

Participatory Journalism-An Unimagined Consequence of Evolving Media Technologies: An Analysis of Selected Media Houses

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Abstract

Evolving technologies are not only influencing journalism and how news organizations constitute themselves and do business, but also how media audiences are empowered to create journalistic content and disseminate it. The uptake of reporting and storytelling by readers – including uploading first-on-the-scene video footage of newsworthy events for mainstream media houses – is a by-product of postmodern technologies being easily accessible to users outside the field of professional newsgatherers. At the same time, these non-professional citizen journalists are fashioning street-wise local narratives which, because of proximity to people, events and contexts, are complementing mainstream media in virtual spaces, and transforming a journalistic culture of supposedly objective journalism compromised by gatekeeping “pressures” in the political and economic ecosystem into an inclusive and participatory process. By qualitative analyses of four news channels that have integrated citizen journalism, this article demonstrates technology-driven transformations in the mediascape, that are redefining how news is produced.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies, Technological Determinism, Participatory Journalism, Mainstream Media

Katılımcı Gazetecilik-Gelişen Medya Teknolojilerinin Beklenmedik Sonucu: Seçilmiş Medya Kuruluşları Üzerine Bir Analiz

Özet

Gelişen teknolojiler sadece gazeteciliği ve haber kuruluşlarının kendilerini nasıl oluşturduklarını ve iş yapış biçimlerini etkilemekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda medya izleyicilerini, gazetecilik içeriği oluşturma ve yayma konusunda yetkilendiriliş yöntemlerini de etkilemektedir. Haberciliğin ve hikaye anlatımının okuyucular tarafından benimsenmesi, – ana akım medya kuruluşları için haber değeri taşıyan olayların olay yerindeki ilk video görüntülerinin yüklenmesi dahil olmak üzere – postmodern teknolojilerin profesyonel haber toplayıcılar dışındaki kullanıcılar tarafından kolayca erişilebilir olmasının bir yan ürünü olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Aynı zamanda, sözü geçen profesyonel olmayan yurttaş gazetecileri, insanlara, olaylara ve bağlamlara yakınlıkları sayesinde, sokaktaki yerel anlatıları siyasi ve ekonomik ekosistemdeki “baskıların” kapsayıcı ve katılımcı bir sürece dönüştürülmesi sağlayarak, sanal alanlarda ana akım medyayı temsil eden ve eşik bekçileri tarafından tehlikeye atılan gazetecilik kültürünü dönüştürmektedirler. Bu çalışma, yurttaş gazeteciliğini temsil eden dört haber kanalının niteliksel analiziyle haberin üretim sürecini yeniden tanımlayan medya ortamlarındaki teknoloji odaklı dönüşümleri göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bilgi ve İletişim Teknolojileri, Teknolojik Determinizm, Katılımcı Gazetecilik, Ana Akım Medya

Introduction and Background to the Study

Innis McLuhan (1964) influenced media theory and communications when he highlighted how communication technologies have become key agents in social and historical change. He indicated communication as integral to social transformation- predicted the existence of the “global village” and the magnification of the world community as we see it today (McLuhan, 1994). McLuhan’s other popular expression, “the medium is the message”, indicates that the qualities of a medium have as much effect as the information it transmits. Drawing insights from these sentiments, the main objective of this paper is to critically analyse how selected newsrooms are modifying their newsgathering process to accommodate user aptitudes and the burgeoning citizen-led platforms facilitated by evolving technologies. Continuities in technological influences on African and Western media practices are explored.

Technological Revolution

The shift in media practice from being “unidirectional and defined by a sense of impersonality due to the role of the public communicator requiring a high degree of neutrality and detachment” (Banda, 2010, p. 19) to a multi-actor news construction process (Wamunyu

& Wahutu, 2019), where ordinary citizens can generate news content for dissemination and public consumption (Messner & Garrison, 2011; Mumia, 2016), is a result of technological changes which have left audiences “proactively empowered” (Berger, 2011, p. 18). Technology’s facilitation and empowerment is therefore employed as an analytical framework of the changes in media practice that have admitted greater citizen participation, notwithstanding the insistence by some social constructionists that the determinism argument is redundant (see e.g. Croteau & Hoynes, 2003), and that what is happening in journalism today is a hybridisation of new and old news gathering dissemination cultures (Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019, p. 46), rather than an overhaul of processes driven by new technologies.

In fact, Croteau and Hoynes were derisory towards “the tendency to focus on the raw power of technology”, which they argued “leads us down the well-blazed but analytically impoverished path to technological determinism” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 305). We argue in this article, that technology has had a determining effect on the conduct of journalism and the emergence of various strands of user generated content that now contribute to news. As we review the phenomenon, we argue that web technology is undeniably a variable of change in practice – even if infused by human innovation.

We admit that scholars identified personal and social utilisation goals in technology’s emergence. For instance, Ellul defined technology as the ability of people to manipulate the tools available to them for the betterment of those they served (Ellul, 1964). The aspect of ability here is important, as it shows that technology is not only a functioning communications network or a computing device. In the main, technology has to be created and skilfully exploited to meet social needs (Kiran, 2012). That said, as post-modernity hurtles into an era where appliances are connected to the internet, becoming what is futuristically termed “the internet of things”, we cannot ignore that technology is and has been the epicentre of media practice transitions, dragging consumers into new and exciting capabilities, and conglomerates which have for so long held sway on what content we consumed, and how, into new negotiations of content and operation modes.

The technological revolution empowers consumers with increased plurality of choices, plus the tools to produce their own content for audience consumption. The age of user-generated content is here – and in news gathering and dissemination terms, it has been given a name: citizen journalism – defined as news gathering and dissemination by traditional consumers themselves to serve their consumption needs in ways that are perhaps not being

served by the media conglomerates. To define the concept in Mumia’s terms, citizen journalism “focuses on the capability of ordinary citizens to generate content that can be considered news – with a more personal touch through internet distribution” (Mumia, 2016, p. xiii). To a very great extent, internet technology facilitates that content’s generation and distribution.

In popular culture, the notion of technology denotes a physical presence. Kiran (2012, p. 77) writes that “technical mediation shapes our experience of the world, but it also shapes our experience of ourselves”. He expands that perspective by arguing that

“The concept of technical mediation must therefore be grounded in a more general concept of technological presence. This concept indicates that technology harbours both actuality and potentiality, the latter denoting that technologies offer possible actions through which we realise specific actions, and, more importantly, realise ourselves; it is through the technological presence in our lifeworld [that] we are able to recognise our own possibilities to be in, and act in, the lifeworld.”

By this narrative, Kiran suggests a media that can bring and empower the social “us” into its planning and use; where the media is an instrument within tangible reach. In Africa, this should mean “greater choice for media consumers, and greater participation by non-media people and institutions who believe they have stories to tell and points to make in the public arena” (Berger, 2011, p. 13). When this is allowed to happen, media communication is transformed into a pushback against political and corporate editorial gatekeeping (White & Mabweazara, 2018), and the social mediation of the technology assumes a more pluralistic milieu in which Guy Berger suggests, “pressures will grow for more transparency in the state, business, and the mass media itself” (Berger, 2011, p. 13).

Winner argues that technology does not only simplify human activity, it is also a powerful force that reshapes that activity and its implications. For instance, improvements in the medical technology transforms not only what doctors do and how they do it, but it also changes how the general populace perceives the health care industry and the medical practice (Winner, 1986). Likewise, technology’s facilitation of media practice outside the mainstream institutional systems creates a massification of content and negotiation on the periphery of political and economic power in the form of community media, including local radio stations.

In Kenya, a country of 47 counties and more than 42 different language groups, rural and urban consumers increasingly identify with the pull of media in their local languages than the mainstream products in the official KiSwahili and English languages. This shift in media

consumption patterns can be attributed to the expanding media practice options that advances in technology have availed, which, according to Mbeke, Okello-Orlale and Ugangu (2011, p. 14), has precipitated “the growth of ethnic language radio stations...that has continued to play a functional role in empowering marginalised and excluded voices – particularly at the grassroots”. The same authors note that “about 68% of radio listeners tune into the local language radio stations...their coverage area is wider than that of English and KiSwahili radio stations. They are popular because listeners identify more with the local languages and local events” (Mbeke, Okello-Orlale, & Ugangu, 2011, p. 52). There is abundant evidence that conventional journalism has now understood and responded to this pull of the local voice, and the need for ordinary citizens to tell their own stories.

When ‘Consumers’ Produce: Towards a More Participatory Media in the 4IR

Major news outlets now provide links on their websites to selected blogs, or invite ordinary citizens to use WhatsApp, mobile text messaging, or emails to send not just news, but also opinion pieces on topics of interest, so that the content generated by the citizen journalist for his or her locality is now incorporated by the leading news houses as part of their brand (Messner & Garrison, 2011; Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019). The shift from unidirectional journalism was precipitated by the ease of new media technologies and their domestication, of course. But in countries like Kenya, the mainstream media may have accelerated disaffection with a journalism driven by corporate self-interest perceived as having harboured political sympathies. This parochial journalism provided the prisms through which election reporting, but also coverage of public vices like corruption in government and the private sector were handled. Often, this reportage was seen as superficial, biased and serving narrow, instead of the public interest (Mbeke, Okello-Orlale & Ugangu, 2011). The mainstream media are seen as succumbing to political and economic “blackmail and strong-arm pressures” from political forces, as well as what Mbeke, Okello-Orlale and Ugangu (2011, p. 59) called “rogue advertisers”, whose contribution to media house profits enabled them to elude media scrutiny, but also to have their pet interests prioritised and defended in the media coverage. This frustrated both consumers and the rank-and-file journalists in those media houses (King’ori, 2018).

Given the tools at the public’s disposal, and the widening of Web 3.0 options for production and consumption, media practitioners and consumers need not be bound by institutional frameworks and their corporate priorities. As seen in Kenya, the disaffection at

the shortcomings of the institutional media has driven consumers and journalists to explore their own media production spaces, mostly online, where many have turned to news blogging as “an extra space to bring to the reading public events that would not be accepted for publication or broadcast in the mainstream media” (King’ori, 2018, p. 73). Although inclusive in its scope of the range of blogging interests, King’ori’s study is careful to distinguish the category of news blogging as the countermand to conventional news reporting of media houses – even involving the self-generation of content by journalists having their own independent platforms while still practicing in conventional media houses.

“Those bloggers who were still practicing as mainstream journalists thus deployed content to parallel writing spheres: their personal blogs, in which they were the sole gatekeepers, besides the mainstream media spaces where the content that they submitted was subjected to multiple filters of editing and framing, which often would exclude what the journalists had submitted for publication or broadcast (King’ori, 2018,p.73).”

It is a trend likely to deepen and expand in the African media practice. Kenyans – and other Africans – have appropriated new technologies to become part of a globalised media democracy which Banda (2010) correctly judged would be an appropriate “contextualisation of citizen journalism”, in which Africans would:

- Question traditional journalism “in terms of how it represents different sections of the population”;
- Seek to “democratise” conventional media and journalism and “their occupational practices in order to encourage the participation of more and diverse opinions”;
- View “the work practices of the media ...in terms of their relationship to the wider societal processes” (Banda, 2010, p. 7)

The implications of African journalists and their audiences seizing the means and content of media production are vast, and are already visible in media-savvy states across Africa – Kenya being a case in point. Again, Banda was an early and accurate assessor of what this might mean for African journalism when he wrote of

- “a plurality of media platforms, theoretically providing more opportunities for citizens to experiment with citizen-journalistic communication.
- “competition for sources of information”, where “the base of possible sources is likely to be diversified, suggesting that conventional journalism will rely on citizen journalists

for some of its production”. Banda predicted that this might “result in greater use of people hitherto marginalised from mainstream media”.

- “greater opportunity for citizens to own their own media and counter the effects of years of reportorial neglect occasioned by an unhealthy concentration of media ownership.
- “new media outlets set up in far flung areas, such as community radio stations”, leading to the likelihood that “universal access to media by citizens is such that it could fuel interest in localised forms of journalism, including citizen journalism”

(Banda, 2010, p. 8).

Despite McLuhan’s claims suggesting that social structure is determined by the existing medium at the particular time, it appears there are far more important questions than are attributed to him. For McLuhan, what is more important is not the information conveyed by the medium in question, but rather the medium itself and its effects on society (McLuhan, 1964, p. 6).

Methodology

The qualitative methodological approach was adopted for this study, where purposive sampling was employed to select media organisations that have incorporated citizen-generated content. Four media organisations were selected, two from the Global South and the other two from the Global North. The rationale for the kind of sampling employed was to compare the ways in which citizen-generated content is incorporated from the perspective of both worlds-the North and the South. From the Global South, The Standard from Kenya, as well News24 from South Africa, were selected. From the North, The New York Times and iReport for CNN, both from the United States, were selected. In analysing the content, our focus was on how the media houses harness content from readers for use in “the overarching structure” of an established media’s space (Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019, p. 46).

Analysis of the Selected Case Studies

Case Study 1: The Standard (Nairobi, Kenya)

Media houses such as The Standard – Kenya’s oldest media house whose flagship newspaper was established in 1901 (Mbeke, Okello-Orlale, & Ugangu, 2011 ; Obonyo & Peel, 2012) – adapted to new rules of the game that accommodated news content from consumers and other non-staff content generators by inviting contributions to a “Blogs and Opinion” page,

whose contributions are incorporated into website and newspaper editions. Increasingly open to directly submitted contributions from private citizens, The Standard has illustrated an important “sub-organisational bifurcation” between traditional and user-participatory journalism in the news construction process (Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019, p. 45).

Kenyan scholars such as King'ori (2018) and Mumia (2016) suggest that mobile technological devices are now accessible across different demographic groups in countries like Kenya, countermending the view by Wamunyu and Wahutu that equated internet access with privilege and affluence. King'ori's study on news blogging found that respondents in the industry “saw blogging as broadening the media space” in ways that complement “gaps” in the mainstream media's coverage of events (King'ori, 2018, p. 91). An example is The Standard media house's provision of space to bloggers to contribute home-grown perspectives which, while relevant and contemporary representations of local activities and sentiments, might not have made the diary and content of staff writers because of the straight-jacketed nature of newsroom assignments and story placement selections. Mumia, for her part, points to rural-based non-elites contributing to national debates on politics and ethnic conflict, as well as local concerns on cattle rustling and food shortages. One of her “case studies of citizen journalism in Kenya” is Mzalendo.com, a website formed by “a group of young men” in peri-urban Gatundu North constituency, whose content “initiated face-to-face meetings” that “had a huge influence on voting patterns during the Kenyan general elections in 2007” (Mumia, 2016, pp. 1-2). This tends to conflict with suppositions that citizen journalism using new media technologies in Africa are necessarily confined to privileged elites.

Before media outlets like The Standard started incorporating the contributions of bloggers and other non-staff writers, there was a sense that news writing was a privilege of staff accredited and contracted journalists. Wrote King'ori: “Conventional media outlets restricted the flow of information and the type of content according to the restrictive prioritisations of particular media houses and their owners” (King'ori, 2018, p. 91).

But the constraints King'ori referred to continue to be tested, as user-generated content becomes part of the ingredients of the daily news fare. Indeed, Mumia's 2016 study points to

“...a phenomenon witnessed on Kenyan media channels...where contributors use SMS, Twitter, blogs and WhatsApp to send comments, stories, still pictures and even videos. The “Road hog” segment on Citizen TV's Sunday Night Live is one such example of active citizen participation in the naming and shaming of abusers of traffic regulations [across Kenya's urban and rural road

network]. Such active participation aimed at challenging drivers breaking the traffic rules tends to bring social change both [of] the road user (drivers) and the public in holding others accountable. Social sites such as mzalendo.com and ushahidi.com are also examples of the influence of citizen journalism in Kenya (Mumia, 2016, p.1).”

It now seems that established media titles, not just in Kenya and Africa, but in the Global North as well (see the examples of the New York Times and CNN below), have cottoned on to the democratising realities of the technological revolution that Banda (2010) and others referred to. For instance, much as technological advancements have compelled societies to adapt, it was improbable that the media would for long demur from content produced by media technologies in the hands of readers. In that view, the aphorism of technological determinism, considered spent by social determinist scholars, may find renewed relevance.

Case Study 2: News24 (South Africa)

News24 is a Cape Town-based online news platform which segments its website according to its domestic, regional and global news focus, while situating itself as “Southern Africa and Africa’s premier online news source” (News24, 2009). With a wide field of interests and story genres catering for a mix of audiences, the platform encourages audio-visual and manuscript contributions of live events, reviews and commentaries that are topical. Many of the contributions to the platform’s video section are captured and submitted by bystanders and include armed robberies, street protests, public scuffles, arrests of suspects, police misconduct, and even the extraction of deadly snakes from homes or business. Most of these are spur-of-the-moment encounters whose recording would have been missed by summoned journalists, and would not exist as live content, were it not for the smartphone technology that allows anybody to record an event of interest.

The human interest video clips contributed to News24 by citizen journalists are an example of the unanticipated or unimagined consequences of new media technologies in the 21st century, where smartphones designed to give the owner audio-visual recording abilities for domestic purposes have spawned newsgathering and dissemination that enriches the content of platforms such as News24. The videos are of the fly-on-the-wall type, with what Le Vay (2019, p.218) calls “the use of a hand-held camera ‘zooming around’”. Barring alarmed exclamations from bystanders watching a scuffle for instance, or the comments of a trained snake-catcher, called out to a home or restaurant, as he gingerly extracts a three-metre cobra or

black mamba from an opening in the ceiling above his head, the video clips are often without voice-over commentary.

These real-life instances of recordings submitted to News24 are impactful for their “raw” footage (Stockinger, 2013, p. 27) that is unmediated by the conventional television anchor’s comments. In traditional journalism, commentary was considered imperative as a guide to the viewers, but in the video clips submitted by users to News 24 and other citizen journalism outlets, the action is left uninterrupted. The conventional journalist “is no longer the gatekeeper over what the public knows” (Fletcher, 2014, p. 46). Viewers will make of the audio-visual clip what they will. This is what McLuhan might have defined as “the change of scale or pace or pattern” introduced by a technological innovation (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8).

In the section that follows, we further explore other examples of the incorporation of user generated content and adjustment to the realities of new technologies, at this point from a Western perspective.

Case Study 3: The New York Times (The United States)

In 2009, the *New York Times* skirted around its reservations towards “the dangers of having inexperienced non-journalists doing reporting” when it launched “five test ‘citizen journalism’ sites... focusing on two New York City neighborhoods – Clinton Hill and Fort Greene, both in Brooklyn – and three New Jersey neighborhoods – Maplewood, South Orange, and Millburn”. The response from local bloggers was close to one of outrage.

“Interesting that the Times jumps on the “citizen journalism” trend (instead of, say, initiating it) — the article acknowledges it as a “growing world” — and yet disses the sites that already exist; sites which have managed to communicate, gain readers and attention, without the Times’ imprimatur” (Washington Square Park Blog, 2009).

The scathing critique suggests that the *New York Times* first scorned the existing manifestations of online citizen media, before assimilating the trend into its own corporate structure by establishing localised sites for neighbourhoods to report their own news. Responses in the readers’ comments of the Washington Square Park blog were similarly uncomplimentary, one of which said:

“I took offense to the Times doing this. By jumping on the bandwagon, they are trying to strongarm and sideline the very blogs they are now trying to capitalise on.” (Washington Square Park Blog, 2009).

The initiative by the New York Times was an example of the established media outlets testing the waters of user generated content – not liking it, but feeling the pressure to incorporate participatory audience involvement. Like Wamunyu and Wahutu averred,

“...the hesitance to accept (user generated content) as a legitimate source of news highlights the fact that the organisation was keen on protecting the boundaries for what it considered journalism...Moreover, this reticence, coupled with the use of social media, highlights the way in which the field, through its overarching structure, normalises innovations such as social media and user generated content” (Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019, p.46).

Today, the Times is openly courting contributions from a wider spread of its readership, but the institutional control effected through editorial gatekeeping remains. This has not effaced the fact that technology and its social use has forced upon major news titles a shift to a recognition of user-generated content. What has noticeably emerged from the experiments by established titles like the Times is described by Albeanu (2019) as “rebuilding journalism together” by providing “a feedback loop with our readers”, and by Munteanu (2011, p. 428) as “the beneficial effects of media in the process of building a virtual reality...increasing human solidarity and social force, rebuilding the social networks and communities or public spaces, feelings of great intensity, the strengthening of collective memory, regular updating of the members of society, acceptance of change, aesthetic education, consumer awareness in decision making, etc.”

The quest by major media houses to domesticate perennial and pervasive social media platforms and their user-generated content brings about the ongoing “hybridisation” of newsrooms and their operations that Wamunyu and Wahutu (2019) describe, and underlines the inevitability of these adjustments as products of technological changes. It highlights that in response to technological developments, technological and societal institutions – the traditional media houses included – adapt themselves in order to integrate the new technologies. If technological developments influence how institutions progress, what power does this give to those who drive technological development? If the technological revolution compels societies to adapt to their presence, then modern technologies are surely controlling the human path – even if, as with the conventional media, there has been the initial resistance, and a stress on maintaining what the mainstream media “perceive as normative approaches to journalism” (Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019, p. 47).

Case Study 4: Ireport For CNN (The United States)

The hybridisation of news gathering and reporting procedures in response to the technological revolution is not a once-off implementation, as the Cable News Network (CNN) has found with iREPORT, its bridge with user generated content and social media actors which was first established in 2005. In a 2015 online report that quoted CNN's head of social media, Samantha Barry, the US-headquartered network was reported to be rethinking its 10-year-old strategy of collaborating with citizen journalists to reflect "the impact that social media platforms have had on how news organisations find stories" (Bilton, 2015). The report by Bilton, entitled "Defeated by social media, CNN overhauls iREPORT", states that the evolution of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter into source material of eyewitness accounts, but also the first public pronouncements by public figures, had "forced" CNN into "a new version" of iREPORT that sourced stories directly from social media "via the #CNN iReport hashtag" (Bilton, 2015).

Discussion

Evolving Media Technologies Transforming The Journalistic Practice

In spotlighting McLuhan's focus on the medium's importance, it is not the content, or how the innovation is used, but how that innovation transforms the dynamics of content generation in favour of ordinary users, that is of primary interest. Winner argues that "the construction of a technical system that involves human beings as operating parts brings a reconstruction of roles and relationships" (1986, p.10). Likewise, media technologies have allowed many citizens, more especially the previously marginalised members of the African society, to engage in journalistic activities. The nature of the technological innovations have made it possible for open-ended communicative opportunities, but the society still determines the terms under which such opportunities become a significant site for communicative power (Banda, 2010, p.36). This study has illustrated the emergence of these communicative opportunities. The structural changes initiated by the internet in the media system cannot be ignored. The creation, reproduction, storage, diffusion and the reception of media messages has been transformed by the internet and media technologies. The communication process has become personalised, while the interactive nature of the medium has blurred the producer-receiver role, in as much as it has reduced the social space amongst communicators. Commenting on the flexibility of the changing roles between media producers and consumers on the internet, Singer (2009) notes:

“Message producers and message consumers are interchangeable and inextricably linked. You may be a producer one minute, a consumer the next – or if you’re a good multi-tasker, both simultaneously. Moreover, you are always connected to others who also are occupying both roles.” (p. 62).

In the postmodern era, citizen participation and interaction have become the heartbeat of a new form of public communication, which has become a complex network of information. The environment has become one with communicators who have assumed the role of citizens of the network, all contributing to it, “because in a networked world, there no longer is the ‘journalist’, ‘audience’, and ‘source’. There is only ‘us’” (Singer, 2009, p.75). To say the least, journalism has been shaken out of its conventional complacency, while news processes have become more receptive to their active, empowered and engaged audiences (Bird, 2009). In short, a new type of journalism has emerged, thereby collapsing the traditional gate-keeping and agenda setting roles of conventional journalism. Commenting on the new ways of journalistic processes on the internet, Fenton argues that “this new journalism is open to novices, lacks editorial control, can stem from anywhere (not just the newsroom), involves new writing techniques, functions in a network with fragmented audiences, is delivered at great speed, and is open and iterative” (Fenton, 2010, p. 6). This is surely evident on all social media platforms.

New Media Technologies, Journalism And New Identities

This paper has reiterated how the practice of journalism – traditionally in the grip of political and economic authoritarianism (White & Mabweazara, 2018) – is being transformed by the modern technological advances, with the new dimension presenting opportunities for local citizens with no journalistic experience to contribute to the news process. The citizen reporters are taking advantage of the ubiquitous nature of technology to partake in the news process. This has invited academic inquiry into how the modern technologies are influencing the journalistic practice. For journalism, these developments indicate that “[w]e are at the beginning of a Golden Age of journalism”, where ordinary citizens without journalism training are contributing news to the mainstream media and therefore, the public debate (Papandrea, 2007, p. 590). The developments also indicate how the privilege of the professional journalist has been extended to everyone who can contribute news to public platforms, thus blurring the line between the mainstream media and the citizen journalist.

On the other hand, the mainstream media have been forced to accommodate citizen journalists, as evidenced by how they are tapping especially into their social media presence and incorporating those manifestations into the conventional media brands (Bilton, 2015; Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019). We have seen evidence of some of the adjustments that major media houses in Africa and abroad, have made, but practitioners are still unsure where these developments are leading to. Some perceive citizen participation as a kind of conflict between ordinary citizens advocating for freedom of expression, and the traditional journalists striving to maintain the authenticity of “the field” (Obalanlege, 2015; Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019).

Relaying the Nigerian experience, Obalanlege argued that citizen journalism would continue to appropriate the traditional role of the mainstream journalists, for as long as ordinary citizens continue to have access to new technologies. Wamunyu and Wahutu (2019) made a more cautious assessment where they saw the appropriating influence in reverse: the mainstream media houses adopting and adapting content that technology-savvy citizens submit. The evidence from our case studies indicates both trends- News 24 in South Africa and The Standard in Kenya have a growing component of citizen contributions whose avant garde writing significantly complements the output of conventional journalists. But the New York Times and CNN, as well as the unidentified media house in Wamunyu and Wahutu’s (2019) study, among others, point to a more aggressive cultivation of user contributions to fit an existing mould of newsroom journalism. What is clear in either case is the adjustment that the new technological capacities have wrought on both the active audiences and on media houses – thereby supporting the theory of technological determinism.

The descriptions above resonate with how new technologies have influenced journalism in Zimbabwe. Against the backdrop of media repression, new technologies have empowered Zimbabwean news disseminators and sources to evade punitive government measures (Peel, 2015). The internet has afforded Zimbabwean citizens opportunities to not only access news, but also contribute to the news process from anywhere, such that citizens abroad can publish content through online channels available to Zimbabwean audiences, without fear of censorship and retribution from the Zimbabwean government (Peel, 2010; 2015). The situation described here is common to many African countries.

In Kenya, social media became the key sources of information when the government suspended the live publication of results of the disputed 2007 elections and likewise, when the government suppressed the mainstream media’s coverage of the bloody aftermath of those

elections (Moyo, 2019). Likewise, in war-racked Somalia, websites from within the country and abroad risk the complexities of political and clan loyalties and the perennial threat of terrorist attacks inside Somalia by attempting to offer independent perspectives. Unyoked from the expectations of the internationally recognised government in Mogadishu, the powerful Al Shabaab movement which holds sway in many parts of the country (including parts of Mogadishu), and other armed factions that have influence in the country's unstable environment, the most numerous category of Somali blogs and websites are "community/political websites...with the majority being named after a geographic area" (Issa-Salwe & Olden, 2008, p. 570). The authors underline the importance of the community websites to the constituencies that they serve by quoting the Somali proverb, Warbaa ugu gaaja wayn – Information hunger is the worst hunger (Issa-Salwe & Olden, 2008, p.570).

In view of the above, African journalists, seemingly, are alive to changes in news gathering affordances that capitalise on the emerging technologies. Some may not have fully embraced the new possibilities and challenges (Deuze, 2008) and are guarding against a perceived threat to their professional relevance. And yet their own employers have absorbed or tapped into the work of citizen journalists, creating new hybrids of conventional journalistic products (Deuze, 2008; Wamunyu & Wahutu, 2019).

Recommendations

In the face of the above discussion, perhaps the big question becomes: who is the journalist of the future? One thing for sure is that we are experiencing a reconceptualisation of the journalistic process, globally. This will therefore require journalists to re-invent themselves by adapting to the technologies. Professional journalists need to change their attitudes towards those citizens who are constructing communities of practice through citizen journalism, and acknowledge the fact that ordinary citizens are enormously influential in consuming and shaping the process. Failure to appreciate this transformation could see journalists fading into irrelevance. The future journalist therefore ought to be techno-savvy, considering how the news media are becoming more and more digital-centric.

Concluding reflections

The evidence shows how new media technologies not only introduce a raft of communicative opportunities, but also problems. Most prominent among the opportunities are the openings for ordinary citizens to contribute news to the public domain without the

gatekeeping and agenda setting roles of the traditional journalists and their media houses. In this, the Internet has been remarkable in facilitating small group communities, from which publics and public opinions are formed. Their common interests are served through a communication channel that they own and produce.

On the other hand, we saw how after an initial reticence, conventional media houses like CNN, New York Times, Kenya's Standard, and South Africa's News24 – among others reviewed – undertook strategic transitions to embrace user generated news content, after accepting that the ground had shifted, with new media technologies empowering user choices over traditional gatekeeping, agenda-setting and opinion leading roles. Thus, the challenge at hand is to acknowledge the burgeoning of citizen-led platforms and to cultivate alternative ways of stimulating user generated content (Banda, 2010). The same media technologies have been criticised for undermining the journalism profession.

This paper has described how conventional journalism navigated the evolving technological influences. In this regard, McLuhan would have described a man whose central nervous system was “extended and projected”. He called this extension “outered” by the “profound organic character of new electronic technology” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 269). The nomenclature of “outering” as it relates to contemporary journalistic acts of citizen journalism and blogging, more especially in the African context, is best explained by Federman who argued that blogging “outers”, or makes public, the private mind. From this perspective, a digital personality interacts with others in the virtual community without the traditional barriers that institutions would often navigate. The “pull” factor of conventional media institutions has been tempered by the digital sphere's “decentralising” effects which moved “citizens into the realm of journalism, participating and contributing to the world of ‘journalism’ alongside professional journalists... citizen and professional journalists as coexisting and complementing each other... an example where there's cross-over; either citizen or pro can publish... and either's work can be of value to the public” (Federman, 2003).

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