), Presidency, Abuja. On expiration of the project, he became Lead Consultant at Witswords Consults Limited (WCL), Abuja, before joining Baze University as a senior lecturer in Mass Communication. His present research interests are in the fields of Public Relations and Advertising Practicum, Strategic Communications and the dynamics of media and governance.

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An alumnus of Georgetown University's prestigious Georgetown Leadership Seminar, Suleiman was executive editor of the online news platform, *NigeriaIntel* from 2011 to 2015 and is on the editorial board of the online forum, *Nigeria Village Square*. He was also a director at the Civic Media Institute of Nigeria, an organisation dedicated to promoting citizen journalism. A widely published columnist with *Peoples' Daily*, *NEXT* and *Blueprint* newspapers, Dr Suleiman teaches at Baze University, Abuja, and has research interests in public information management, new media and e-governance.