Chapter 6

Citizen Journalism: How Technology Transforms Journalism Business through Citizen-Reporters in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Recent national and international developments are demonstrating the power of technology to transform communication channels, media sources, events, and the fundamental nature of journalism. Technological advances now allow citizens to record and instantly publicize information and images for immediate distribution on ubiquitous communication networks using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube. These technologies are enabling non-journalists to become “citizen reporters” (also known as “citizen journalists”), who record and report information over informal networks or via traditional mass media channels. Against the background of media repression in Nigeria, the article reports on a study that examined the impacts of technology on the journalism business as a way of understanding how citizen-reporters impact the journalism business in Nigeria. Specifically, the focus of the study was on Nigerian citizen-reporters (bloggers, social media, online news, and online discussion groups), their roles, and the impacts on Nigeria’s political struggle, free press, and free speech.

INTRODUCTION

Recent national and international developments are demonstrating the power of technology to transform communication channels, media sources, events, and the fundamental nature of journalism. Technological advances now allow citizens to record and instantly publicize information and images for immediate distribution on ubiquitous communication networks using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube. These technologies are enabling non-journalists to
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become “citizen reporters” (also known as “citizen journalists”), who record and report information over informal networks or via traditional mass media channels. Citizen journalism is not new as people have been chronicling activities since cave dwellers pictorially depicted bison on their cave walls, and technology has facilitated mass communication since the Guttenberg press (Bentley, 2006). However, more than any prior technology, the Internet has revolutionized communications (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kleinrock, Lynch, & Wolff; 2003).

The universal availability of the Internet and mobile technologies has dramatically expanded the population of those who can broadcast information, blurring the distinctions between professional reporters and citizen journalists (Papandrea, 2007). Technology has greatly impacted news reporting, consumption, and creation (Gillmor, 2004) as people depend more on the Internet and alternative media sources for their news and other information (Marshall, 2005; Pisani, 2005; Papandrea, 2007). The influence of elites and institutions is giving way to wider public participation and greater interactivity as blogs, Twitter broadcasts, media forums and networks broadcast instantaneous, unfiltered news to the millions. Every citizen with access to the appropriate technology can now practice journalism, and no training nor is professional affiliation required for citizens to report news stories, record video, and broadcast information (Marshall, 2005).

Not only do technologies increase the information disseminated and allow more people to participate in public conversations, technology enabled citizen journalists can actually determine events and, therefore, change the course of history. In disasters and other emergency situations, citizen broadcasts provide early warnings, assist in locating people who need assistance, and transmit other critical information. Much of the video on catastrophes, such as Katrina and Tsunami, was captured and broadcast internationally by citizens using handheld devices (Marshall, 2005). Citizen reporters have recorded revealing behavior by public figures, arguably altering political careers, election results, and decision making. In other words, citizens using technologies are transforming the face of news reporting, developing news channels, and even creating the news itself.

The power of citizen journalism to determine events is powerfully demonstrated in the current Middle Eastern uprisings. Developments in the region and beyond provide strong evidence of the influence of a technology equipped populous and demonstrate how citizen journalists can alter the course of history. Flew (2008) explains how having access to alternative sources of news and information is enormously important in countries that are not democracies, are young democracies, or where there is a pattern of direct or indirect state control over media sources. (Flew, 2008). According to Zakaria (2011), “technology — satellite television, computers, mobile phones and the Internet — has played a powerful role in informing, educating and connecting people in the region. Such advances empower individuals and disempower the state” (Zakaria, 2011, p. 8).

Prior to pervasive handheld technologies, repressive governments regulated the media messages received by their populations through control of networks and communication channels. Thus, they could shut down networks and manipulate information flows to keep their populations uninformed through media censure, propaganda, and stopping the communications needed to gather the support required for successful revolt. Now technology may allow citizens to freely express previously suppressed views enhancing their free speech, human rights, and political freedom (Flew, 2008).

Access to multiple networks and media enables the populous to distribute information in spite of government efforts to curtail communications, and