



Social Media as the Fifth Estate of Public Communication

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Abstract

Social media as the fifth estate of public communication was looked into and discovered that social media 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, p.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, social media seen as the “fifth estate” have posed a serious challenge to the mainstream journalism in Nigeria as the “fourth estate” of public communication. In congruency with the Democratic Participant Media Theory and the Public Sphere model, the researcher came to the reasoned conclusion that in this modern age, the social media have emerged as alternative news sources; since audiences now depend on them largely in meeting their information needs. In as much as social media in Nigeria has broadened people’s access to a variety of news, this study suggests that a proper synergy between the mainstream journalism and social media journalism is recommended to ascertain the best way(s) forward for effective and efficient journalism practices in the country which will suit the modern age public communication. The need therefore to sensitize Nigerian social media journalists on proper use of this emerging brand of journalism is obvious. Among other things, it was recommended that operators of social media should endeavour to observe the core ethics of conventional journalism, that is, accuracy and objectivity in their news dissemination endeavours.

Introduction

In the human society, communication has paved the way for understanding, belief, trust, culture preservation, traditional dynamism and so on. History has shown that communication has remained the live wire of society because from the primitive era, through the era of supremacy of the mainstream media to the emerging era of reign of the social media. This shows that communication keep changing in styles, apparatus and in roles. According to Odi, C. (2010) in Okoro, N. (2013 P. 161), this general dynamism in communication tools and system has resulted in astounding evolution of a collaborative, participatory, democratic and user-general-content pattern of communication. The online platforms and technologies that are used for this new system of human communication are called the social media. The social media include facebook, twitter, myspace, skype, 2go, linkedIn, and a host of others.

Viewing social media as the global public squares of the contemporary era, one might be tempted to say social media have reduced the world to a global family as a result of its role in politics, religion, economy, trading and so on. By its convergence, social media have recreated the public sphere pattern of the mainstream role of fourth estate to the government and the society to the fifth estate role. This is as a result of its

interactive nature, participatory and democratic manner. Millions of people use social media every day. This system of communication has drastically changed the processes of public communication and information dissemination. Social media has made communication device like facebook, myspace and so on user friendly, user generated and user interactive in public communication and information dissemination. This development has resulted in the creation and use of a concept called “prosumer”-a situation where a social media user is both a content producer and content consumer (Odi, C. 2013). This elucidates the views of Dutton (2009), cited in Newman, Dutton and Blank (2012; P. 14), called the current use of the internet and other digital information and communication technologies with the potential for independent source of accountability the fifth Estate. So, while the mainstream media are the fourth estates the social media are the fifth estate of public communication.

What is Social Media?

There is no universal definition of social media. The concept has been viewed from different perspectives by scholars. Simply put, social media is a collective term that describes the means of communicating and engaging with people. Boyd and Ellison (2007:1)

perceive social media as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system...”. According to the Australian Electoral Commission (2011), social media can be defined as

“online tools and Web sites that facilitate many-to-many communications between users. Specific examples include Facebook and Twitter, but may also include more regional or niche services, and more longstanding collaborative environments such as web-based forums and wikis”.

More specifically, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) see social media as internet-based applications built on the technological and ideological foundations of Web 2.0. Social Media can equally be called a strategy and an outlet for broadcasting (Cohen, 2009:12). The term “social media” refers to the wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities. The kinds of internet services commonly associated with social media include blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, Twitter, YouTube and so on (Dewing, 2012:1). The social media technologies provide flexibility, adaptability, usability and customizability.

Constantinides and Fountain (2008) opine that the social media is a system that supports the creation of informal users’ network facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the effective generation, dissemination, sharing, editing of informational content.

In short, social media is primarily used to transmit or share information with a broad audience in a free flowing technologically driven process. This facilitates **social networking** which has been described as a tool and a utility for connecting with others (Stelzner, 2009:4). But more appropriately social networking is an act of engagement; as people with common interests associate together and build relationships through community (Hartshorn, 2010) within or outside geo-political divides. This constitutes the prevalent activities that go on in the social media. Thus while the latter is the facilitating conduit or platform; the former is the real activity that ensures its relevance to humanity and society.

The Status of Social Media Journalism in Nigeria

Modern 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, p.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, Blogger, Instagram 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 (2015, p.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“, even in this present day politic, Peter Obi is having more face book fans others.

As a result of the ubiquitous adoption of social media for public communication in Nigeria, modern journalism has gained currency in the country. Nigerian modern journalists report events in their localities and comment on national issues, using the social networking sites. This brought about the role of social media as the “Fifth Estate” of public communication.

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, p.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, modern journalism has posed a serious challenge to the mainstream media in Nigeria. Before press time, modern journalists in Nigeria had reported the Fulani herdsmen massacre in Benue, which claimed the lives of over 75 innocent citizens. Not only did the social media give timely report of the massacre, they also gave the audience the opportunity to ask questions and exchange views on the national calamity.

This challenge posed by modern journalism appears to have forced the traditional media in Nigeria to embrace modern brand of journalism. However, experts have called the genre of modern 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, p.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".

Social Media Dynamism Vs Mainstream Media

The advent of the social media has added a twist to the communication processes in the contemporary society like Nigeria. The phenomenon has drastically changed the information distribution system, processes of reporting, sources of information gathering and information consumption in the society from the dry style in which the audience is a passive member of the information chain to the collaborative lively pattern in which the audience is an active member of the chain, a content creator and contributor. (Odi, C. 2013, P. 169. Bitrus, F. and Nlemchukwu F. 2021, P.20).

The entire paradigm of social media has altered the basic rules of communication especially between business and their audiences. The one-way communication methods of the recent past-business-to-consumer and business-to-business-have been replaced by a more robust multi-dimensional communication model (Maggiari, 2012, P. 1).

Social media system of communication is markedly different from the system of the mainstream media. The user generated content principle on which the social media operate is absent in the mainstream media in which the content is generated and disseminated by the media themselves. It is obvious that social media is citizen base (participatory and democratic). This has resulted in the creation and use of concepts like "prosumer". This is where the audience is both a content producer and content consumer and "active audience" is where the audience is an active participant in the communication process. Maggiari (2012, P. 1) stressed and identifies what he called the five Cs of social media, which distinguish them from the mainstream media. These are conversation, contribution, collaboration, connection and community.

CONVERSATION: With the social media, communication is no longer a one-way direction, sent to a passive audience. “Social media is a least a two-way conversation, and often a multidimensional conversation. Social media engages everyone involved” (Maggiari:, 2012, P. 1).

CONTRIBUTION: Through social media, contributions, comments, question and reactions from any interested persons who is connected is encouraged. Users are allowed the opportunity to interact freely, makes their contributions, negative or positive, without restrictions.

COLLABORATION: Social media are fertile platforms for user-collaboration. Social media promote exchange of information among the users. This is done by inviting participation.

CONNECTION: “Accessing information on the internet only takes a check. Social media thrives on connections, within its own web vehicles and through links to other sites, resources, people, and automatic feeds. People can even create their own personalized site of connecting” (Maggiani 2012 P. 1). This helps users to connect or reconnected to by other people.

COMMUNITY: With the advent of social media, creation of communities was created in the disguises of platforms, groups and so on. This promotes and paves way for fellowship, and relationship with others who share common attitudes, interests, and goals. (Maggiani, 2012 P. 1) explains that communities form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities build goodwill from members to the hosting organization and among members.

The Positives Pose of Social Media to the Mainstream

“As society grows, new ideas are initiated, new devices are invented and new technologies are introduced, all these innovations geared towards making life simple: as a result of the ubiquity avoided use of the social media, fears and doubts have been expressed about the continued relevance and survival of the mainstream media of public communication in their current and style of reporting (operation). This made the economist (2011), in its article entitled “The end of mass media coming full civil”, with a sub-title: “The rise and fall of mass communications”, observes that:

The biggest shift is that journalism is no longer the exclusive preserve of journalists. Ordinary people are playing a more active role in the news system, along with a host of technology firms, news start-ups and not-for-profit groups. Social media are certainly not a fed and their impact is only just beginning to be felt... successful media criticizes

and will be the ones that accept this new reality. They need to reorient themselves towards serving readers rather than advertisers, embrace social features and collaboration, get off political and moral high horses and stop trying to erect barriers around journalism to protect their position. The digital future of news has much in common with its chaotic, ink-stained past.

Social media have posed challenges to the mainstream channel of public communication, by forcing them to change their style of reporting, sluggish style news gathering and dissemination so as to remain relevant in their line of professionalism. In his study, “The rise of social media and its impact on mainstream journalism”, Newman (2009 P. 1) examined how newspapers and broadcasters (print and broadcast media) were responding to a wave of participatory. Social media and a historic shift in control towards individual consumers and concluded:

1. Social media and User-generated content (UGC) are fundamentally changing the nature of breaking news. They are contributing to the compression of the “news cycle” and putting more pressure on editors over what to report and when. This made most of the news organizations are already toying the line of abandoning attempts to be first for breaking news, focusing instead on being the best at verifying and correcting it.
2. As a result of the social media pose to the share of communication, same values, new tools, sum up the approach in most mainstream organization as the marry the culture of the web with their own organizational norms. Guidelines are being rewritten; social media editors and twitter correspondents are being appointed; training and awareness programmes are underway.
3. Social media as the fifth estate of public communication is not replacing journalism, but they are creating an important extra layer of information and diverse opinion. Most people are still happy to rely on mainstream news organization to sort fact from fiction and serve up a filtered view, but they are increasingly engaged by this information, particularly when recommended by friends or another trusted source.
4. Newsman (2011, P. 6) further note that mainstream media of public communication serve as the lifeblood of topical social media conversations in the world today there by providing the vast majority of news links that

are shared. The agenda and discussion of the mainstream continues to shape conversations around major news stories.

5. Through exposition, news correspondents and columnists are gaining new authorities and influence through their expertise of social media. Some are becoming 'network node' (Job creation) attracting significant audience of their own-independent of their parent brands.

Criticisms of Social Media as Fifth Estate over Mainstream media of public communication

Social media 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 social media as the fifth estate of public communication..

It has already been noted that social media offers professional and non-professional journalist's 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. Social media 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, modern journalism presents a more personal, nuanced view of events and has the potential to cultivate communities of people with a common interest. Through blogs, these journalists (social media) have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, ill human treatments, religious sarcasms, ethnic agitations and other issues of concern to local and national communities.

Another rather amazing benefit of social media is that it delivers news almost at the speed of lightning. It has surpassed the immediacy of the broadcast media (radio and television). Modern 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 the "*Fifth Estate*" (social media) 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 social media notwithstanding, it has some downsides. One of such challenges is the question about the veracity of its content. Some

commentators have criticized social media 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).

Again, this modern journalism (social media) has been criticized by its opponents in Nigeria. Some of the critics believe that social media journalism lacks veracity. Dare (2014, p.44) found that only 33 respondents of the 120 surveyed trusted Sahara reporters. This, according to him, shows that most Nigerians do not always believe stories from social media journalists. It is believed in some quarters that they spread false hood.

Other critics argue that blogger/ citizen journalist fuels civil unrest, political instability and ethno-religious crisis. It was believed in some quarters that bloggers misinformed the activists, making them to gang up against the government.

More so, social media 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 social media journalists during the military python dance operation in Abia state, Health saga of president Muhammed Buhari, and in the hate speech of 2015 general election. It was said that during crash/accident, while rescue operators sweat profusely to see if there could be any survivors, the social media journalists concern is taking and uploading gory pictures through their blog.

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

Social Media as Channels of Public Communication

Presently, there has been an upsurge in the availability of *Information and Communication Technology* (ICT) devices in Nigeria. This is particularly evident in the contemporary Nigeria, prevalent of internet services as well as the use of hi-

tech mobile or smart phones. These devices have consequently promoted the use of the social media in the country. So, with the presence of internet which is the major driving of social media engines, the use of the social media in Nigeria has no doubt been enhanced. An empirical study conducted by Idakwo in 2011, among other things upholds the fact that the use of the social media as means of communication has been adopted in Nigeria. The study examines '*the use of Social Media among Nigerian Youths*'. From the title, it is obvious that some findings of the study shall be relevant here. In his study, Idakwo, among other things discovered that most people use *Facebook* more than other social media channels in Nigeria. Also, most respondents concurred to the fact that they use the social media especially *Facebook*, as an alternative to other conventional communication media. In the words of the researcher, —with regard to the use of *Facebook* as an alternative mode of communication, 74% admitted to using *Facebook* as an alternative to other kinds of communication.: In a nutshell, the author summarizes other key points of his findings as follows: Social media have become a mainstream activity and have become a major mode of communication especially for youths, who form about 50% of the world population on *Facebook*. Social media have moved from being just interactive to a form of mass media. Social media have been predicted as a strong force in shaping public opinion especially in issues of politics, social causes and sexuality. Social media have also been an expression of the complexities between the media and society (Idakwo, 2011, p.23)

Some of the few existing empirical studies conducted in Nigeria so far on social media, show that millions of Nigerians are users of the media: yet no scientific research has been conducted to ascertain the credibility of these social media and the possibility of assuming an alternative channels to the conventional media.

In Nigeria, Social media have been variously and popularly deployed as veritable instruments of communication. Regardless of the fact that it has not been long they emerged as channels of human interaction in the country. The level of their usage is quite incredible cutting across all strata of the nation.

Theoretical Framework

In every academic discipline, there is a body of theories that provide explanation for observable phenomena in that field. Ohaja (2003, p.63-64) argues that —knowledge does not exist in vacuum. This study was anchored on Democratic Participant Media Theory and the Public Sphere model.

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, p.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, p.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, p.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, p.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/bloggers. 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, p.176). Harbermas’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.

Conclusion

This study has critically taken a look at Social Media as the Fifth Estate of Public Communication in Nigeria. It is clear from the study that social media is growing rapidly in the country to invigorate some features of the mainstream journalism practices as the *fourth estate* of public communication. Therefore, the need to sensitize Nigerian citizen (WE) journalists on proper use of social media is just obvious. As a result, a proper synergy between the social media and mainstream journalism is recommended to ascertain the best way(s) forward, for effective and efficient journalism practices in the country. This way, a proper and acceptable harmony of the strength and weaknesses of these two major trends in journalism shall be erected, ethics maintained, professionalism promoted and the public sphere rejoices.

Recommendations

The researchers recommends that:

- 1) There is no doubt that with the development of communication channels, the information hungry society would equally turn to social media as a channels for their information needs. Therefore, operators of social media must endeavour to observe the core ethics of conventional journalism, that is, accuracy and objectivity.

- 2) Since the social media have been adjudged by the users as credible news sources to a large extent, such credibility must be sustained for effective modern journalism and there should be a synergy promotion of ideas and interest.
- 3) The social media have provided an alternative platforms or channels as the *fifth estate* to public communication for news transmission. This should not be seen as threats to the conventional (mainstream) media; rather, it should be seen as a way of advancing the course of mass communication in for the modern man in this global rebranding society.
- 4) It was also recommends that operators of social media should endeavour to observe the core ethics, the social responsibility of conventional journalism, that is, accuracy and objectivity in their news dissemination responsibilities.

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