

# Social Media: Enlarging the Space for User-Generated Community Journalism

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## Abstract

Social media have to a large extent competed with the traditional media in terms audience size. Social media have enjoyed a large following because of interactivity and utility in bringing about User-Generated community journalism. Social media have also brought about re-definition of news and news determinants as well as enhanced democratization of communication. For the traditional mass media to remain effective or relevant to their audience, social media and their contents should be incorporated into their channels. By so doing, contents of the mass media would go a long way to reflect the interest of the community or their audience members.

**Keywords:** Social media, enlarging the space, use-generated community journalism.

1. **Introduction:** Social media – a pot pourri of new and communication technologies have probably been put to more uses than was originally envisaged. Through their multi-purpose applications, social media have fulfilled informational and other interpersonal goals which the traditional mass media of radio, television, newspaper, magazines, books and films were deficient in addressing. The social media comprising social networking sites such as the Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Internet forums, Weblogs, etc have to a great extent become the fifth estate of the realm, with more uses and gratifications as well as more users, whereby the only condition for access, participation or utilisation is simply the acquisition of and ability to operate the gadget.

This paper would be discussed under the following sub-headings:

- (i) Keywords
  - (ii) Theoretical Framework
  - (iii) Social Media: Re-defining News/News Determinants and Enhancing Democratization of Communication.
  - (iv) Social Media: Enlarging the Space for User-Generated Community Journalism.
  - (v) Conclusion
2. **Keywords**
    - 2.1 Social Media: New information and communication technological platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Internet forums, Weblogs, etc which users deploy for various uses and gratifications.
    - 2.2 Enlarging the Space: A conscious and deliberate effort at affording people, hitherto disadvantaged, easy access and equal opportunity to participate in information generation and dissemination.
    - 2.3 User-Generated Community Journalism: This is a kind of journalism whereby the people themselves report their affairs and disseminate same among themselves through the social media.

3. **Theoretical Framework**

This paper derives its theoretical basis from the information society theory. Quoting Melody (1990), McQuail (2010, p. 104) describes “information society simply as those that have become dependent upon complex electronic information networks and which allocate a major portion of their resources to information and communication activities”.

Also quoting Van Dijk (1999), McQuail (2010, p. 105) suggests that “modern society is in a process of becoming a network society: a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks which are gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face to face communication”.

Information society posits a society that is characterized by complex interactive networks of communication.

4. **Social Media: Re-Defining News/News Determinants and Enhancing Democratization of Communication**

In the traditional news media the question often asked is “is it newsworthy?”, but in the social media, the question is “to whom is it newsworthy?”. Lee (2010, p. 273) notes that “digital camera users have often posted their pictures on the webs to create self-presentations and to enhance social relationships. As bloggers, they provide particular pictures and information related to a local site, and they share them with their intimates or the public to be acknowledged by them. When people search on the web for information about a locale, they are able to get a sense of the place before getting there, and to visit the locale based on this information. Personal

photographs provide visual details of numerous places, make them aesthetic and desirable, and consequently extend the pool of destinations that are considered worthy to visit". User – led community journalism, chronicles and carries comments "on everyday topics that shape people's lives in our neighborhoods and in our towns, it involves reporting on all manner of personal tragedies: fires, auto accidents, crimes, etc" Lauterer (2006, p. 26).

Social media have indeed gone a long way in filling the gap for community journalism which has been left by the major mass media.

In the traditional mass media, there are basic criteria that determine what is newsworthy. Itule and Anderson (2008, p. 15-18) identify criteria must often considered as determining newsworthiness to include the following:

**Timeliness:** Is it a recent development, or is it old news? Freshness strengthens a news story. Audience members want to know what is happening now. Breaking news stories command space at most news media. Many people either go online to get what the various news media have to say or log on to the social media or upload breaking events to social media.

**Proximity:** Is the story relevant to local readers? Events close to home are naturally of interest to the news media. Users of the social media such Youtube usually upload videos and pictures of occurrences that are of close proximity to them.

**Conflict:** Conflict – whether it involves people, governmental bodies or sports teams – is often considered newsworthy. Social media have always become busy with uploads of conflict situations.

**Eminence and Prominence:** Some happenings are newsworthy simply because well-known people are involved. Unlike in the traditional mass media, events or occurrences posted in the social media do not have to affect prominent people alone. Everyone and everything considered 'interesting' to the social media user is uploaded in the social media.

**Novelty:** The unusual makes news. This principle also applies in the social media. That explains why unusual things or occurrences are always quickly uploaded in the social media, such as gang rape, jungle justice, etc.

**Consequences and Impact:** What effect will the story have on readers? Social media have remained a major source of news and information on disasters – automobile accidents, air crashes, terrorists' activities, flood, crime, etc. Many people get to know about these occurrences through the social media.

**Human Interest:** Even though it might not be an earth shattering event, does it contain unique, interesting elements? Human interest stories often appeal to the emotions of readers, pulling them into the lives of others or into subjects of broad concern. Many of the postings/uploads in the social media are emotional, personal or unique things about social media users themselves and people close to them. However, the social media have extensively re-defined or provided alternative criteria of news selection as earlier advocated for by Traber (1987, p. 66). He posits that:

Alternative criteria of news need to be established, practised and taught, and they are to a large extent a reversal of the news values of conventional journalism. What is needed first and foremost are alternative social actors, or the re-definition of the criterion of prominence.

According to him, social actors are those groups of people or persons who almost as a matter of right are covered by the media and can speak through them. The very process of publicity makes them prominent, even those who otherwise might be totally insignificant in terms of their public service. To bring about a new set of social actors in the new journalism, Traber suggests that:

If the media make a conscious effort to report on, and in fact give preferential treatment to the manual labourers and their agricultural and industrial organizations, to the women and their groups. To the youths and children, and to the forgotten minorities, these persons and groups do become social actors who can speak to the public in the public consciousness.

If Traber's suggestion is implemented by the traditional mass media every citizen would become potential news maker, instead of the hitherto situation whereby high social status serves as one of the major considerations to merit media coverage. This is where the social media have made a great breakthrough and do have an edge over the traditional mass media.

Moreover, social media have addressed the problem and filled the vacuum highlighted by Traber (1987, p. 66) in his assertion that:

African mass media are by and large autocratic rather than democratic. They are primarily concerned with the interests of the aspirations of those we

disparagingly call ordinary people, or in the terminology of the left the masses, who have no face, no will of their own.

Social media have not only enhanced information sharing/dissemination, but also people's participation in information production and sharing. Every user of the social media is equal participant, thus enhancing democratization of communication. UNESCO (1981, p. 166) defines democratization of communication as a process whereby:

- a) The individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication
- b) The variety of messages exchanged increases and
- c) The extent and quantity of social representation or participation in communication are augmented

The various social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube have enabled many people to become active partners in the communication economy and have brought about increase in variety of messages exchanged, extent and quantity of social representation or participation in communication.

#### 5. **Social Media: Enlarging the Space for User-Generated Community Journalism**

User-Generated community is a kind of journalism where the people themselves take over the role of reporting their affairs and disseminating same among themselves through the social media. User-Generated community journalism made possible through the social media makes the hitherto recipient of mass media messages to get engaged and actively participate in information gathering and dissemination. User-Generated community journalism is journalism by the people and for the people. In User-Generated community journalism, the civil society is engaged. Contents of the social media largely represent the kind of content the people would want to see in the conventional or traditional mass media.

Community journalism is about redefining news or enlarging the space to enable more people to be heard or seen in the mass media of communication. Community journalism is about providing greater access or greater space/airtime to people. Community journalism tries to ensure that all the people affected by the issue have a voice in the story, not just the proponents of the most extreme viewpoints.

Community journalism enhanced by the social media is about providing entry points to involve people and encouraging interactivity between journalists and citizens. It seeks to create two-way conversation with the audience; in contrast to a one-way downloading of information on the public as is seen frequently in traditional journalism User-Generated community journalism is complementary to citizen or civic journalism. In the opinion of Perry (2002, p.14), "civic journalists... see their audiences as participants in public affairs, rather than as spectators. In short, they try to build connections with the communities they cover". People use the media to connect to society. Balnaves, Donald and Shoesmith (2009, p.225, 226) note that people go online to connect with the news of their community, whether this is a geographical community or one formed around some other common bond. Weblogs or blogs, part of the social media, are regularly updated online journalism-websites where commentary, original reporting and links to other content on the web are sorted in reverse chronological order (newest items on top). Items posted to blogs typically are short. Most blogs are a quick read. Blogs offer interactivity and timeliness. All blogs offer audience members the opportunity to respond to what they read, see, hear and often the responses are incorporated into the blog.

Social media serve as the 'voice of the voiceless'. Their contents are an aggregation of the opinions, views or expressions of the people. Social media provide a potpourri of the opinions or ideas of the people. With equal access and use, users of the social media enrich the public sphere-cyber space with robust inputs to issues of public interest, which the traditional media of mass communication can tap from or build their agenda around.

Social media provide inexhaustible sources of citizens' contributions to national discourse such as federal government's removal of petroleum subsidiary on January 1, 2012, planned introduction of N5000 notes, air crashes, terrorist attacks/bombings, etc. The social media have helped immensely in fulfilling the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which states that the right to freedom of opinion and expression includes "freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". Likewise, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) stipulates that the right to freedom of expression "comprises the freedom to seek out, to receive and communicate information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontier whether in oral, printed or artistic form, or by any other means of the individual's choice", (UNESCO 1981, p. 35). In no other channels does the right to impart information" made more possible and easier than the social media where everyone is a co-producer and user of information. The social media provide avenues for the expression of public opinion on any issues of concern to the user. Berelson in Schramm (1961, p. 343), defines public opinion

as: “people’s response – that is approval, disapproval or indifference – to political and social issues of general attention, such as international relations, domestic policy, election candidates and ethnic relations”.

In its analysis, UNESCO (1981, p. 195) explains that:

Public opinion is not simply the expression of the will of the people and, though it is closely linked with the public, it is not identical to it. Since it is not learned or imposed as a block by some recognized authority; it is not the same as an ideology. Moreover, it is not equivalent to a body of knowledge, although it cannot exist without data and concepts generated by experience. Such data are used to judge whether the public approves or rejects a subjects under consideration.

In any context, public opinion is considered to be that of people outside the decision-making process, external to the powers centers, and differs from that of people who, because of their specific position, knowledge and skills, are responsible for decisions. Public opinion is not simply the sum of the individual opinions rather a continuing process of comparing and contrasting of opinions based on a wide range of knowledge and experience.

Burns *in* Curran, Gurevitch and Woollacott (1977, p. 65) identifies four major channels of public opinion. These are:

- a. Public opinion as manifested in Public meeting and demonstrations.
- b. Public opinion as manifested in public utterance, spoken or written.
- c. Action which focuses attention on grievances or demand through attacks on property through riots, through assassinations, etc.
- d. Action designed to enforce change either through the organized disruption of civil life or by revolution.

In any of the above instances, the social media are utilized to record for dissemination to and among members of the virtual community.

Communication in the age of the social media has become more of a matter of human rights. According to UNESCO (1981, p. 172), “it is increasingly interpreted as the right to communicate, going beyond the right to receive communication or to be given communication. Communication is thus seen as a two-way process, in which the partners-individual and collective – carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue. The idea of dialogue, in contrast to monologue; is at the heart of much contemporary thinking, which is leading towards a process of developing a new area of social rights”. Many of the social media such as Facebook and Youtube provide avenues for the exchange of ideas on issue of public and personal concerns. It is in this regard that McQuail (2010, p.156) notes that the big advantage of the new media “is the ready access for all who want to speak, unmediated by the powerful interests that control the content of print media and the channels of broadcasting. The potential of the new media to bypass established institutional channels does also seem to improve the chances for the many and reduce their dependence on the various monopolistic sources of information and influence”.

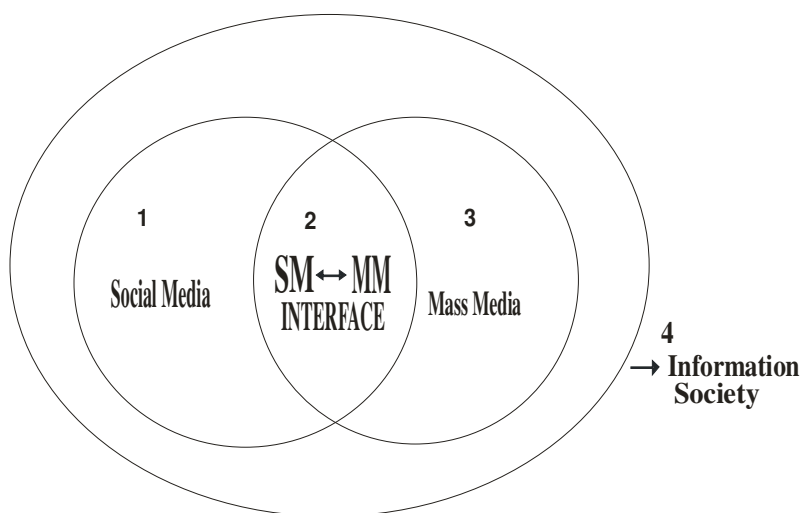
Social media are not only “market places of ideas’, but are virtual communities. According to Baghdady (2008, p.165) a virtual community is “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact with a specified boundary or place (a conference or a chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest”. One of the current virtual communities is Facebook, which is a social utility that connects people worldwide. Facebook is a free-access website that allows users to join networks, such as a school, place of employment, or geographic region, to connect and interact with other people. Users can post messages for their friends to see and update their personal profile to notify friends of happenings in their life”.

To enrich their contents and/or improve their audience – generated contents, mass media should integrate social media into their channels. While the media have the potential for structuring issues for the public, those issues many of the times also become major issues for discussion on the social media. Quoting Shaw and McCombs, Littlejohn and Foss (2008, p. 293) assert that “the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about”. In other words, agenda – setting establishes the salient issues or images in the minds of the public.

Littlejohn and Foss (2008, p, 293) explain that there are two levels of agenda – setting. The first establishes the general issues that are important, and the second determines the parts or aspects of those issues that are important. In many ways, the second level is as important as the first, because it gives us a way to frame the issues that constitute the public and media agendas. Media depictions frame events in ways that affect how

audiences can interpret these events, this can happen by various textual features of the “story” such as headlines, audio –visual components, metaphors used and the way in which the story is told, to name only a few of the ways framing functions. They identify what they call “a three-part process” of agenda – setting function. First, the priority of issues to be discussed in the media, or media agenda, must be set. Second, the media agenda in some way affects or interacts with what the public thinks, creating the public agenda. Finally, the public agenda affects or interacts in some ways with what policy – makers consider important, called the policy agenda. In other words, the media agenda affects the public agenda, and the public agenda affects the policy agenda. Often, what is on the media and public agendas end up as or simultaneously become social media agenda. It is a general knowledge that there is a high traffic of users on the social media. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Youtube provide fora where discussions on personal, national and international issues take place. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter provide a constant source of alternative news sources for users. Social media can also serve as sources of or cues for investigative or follow-up stories in the mass media.

User-generated journalism can be represented in the following model:



**Model of User-Generated Community Journalism (Charles Obot, 2012)**

- 1) Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Internet forums, Weblogs, Social blogs, Microbloggings, Wikis, Social Networks, Podcasts, Videos/pictures.
- 2) Social Media – Mass media interface for user-led community journalism: Here social media users set and/or build agenda for issues of concern to them and their communities. Similarly, the mass media which have presence or accounts on the social media have constant interactions with their audience members (social media users).
- 3) Information Society: Modern society where digital information and communication technologies have become part of the daily lives of the people. This is also a society where most members of the community have at least one ‘push’ technology that enables them to become part of the virtual community.

User-generated content, according to BBC World Service Trust (2012), refers to a wide variety of media content that is produced by audience members as opposed to content made by the media organization. The rationale behind user-generated content is that it taps into the expertise of the audience and the public. It aims at amplifying voices that would not normally be heard.

User-generated content has clearly changed the world with the explosion of blogs, audio and video. That means, hitherto consumers of mass media messages have now/also become communicators or publishers of mass mediated messages. User-generated content has aided or enhanced community journalism, because they are real life stories told by people themselves. User-generated contents add to professional media contents and enrich same. It gives you an insight into what the audience is thinking about.

With mobile phones, for example, users can participate in ‘Vox Pop’ initiated by the media house, react to any media content or send unsolicited video footage or pictures of any human-interest subject matter.

User-generated content can also come in the form of video stories. Video stories are usually between two and three minutes long and the viewer is taken on thought relate to the person talking to them. Video stories one's everyday life, telling stories about ordinary lives, real-life stories and sharing something that is very special in one's life.

User-generated content can also be in the form of digital storytelling as a personal event or experience made into a short piece of television or internet video. The stories use mainly still images processed and compiled by an image and video editing software (i.e. Photoshop, window movie maker, imovie etc). The same storytelling process can also be applicable in radio.

User-generated contents is definitely a new paradigm in community journalism in which there is a great deal of participation of audience members through the social media, a lot of inputs from them and with a wide spectrum of audience (users') involvement is content production and dissemination.

The traditional mass media should create a forum/segment for audience members to participate or collaborate in message production through the various social media platforms. The social media also have implications on the traditional mass media, which are largely controlled by the governments, financiers, power centers, interests and other sources of structural influence.

As noted by UNESCO (1981, p. 21).

The monopoly of the controlled media is broken by other means of communication; news is passed on by words of mouth, illegal leaflets are circulated. And foreign broadcast make inroads on the monopoly enforced by the State within its frontiers.

The social media have successfully and enormously broken the monopoly of the traditional mass media in terms of rapid, wide and undiluted dissemination of information.

Social media have also led to the creation of virtual communities. Quoting Howard Rheingold Baghdady (2008, p. 168) explains that virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Social media are the only form of mass media that have either surpassed or rivaled radio as a mass medium in terms of audience following. In the opinion of Jan Fernback and Brad Thompson, quoted by Baghdady (2008, p. 169) virtual communities are "social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact with a specified boundary or place (a conference or a chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topics of interest". Social media have not only served communication functions, but also fulfilled social categories uses.

## Conclusion

Social media have indeed expanded the frontiers of communication channels. Moreover, they have enhanced the potentials of audience members to become active participants in communication messages, but also as producers of mass media messages.

Moreover, social media can to a large extent be described as effective media. An effective media is an asset to any society. A mass medium can be considered effective if it is capable of affecting the behaviour of a large number of people. Islam (2002, p. 2) identifies three criteria of effective media, namely: independence, quality and reach. According to him, independence refers to the media's ability to report information it receives without undue fear of being penalized. It also refers to a media industry that is not controlled by any interest groups, but still has access to necessary data. High quality media are those with access to and the capacity to report objectively on basic economic, social and political information, those that can express a diversity of views and are accountable for the information they publish and those that have the capacity to analyze the information obtained for its news value and truth.

According to Edward Herman, quoted by Islam (2002 p. 4); objectivity is a key element of quality. He explains that objectivity is, first presenting a variety of sides to a story, searching out facts without political constraint and presenting these facts fairly and impartially. Secondly, deciding what is news worthy on the basis of consistently applied news values, unaffected by ideological premise or compromised by strategic or profitability considerations.

The mass media with reach has relevance for and brings news to most of the population. The effect that the mass media have on society depends to a large extent on who they reach.

Social media rank high in reach, diversity of views, immunity to political constraints, consistency in the application of news values- prominent of which is human interest-and are unaffected by ideological premises or compromised by strategic or profitability considerations.

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