

Citizen Journalism in Nigeria: Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract

The study evaluated the possibilities and challenges of citizen journalism in Nigeria and discovered that Citizen Journalism is emerging as a powerful phenomenon across Nigeria as showcased by popular citizen journalism websites. The Sahara Reporters, one of such websites, is noted for its timely reports on issues and events as evidenced in a study conducted by Dare (2011:44) where 86 of the 120 respondents surveyed cited the Sahara reporters as a source of breaking news. By its interactivity and ability to deliver news in split seconds, citizen journalism has posed a serious challenge to the mainstream media in Nigeria. In as much as citizen journalism in Nigeria has broadened people's access to a variety of news, this study suggests that during emergencies, citizen journalists should not spread news or post pictures that may hamper rescue operations. The need therefore to sensitize Nigerian citizen journalists on proper use of this emerging brand of journalism is obvious.

Introduction

The concept of citizen journalism has been variously called "public", "participatory", "democratic", "guerrilla" or "street" journalism." Bowman and Willis (2003) define this brand of journalism as "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information", noting that "the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires." Radsch(2013) vividly captures the spirit and essence of citizen journalism in his definition of the concept as "an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a repose to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism."

Citizen journalism is the reverse of the straight-jacket, near unilateral top-down communication system of the mainstream media. Bowman and Willis (2003) state that, "Participatory journalism is a bottom-up, emergent phenomenon in which there is little or no editorial oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictating the decisions of a staff. Instead, it is the result of many simultaneous, distributed conversations that either blossom or quickly atrophy in the Web's social network." They observe that "the fluidity of this approach puts more emphasis on the publishing of information rather than the filtering. Conversations happen in the community for all to see. In contrast, traditional news organizations are set up to filter information before they publish it." In its true nature, citizen journalism allows no room for gate keeping. In this brand of journalism, information gets to the members of public, who are directly involved in content creation, raw, 'naked' and undiluted.

Over the years, there seems to be some confusion regarding the meaning and nature of citizen journalism. This is evident in the numerous names it has been called, as enumerated above. Pondering on this, Meyer (1995) observes that "one measure of the discomfort that journalists feel over the concept of public journalism is the great variety of names given it, e.g. civic journalism, citizen journalism, community journalism, or communitarian journalism." He further states:

Part of the blame for the confusion must go to the early promoters of public journalism who have steadfastly refused to give it a definition or anything more than a vague theoretical structure. Because it is an idea in development, they say, a definition would needlessly limit it. Maybe so. But one consequence is that debating public journalism is like arguing over a Rorschach test. Each sees in it the manifestation of his or her fondest hopes or worst fears.

The confusion is apparently fuelled by uncertainties about what constitutes citizen journalism and who citizen journalists are. This explains why Glaser (2006) notes that "There is some controversy over the term citizen journalism, because many professional journalists believe that only a trained journalist can understand the rigors and ethics involved in reporting the news. And conversely, there are many trained journalists who practice

what might be considered citizen journalism by writing their own blogs or commentary online outside of the traditional journalism hierarchy.”

The seaming confusion and misconception notwithstanding, citizen journalism is simply the emerging brand of journalism in which the content is user-generated, unedited, uncensored and comes real-time. The definition by Professor Jay Rosen, cited in Moller (2012), gives an insight into the nature of citizen journalism concept: “citizen journalism is when people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another.” With this, it is obvious that a person does not necessarily need a former training in journalism to be a citizen journalist, especially in this era of astounding ubiquity of the social media. What one needs to participate in the growing citizen journalism spectrum is just a fair knowledge of the operations and manipulations of the social media.

Mark Glaser (2006), a freelance journalist, explains that:

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube. All these might be considered acts of journalism, even if they don't go beyond simple observation at the scene of an important event.

At a time when Nigerians used the internet to mobilise protests against the removal of fuel subsidy, the findings of a recent academic research released by Oxford University found that citizen journalism is on the slow but gradual rise in Nigeria and that the traditional media is waking up to it. The study, which had Sahara Reporters as its case study placed Sahara Reporters, the citizen journalism website, as Nigeria's first leading citizen website.

The academic research conducted by Sunday Dare, a Nigerian Journalist, who earlier had studied media and public policy at Harvard University took a first objective stab at the theory and practice of citizen journalism in Nigeria, how far it has come, what impact it is making in terms of advancing democratic rights and institutions, and how it has given the people voice and a platform to query their government.

The study revealed that Sahara Reporters scored high in blazing the trail, especially exposing corruption and combining advocacy journalism with mainstream journalism. The research project entitled ‘The Rise of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria – A Case Study of Sahara Reporters’ argued that the emergence of Sahara Reporters was fuelled by the interactive and investigative vacuum left by the traditional media in Nigeria.

On the basis of the foregoing, this study, therefore, is an attempt at a holistic inquiry into the state of citizen journalism in Nigeria.

Problem

Citizen journalism generally epitomizes the belief that the experiences of people personally involved with an issue present a different—and often more complete—picture of events than can be derived from the perspective of an outsider. Due to limitations of access and time—and in some cases ulterior motives to present just one side of a story—traditional reporting risks at least the perception of being skewed. By granting access to anyone to cover the news, citizen journalism presents a more personal, nuanced view of events and has the potential to cultivate communities of people with a common interest. Through blogs and other avenues, citizen journalists have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, and other issues of concern to local and national communities. (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007).

Within the Nigerian context, this study investigates the extent to which the thinking that participation by readers in citizen journalism improves the quality of the news and the extent to which such participation increases the trust that the community has in the news.

Does citizen journalism force contributors to think objectively, ask probing questions and work to understand the context so that their representation of events is useful to others? Do the activities of citizen journalists get people involved in new ways with the world around them; make them form a deeper connection with the subjects of their investigations? These critical questions form the problem canvas of our investigation.

Historical Perspectives of Citizen Journalism

The concept of citizen journalism has a long history. Communication researchers have tried to tell the story of the origin of citizen journalism from their respective angles. Kern and Nam (2008:12) write that “the roots of citizen journalism lie in the program of civic journalism, which developed as a reform movement among journalists in the United States. Facing the readership crises of the US newspaper industry in the late 1970s, some newspaper executives, journalists, and intellectuals tried to improve the relationship between the press and the public by developing new ways of listening to citizens.” Citing Sirianni and Friedland (2001: 217), Kern and Nam (2008:13), report that the first so-called public or civic journalists acted as advocates for ordinary citizens. They organized public meetings and put specific problems of the local community on the agenda. The citizens contributed to the news process as interview partners and members of focus groups or by raising their voice at public meetings. The reporters tried to learn from the community and to move local issues to the center of news coverage. Kern and Nam (2008:13) added that, “towards the end of the 1990s, more and more intellectuals and social movement activists entered the field of media activism and developed the idea of citizen journalism.”

Contemporary citizen journalism’s history and popularity can be directly linked to the advent and currency of the Internet and its ancillary technologies. “The growth of citizen journalism is tied to the growth of interactivity on the Internet. When physicist Tim Berners-Lee launched the world’s first website <http://info.cern.ch/> back in 1991, his site offered audiences very limited interactivity. Internet technology was limited in this regard. Over the coming years, a variety of new features and functions on the Internet made it easy for audiences to interact with other audiences or with website publishers.” (www.theopennewsroom.com). The real change in news reporting occasioned by citizen journalism did not come until 2004 when Web 2.0 features started appearing on websites. “Web 2.0 features enabled consumers or ordinary people to publish their own websites or weblogs, or feed content into the mainstream media among many other features. WordPress and BlogSpot are examples of such platforms.” (www.theopennewsroom.com).

The web 2.0 on which the citizen journalism operations are based has some peculiar features. “Some of the characteristics often noted as descriptive of Web 2.0 include blogging, RSS-generated syndication, social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, mash-ups, wikis like Wikipaedia and other collaborative applications and interactive encyclopedias and dictionaries....”(http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gc1169528,00.html). The social media, with the help of web 2.0 technologies, have enabled citizens to be active participants in the processes of news gathering and distribution. Since the invention of the web 2.0 in 2004, journalism has ceased to be the exclusive preserve of professional journalists. The styles of news gathering and reporting have drastically changed. This development has ended the era in which news consumers only participated in news generation through irregular letters to the editors, the lordly gate-keepers who decided which letter to publish, in which form and at what time.

Following its advent, the power of the citizen brand of journalism has been tested in different places and situations. “The 2004 Indonesian Boxing Day Tsunami, the July 2005 London Bombing and the 2007 Virginia Tech disasters are cited in many research studies as examples where audiences on the ground took photographs, text and voice messages and eye witness accounts which told the ‘story’ in ways that almost eclipsed the traditional way of reporting news” (www.theopennewsroom.com). Other instances that quickly come to mind are the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the 2013 military takeover of power in Egypt and the attendant protests, 2012 elections in the United States and Ghana, just to mention a few. In each of the instances, ordinary citizens gathered information, including action pictures from scenes of incidents, and uploaded to the Internet for global consumption, within split seconds.

Pros and Cons of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism has been trailed by mixed reactions over the years. While some commentators have spoken so glowingly about the benefits of this brand of journalism, others have almost over-emphasized its downsides. There is, therefore, a need to strike a balance through a dispassionate assessment of the pros and the cons of citizen journalism.

It has already been noted that citizen journalism offers professional and non-professional journalists alike opportunities to be active participants in news content creation. With it, members of the public are no longer helpless passive consumers of news. They are now content creators. Citizen journalism has broken the hitherto seemingly endless monopoly of the mainstream media. As such, journalism is today democratic and participatory. According to Educause Learning Initiative (2007), by granting access to just anyone to cover the news, citizen journalism presents a more personal, nuanced view of events and has the potential to cultivate

communities of people with a common interest. Through blogs, citizen journalists have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, and other issues of concern to local and national communities.

Another rather amazing benefit of citizen journalism is that it delivers news almost at the speed of lightning. It has surpassed the immediacy of the broadcast media (radio and television). Citizen journalism, via the social media, spreads news like wild harmattan fire just in split seconds, apparently because the news does not need to wait for any editor to process it. Feedback is also immediate. The audience has the opportunity to react to the news instantly, and even add to the content. This is why citizen journalism has been called “We Media.” In fact, we can simplify it by calling it “Our Media.” This is because the content of this brand of journalism is what we make it.

The foregoing benefits of citizen journalism notwithstanding, it has some downsides. One of such challenges is the question about the veracity of its content. Some commentators have criticized citizen journalism as a new way of spreading falsehood and other unethical practices in the name of journalism.

Potential false news reports are just one of the many possible ramifications of sourcing news from anonymous sources. The news could be factually correct, but have flaws like blatant disregard of ethics, lack of objectivity, impartiality and balance. It could also be a hidden agenda or opinion sugarcoated as fact or a libelous or defamatory statement that puts subjects in the story in bad light. In mainstream media, a process of verification and checks called gate-keeping can weed out any such inaccuracies and biases. Gate keeping, so it’s called, is done by experienced and trained journalists and editors, using tools and skills like knowledge of the law and in house or commercial stylebooks such as the Associated Press Stylebook.

(www.theopennewsroom.com).

Theoretical Anchor

Democratic Participant Media Theory

This study is anchored on the Democratic Participant Media Theory and the Public Sphere model. The emphasis of this theory is on the basis of society and on the value of horizontal rather than vertical (top-down) communication (McQuail, 1987: 122). The main thrust of the theory lies in its insistence that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers (Folarin, 2005: 43).

McQuail (1983) proposed this theory to take account of many ideas expressed to take care of the needs of citizens. The theory found expression in the 1960s and 1970s in pressure for local and community radio and television. It challenged the dominance of centralised, commercialised, state-controlled and even professionalised media (McQuail 2000: 160). Making a reference to Ezensberger (1970), McQuail notes that the key to applying this theory was seen to lie in the new technology of the times. It favoured media that would be small in scale, non-commercial and often committed to a cause. Participation and interaction were key concepts.

The theory has been against the system of parliamentary democracy which has seemed to become detached from its grassroots origins, to impede rather than facilitate movement in political and social life. It also takes exception to a ‘mass society’ which is over-organised, over-centralised and fails to offer realistic opportunities for individual and minority expression. McQuail (1987: 122) says “the central point of a democratic-participant theory lies with the needs, interests and aspirations of the active ‘receiver’ in a political society. It has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in small-scale settings of community, interest group, sub-culture”. Essentially, the theory’s cautions that communication should not be left in the hands of professionals alone find practical expression in the structure and general operations of citizen journalism. Orchestrating the tenets of the Democratic Participant Media Theory is the Public Sphere Model.

Public Sphere Postulation

The public sphere is a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. The public sphere is an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. In its ideal form, the public sphere is “made up of people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1991:176). Habermas’s work actually relies on a description of a historical moment during the 17th and 18th centuries when coffee houses, societies and salons became the centres of debate, and extends this to an ideal of participation in the public sphere today. Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere

generates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge - therefore, to guide - the affairs of state. In ideal terms, the public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to.

The public sphere mediates between the “private sphere” and the “Sphere of Public Authority” (Habermas, 1991). The private sphere comprises civil society in the narrower sense whereas the Sphere of Public Authority deals with the State, or realm of the police, and the ruling class. The public sphere crosses over both these realms and through the vehicle of public opinion, it puts the state in touch with the needs of society. This area is conceptually distinct from the state: it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state (Habermas, 1991). The people themselves came to see the public sphere as a regulatory institution against the authority of the state. The basic belief in public sphere theory is that political action is steered by the public sphere, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere.

The Status of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria

Citizen journalism is now a popular brand of journalism in Nigeria. This development is attributable to the overwhelming use of the social media in the country. Both the political leaders and the electorate in Nigeria use the social media for various reasons. In his study of the rise for citizen journalism in Nigeria – a case study of Sahara Reporters, Dare (2011:44) stated that “National recognition came for social media when on June 28, 2010, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, launched his Facebook fans page to reach out to the youth and Nigerians with a view to getting feedback on electoral reform and other national issues.” He reported that Nigerian politicians employed the social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and SMS messaging to advance their campaigns and deliver their manifestos to boost their followership during the country’s 2011 general elections.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Webster (2010), cited in UNDP (2010:67) observed that President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria 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”

As a result of the ubiquitous adoption of social media for public communication in Nigeria, citizen journalism has gained currency in the country. Nigerian citizen journalists report events in their localities and comment on national issues, using the social networking sites.

Today, there are popular citizen journalism websites in Nigeria. The Sahara Reporters, one of such websites, is noted for its timely reports on issues and events. In a study conducted by Dare (2011:44), 86 of the 120 respondents surveyed cited the Sahara reporters as a source of breaking news.

By its interactivity and ability to deliver news in split seconds, citizen journalism has posed a serious challenge to the mainstream media in Nigeria. Before press time, citizen journalists in Nigeria had reported the Dana airline crash of June 3, 2012, which claimed the lives of over 150 passengers on board. Not only did the social media give timely report of the plane crash, they also gave the audience the opportunity to ask questions and exchange views on the national calamity.

This challenge posed by citizen journalism appears to have forced the traditional media in Nigeria to embrace citizen brand of journalism. However, experts have called the genre of citizen journalism practiced by the mainstream media in Nigeria to question.

In his study of citizen journalism off-line, with a focus on the Nigerian punch model, Salawu (2011:192) found that, despite the newspaper’s claim of creating an opportunity for readers to create their own news, the punch’s model of citizen journalism was still with some limitations. According to him, “compared with online citizen journalism, especially one that is done through blogs, the punch model is with inadequacies. In the model, the professionals in charge of the page would still play the role of gatekeepers.” He explained that the professionals would “determine what stories to go public and what should not go. Even, for those that would go public, some editing would have been done on the stories, thereby robbing them of their originality, and in a way distorting the actual reports of the contributors.”

The above picture painted by Salawu is different from CNN’S brand of citizen journalism tagged “ireport”. In the “ireport”, stories retain their originality; there is no sort of distortion. As a result, credit or blame goes to the contributor of a story in “ireport”.

Criticisms of Citizen Journalism in Nigeria

Citizen journalism has been criticized by its opponents in Nigeria. Some of the critics believe that citizen journalism lacks veracity. Dare (2011:44) found that only 33 respondents of the 120 surveyed trusted Sahara reporters. This, according to him, shows that most Nigerians do not believe stories from citizen journalists. It is believed in some quarters that they spread false hood.

Other critics argue that citizen journalism fuels civil unrest, political instability and ethno-religious crisis. This angle of criticism peaked during the nationwide protests that greeted the removal of fuel subsidy in January 2012. It was believed in some quarters that citizen journalists misinformed the activists, making them to

gang up against the government. However, that was perceived, the aim of the protest was partially achieved as there was a huge reduction in the pump price of fuel.

Again, citizen journalism has also been criticized for trivializing issues of national interest, including national calamities. There was an outcry; especially by national leaders against the conduct of citizen journalists during the Dana Airline crash of June 03, 2012. It was said that while rescue operators were sweating profusely to see if there could be any survivors, citizen journalists were busy taking and uploading gory pictures to their friends.

It is suggested that during emergencies, citizen journalists should not spread the news or pictures that may hamper rescue operations.

Conclusion

This study has critically analyzed the state of citizen journalism in Nigeria. It is clear from the study that citizen journalism is growing rapidly in the country. Therefore, the need to sensitize Nigerian citizen journalists on proper use of citizen journalism is just obvious.

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