NEW MEDIA: A REVIEW OF SOME TRENDS IN JOURNALISM TRAINING IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The growth of the Internet and World Wide Web has brought about newest medium for journalism, otherwise called online or cyber journalism. This development has engendered inevitable revolutions in both the practice and training of journalism. This development, for instance, has brought about certain phenomena which include Convergence. For instance, newspaper websites now include video, podcasts, blogs and slideshows. These developments have triggered up new challenges for the journalist who must be well acquainted with the new media, and for the journalism teachers and schools who must be up-to-date in knowledge, resources and facilities. This new development has also challenged the corpus of mass communication theories, to the extent that some sorts of reviews have been attempted. This paper considers the foregoing, and specifically examines how the digital developments have impacted on both the formal and informal training of journalism. The paper observes that while many journalism schools in Africa are yet to grasp the full import of the new phenomena, a certain few are doing pretty well. The paper also acknowledges the informal training in ICT Journalism being provided on platforms such as Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies' annual Highway Africa Conference, Panos Institute West Africa, International Institute for ICT Journalism (PenPlusbytes) et.c. The paper concludes with a call for a review of curriculum in most of journalism schools, a re-training of journalism teachers through informal platforms, adequate provision of infrastructures to enhance teaching in New Media, and a consideration of new business model for Journalism, in view of the new developments.

Keywords: New Media, Journalism, Convergence, Internet, Development

INTRODUCTION

The profession of journalism has undergone rapid changes due to the continuous development of new communication technologies. The new technologies have changed the face of production and dissemination of information in general. The most important one is that television and the other older media are being challenged by new media technologies offering an expanded range of information and entertainment services. Dizard, Jr. (1997: 3) agrees that the older media will be around for a long time, but will

be different. He notes that the winds of change have swept away the comfortable assumptions that guided their operations in the past. According to him, the media have a new agenda: who will compete with what   products for which audiences in a more complex marketplace? There will be many winners and losers in the industry shakeout now taking place (Dizard, Jr. 1997: 3).

This present paper shall be looking at the challenges brought about by the new media, while also reviewing how Journalism education, particularly in Africa, has been reacting to the challenges.

The ICTs

ICTs, according to Tiamiyu (2003:35), "are the electronic technologies for creating, acquiring, storing, processing, communicating and using information". Tiamiyu classifies ICTs along two dimensions: (i) *content-conduit* dimension, and (ii) *service-product* dimension.

According to him, content-oriented ICTs emphasise the digital creation and publishing of information content (e.g. database products, electronic books, web-sites). Conduit-oriented ICTs provide the channels or media for the storing, conveying or transmitting of information content (e.g. the telephone network). Product-oriented ICTs are physical objects for information processing or transmission equipment (e.g. computers, cellular phones, TV transmitters, etc). ICT products are usually combined and networked to form ICT infrastructure or systems. Service-oriented ICT emphasise the provision of information services like bulletin board services, radio broadcast services, online searching, etc through the information infrastructure or systems (Tiamiyu, 2003:36).

ICTs usually differ in the extent to which they either emphasise the creation of information content (messages) or serve as conduit for the transfer of content, and simultaneously also in the extent to which they might be physical products or intangible services. ICTs usually differ in the extent to which they either emphasise the creation of information content (messages) or serve as conduit for the transfer of content, and simultaneously also in the extent to which they might be physical products or intangible services. ICTs range from computing and telecommunications equipment, products or infrastructure to personalised (narrowcasting) or mass (broadcasting) applications of the infrastructure or products to create, modify or transmit content (Tiamiyu, 2003:36-37).

The most overwhelming of the ICTs is the Internet, which is a global network of interconnected computers that communicate freely and share and exchange information (Baran, 2002:68). Hunter (1998) notes that over the course of its history, the net has developed many communications media meant to foster conversation and collaboration. The Internet's conversation media fall into two broad categories: (i) the asynchronous media, such as electronic mail, Usenet, Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), and Web Boards, all of which allow for delayed textual conversation; (ii) synchronous media like Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), both of which allow for real time textual conversation. Both forms of communication fall under the broad category of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

McQuail (2000:118) notes that the most fundamental aspect of information and communication technology (ICT) is probably the fact of digitalisation, which he describes as the process by which all texts (symbolic meaning in all encoded and recorded forms) can be reduced to a binary code and can share the same process of production, distribution and storage. Recognising that digitalisation (and convergence) might have far-reaching revolutionary consequences, McQuail, yet, notes that for now, the 'new electronic media' can be viewed as an addition to the existing spectrum rather than as a replacement. He, also, notes:

> As we have seen, many different forms of mass media have so far survived, retained their separate identity and even flourished. The general institution of mass media has also survived as a distinct element of public social life (McQuail 2000: 118).

Benefits of the New Technologies to Journalism

The new technologies have enhanced the gathering of information. With mobile phones, reporters can easily contact news sources and conduct interviews with them without having to travel distances, and disrupt the contact's schedule. They can also easily contact their offices to file in stories from wherever they are with the use of cell phones. The digital cameras are also useful because they are handy and portable. Thus, journalists can always have them to use once they see any newsworthy event/object that they can record. Unlike what happens with manual cameras, images taken with digital cameras can easily be printed. The same thing happens to videography. With camcorders, video recording of happenings can be taken without much ado.

With the Internet, sourcing of information on various issues and subject-matters has become pretty easy for journalists. With the various search engines, information is at the finger-tips of journalists. To get his information to the newsroom is also no longer a problem. With the availability of various miniature computers – laptops, palmtops et.c. – the reporter can easily encode his messages wherever he is. And, with the availability of the internet, these reports, within a twinkling of an eye, will reach the newsroom. It is not only the story (report) that will go, the photographs taken with the digital camera will also be uploaded to the e-mail and will be sent along. Video clips can similarly be sent from the field to media houses via the internet.

Really, media products now are better than what they used to be pre-digitalisation. Newspaper and magazine prints and photographs now come out neater, sharper and more colourful. The same goes for sound and pictures of broadcast productions as they are now clearer and brighter. Television viewers with High Definition, LCD and plasma television sets also see better quality television transmission. Now, television broadcasting is moving from analogue to digital in what is called Digital Terrestrial Transmission (DTT).

The new technologies have also made it possible for media to have wider reach. The satellite technology has made broadcasting across nations and continents possible. We now have global media like CNN, BBC and the likes. Newspapers have also gone on the cyberspace as their contents are also now read online, and accessible anywhere in the world the internet is available. The net also has space for independent news media. These

online media have become minefield of information for traditional newspapers as they sometimes break news which the traditional media later feed on (Kperogi, 2008). For Nigeria, such online newspapers include Times of Nigeria, SaharaReporters, Elendureports while there are also internet portals like Nigerianvillagesquare.com, Gamji.com, Naijacommunity.com, Nigeriaworld.com, BiafraNigeria.com, Lagosforum.com, Kwenu.com, Arewa-online.com et.c (Kperogi, 2008: 74; Nworah, 2005). They are also a veritable source of information for Nigerians at home and abroad.

Online editions of newspapers have become veritable sources of information anywhere one may be on the planet, provided there is internet connectivity. These online newspapers also come with the advantage of interactivity, making communication a robust encounter between the media and their consumers. Similarly, radio and television broadcasts have defied geographical and spectrum limitation with the phenomenon of webcasting, that is the process of disseminating broadcast content on the Internet.

Challenges of the New Media to Journalism

Although the Internet has brought forth an unprecedented flowering of news and information, it has also destabilized the old business models that have supported quality journalism for decades (Mohammed, 2016). In the technologically advanced world of the United States of America, good journalists are losing their jobs, while all over the world, journalists have had to adjust to a radically new news environment online. The internet has been responsible for the death of many well-known print journalism institutions. The print-based model for raising advertising revenue to support a large, independent journalism organisation is outmoded. Bloggers have taken over the cyberspace, making a lot of money by blasting opinions (as opposed to facts) across the space. As bloggers have increased in number, the number of journalists, in the US, for instance, has significantly decreased. Some bloggers are making as much as $200, 000 per year and many of them are doing so by shilling for companies or selling consumer goods (Erbe, 2009).

Really, the traditional media are facing a lot of challenges with the upsurge of the new media. American newspapers like *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* have concurred that newspapers as we have known them are disintegrating and are possibly on the verge of extinction. The internet has been regarded as a major culprit in all this for luring away advertisers and readers. The American great regional dailies--the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune,* the *Philadelphia Inquirer*--are in bankruptcy. *Rocky Mountain News* has closed down, ending daily newspaper competition in Denver city. The owners of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reportedly losing $1 million a week, have threatened to fold the business, leaving a major city without a major daily newspaper. Big dailies in Seattle (the *Times*), Chicago (the *Sun-Times*) and Newark (the *Star-Ledger*) are reportedly near the point of folding, and smaller dailies like the *Baltimore Examiner* have already closed. The 109-year-old *Christian Science Monitor*, in recent years an essential source of international news and analysis, has folded its daily print edition. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* has scuttled its print edition and downsized

from a news staff of 165 to about twenty for its online-only incarnation. Whole newspaper chains - such as Lee Enterprises, the owner of large and medium-size publications that have, for decades, defined debates in Montana, Iowa and Wisconsin - are struggling as the value of stock shares falls below the price of a single daily paper. And the *New York Times* needed an emergency injection of hundreds of millions of dollars by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim in order to stay afloat (Nichols and McChesney, 2009). Many of the other newspapers are closing down certain of their bureaus in order to cut cost.

It is however not just newspapers that are in distress, the institution of journalism itself is under heavy assault. Journalism is missing from most radio and television outputs. As already said, the cyberspace has been taken over by bloggers, feeding readers with opinions, rather than news; and with half-truths or outright falsehood rather than the whole truth. Many of the blogs are just platforms for political propaganda and campaigns, as well as economic interests. In order to survive, many traditional media outlets are sacrificing good journalism for corporate journalism, turning front news page to advertisement page.

While we do not totally disparage online journalism – because we recognize there are genuine efforts to promote original journalism online – we yet believe that every serious journalist involved in online project will agree that this has an implication for news gathering and reporting, especially at the local level. In a 2008 study conducted by journalist Tyler Marshall and the Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism, the Internet is discovered to be posing a challenge to newsroom managers. Forty-eight per cent of those surveyed say the tension between the speed, depth and interactivity of the Web compared to the reduction in journalistic standards and accuracy is a concern (Pew, 2008). Newspaper websites are regarded as, increasingly a source of hope but also of fear. Editors are torn between the advantages the web offers and the energy it consumes to produce material often of limited or even questionable value. Yet, some other editors think the technology has a lot to offer journalism.

Again, in the United States, for instance, the new technology has shrunk the newspaper, not only in terms of staff strength, but also in terms of number of pages and stories published. The Pew Research Centre's study notes:

> There are fewer pages, shorter stories, and notably fewer editors checking copy for errors. Most topics, not just foreign and national news, are getting lesser space and resources and are considered less important than three years ago. Stand alone business sections are disappearing (Pew, 2008: http:journalism.org/node/11961).

Which way out?

Acknowledging that the old model of journalism business can no longer work in this dispensation, there has been a flurry of proposals to address the concern. These range from schemes to further consolidate news gathering at the local level to pleas for donations from news consumers and hopes that hard-pressed philanthropists and foundations will decide to go into the news business. And they range from ineffectual to improbable to undesirable. There have also been proposals that newspapers come up with a plan to charge readers "micropayments" for online content. A number of newspapers are already doing this. *The Punch* of Nigeria, a couple of years ago, required that its online readers register with a sum of 1, 500 Naira (about US$5) each for them to have access to its contents. *The Punch* also started selling recharge cards for its mobile service. Some analysts have seen all these measures as schemes to get information seekers to voluntarily donate for the survival and smooth running of newspaper businesses. The columnist at www.editorandpublisher.com has likened this to offerings and donations voluntarily given by Christians to their churches (Outing, 2009). The columnist writes:

> So for a voluntary online content fee system to work, the news industry must apply similar persuasive techniques. If religious people value their churches enough to give regularly and significantly, I see no reason why we can't get citizens who care about staying informed to voluntarily support the news gathering industry when they come to understand that advertising alone can no longer sustain newspapers and their websites, and other forms of news outlets (Outing, 2009: http://steveouting.com/2009/02/19/can-newspapers-be-like-mega-churches/).

Yet, there is also a view that "even if such a system were practically possible, the last thing we should do is erect electronic walls that block the openness and democratic genius of the Internet" (Nichols and McChesney, 2009). The point being made here is that the system of pay for access will further diminish the public sphere potential of the internet, and make the traditional newspaper no longer a public sphere (Salawu, 2007; Hunter, 1998). *The Punch*'s measures did not work as it apparently received little or no subscribers. So, the whole idea fizzled out.

Revolution in Journalism Scholarship and Training

For sometimes now, Media and Communication Scholars have been interested in the applicability of extant (mass) communication theories to the new medium. As new communication technologies are developed, researchers seem to use the patterns of research established for existing technologies to explain the uses and effects of the new media (Morris and Ogan, 1996: 44). For instance, research in group communication has

been used to examine the group uses of e-mail networks (Sproul and Kiesler, 1991). Really, communication scholars are increasingly interested in online audiences because of the make-up of the newer media forms. New media supports interactivity, which significantly supports the core Uses and Gratifications notion of active users (Ruggiero, 2000).   Likewise, there had been studies into how concepts of status, decision-making quality, social presence, social control, and group norms have been affected by a technology that permitted certain changes in group communication (Morris and Ogan, 1996: 44). The fact is researches in communication phenomena have always been updated with the arrival of new technologies.

Whereas some concepts in media and communications studies have undergone some kind of review with the advent of the new media, some others still remain very much in the original shape. An important concept that has had to be reviewed with the advent of the new media is the *mass*. Morris and Ogan write:

> Because a collection of communication services – electronic bulletin boards, Usenet groups, E-mail, Internet Relay Chats, home pages, gophers, and so forth – comprise the Internet, the concept of the critical mass on the Internet could be looked upon as a variable, rather than a fixed percentage … . Fewer people are required for sustaining an Internet Relay Chat conference or a Multi-User Dungeon than may be required for an electronic bulletin board or another type of discussion group. … a relatively large number of E-mail users are required for any two people to engage in conversation, yet only those two people constitute the critical mass for any given conversation (Morris and Ogan, 1996: 45).

The new technology provides the opportunity for the provision of personalized newspaper, do we also call that a mass medium? These are some of the issues the new media have sprung up in the discussion about the concept of *mass*. And, I sincerely think this is one of the reasons the nomenclature of *mass communication* for our discipline is no longer fashionable, except in a few old-fashioned universities in the United States, and in some countries like Nigeria. Importantly, Dizard, Jr. (1997:5) notes that the Internet is a major factor in redefining the meaning of *mass media*, pointing out that the contest for a more descriptive name has already started.

However, as already said, a good number of our theories and concepts have remained untainted even with the advent of the new media. One such concept is Interactivity. The concept used to be regarded as a natural attribute of interpersonal communication, but now it has been more applied to all new media, from two-way cable to the Internet (Rafaeli, 1988). For instance, the translation for Radio in my language is 'medium-that-speaks-without-receiving-feedback'. But with the technology of telephone, especially the cell phone, the Radio now receives feedback, meaning it is now highly interactive.

Networking is another concept that is no longer only applicable to interpersonal communication again. In fact, researchers have been approaching the new

communication technologies through network analysis, to better address the issue of social influence. Importantly, the old concepts of senders and receivers are inappropriate to the study of the Internet (Morris and Ogan, 1996). The Berlo's linear model of Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (Berlo, 1960) is not applicable to the study of the new media because of its (new media) essential interactivity and interchangeability of roles between 'producers' and 'receivers' of messages (the interlocutors). Some other models like Newcomb's, Osgood's, Westley-Maclean's and Schramm's (See Severin and Tankard, Jr. 1992: 45 - 50) are still relevant to the new media.

Essentially, the alluring traits of new media have spurred new research interests. Lagerkvist (2009: 3) notes that over the past decade, the term 'new media' has gained a wider currency, resulting in stacks of new publications, including new journals. Communication and Media Schools are already appreciating the need for a systematic study of the New Media. A number of chairs in New Media have been endowed in a number of universities in America and Europe. And, nowadays, it is not unusual to find Communication/Media departments in America and Europe advertising to recruit lecturers with specialisation in the new media. In Africa, only the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa is known to have such a chair, that is the MTN Chair of Media and Mobile Communication. Again, Internet Studies has become a major area of Media/Communication scholarship in America and Europe. Rhodes University is paying serious attention to the study of new media with a number of courses in the area in its curriculum. Its New Media module focuses on planning and implementing new media platforms, content management systems, multimedia journalism tools, and online publishing environments. Its Design module has attention for web design, while its Photojournalism also has consideration for digital editing. The Design module also introduces students to software packages like Adobe Acrobat, and Professional and Adobe Photoshop. Some other South African universities where Journalism is given considerable attention also give varying levels of attention to the study of the New Media. University of South Africa (Unisa) has a specialisation in Telecommunications in its Communication Science programme.

In Nigeria, efforts of the University of Lagos at teaching digital media received some boost when the World Bank donated a multimedia centre to its mass communication department. This was a great impetus as relevant courses/modules in digital media were also incorporated into the curriculum.

The news industry is seriously desirous of graduates who can help steer it through the emergency brought upon it by the new media phenomenon. Journalism training now requires multiskilling in this age of convergence. As traditional journalists are losing jobs in the US, there is an increase in the opportunities opened to content moderators, multimedia producers and web editors. We should be able to make a distinction between training the people whom the news industry *wants*, and training those whom news industry *needs*. Already, people are querying the need for anybody to do a journalism degree when he will come out not being conformable with the industry. One view is that majority of journalism graduates are outdated while their schools are obsolete. The desire is that journalism graduates of today should have the choice between having their own

website and joining a news organisation, which gives them a stronger bargaining position and hopefully better salaries (Online Journalism Blog, 2008).

There is also a view that entrepreneurial and business skills should be taught. This would give journalists the opportunity to build and manage business, and even be enterprising working for organisations. In Nigeria, Entrepreneurial Development is already a General Studies requirement stipulated by the NUC. However, journalism schools should teach it in direct application to media business.

As it is now, journalism schools need to reinvent themselves in response to the new media phenomenon. To start with, lecturers need to be given opportunity to get exposed to the practices in the new media. Most lecturers had been trained on the traditional mass media. Now is the time to reinvent them through refresher courses and informal trainings. Journalists also need to get themselves equipped for the opportunities, not challenges, offered by the new media.

A number of organisations have been making various efforts to offer training in new media practices to working journalists at informal levels. Such organisations in Africa include the School of Journalism and Media Studies at the Rhodes University, South Africa, which for the past twenty-one years, through the platform of its annual Highway Africa Conference, has been training journalists all over Africa in the new media. There is also the Dakar-based Panos Institute West Africa (PIWA), which through its ICT programme (Uses and Policies of Digital Technology) has been training ICT journalists in West Africa. Again, there is Penplusbytes – International Institute for ICTs Journalism. This Accra-based organisation started on July 18, 2001. It seeks to empower the media through the use of ICTs to advance the work of journalism. It consists of a network of media organisations and journalists interested in using ICTs effectively to advance journalism. Penplusbytes has offered series of training in Online Journalism and Convergence, Web 2.0 for Journalists, Writing and Editing for the Web, New Media Leadership and Management Strategies, Multimedia Production for the Newsroom et.c. It works in conjunction with the African University College of Communication, also based in Accra, Ghana; and the only university of its kind in Africa.   The first two mentioned organisations offer their trainings free of charge, all expenses paid, while Penplusbytes charges some fees. The Rhodes School of Journalism hosts the Highway Africa Conference in conjunction with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC); and they are supported by a number of organisations including the South African Department (Ministry) of Communications, ABSA, MultiChoice, Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NIZA), MTN, Telkom, Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung, PIWA and Open Society Initiatives (of West Africa and Southern Africa) et.c. PIWA usually partners with the Dakar-based Open Society Initiative of West Africa (OSIWA) and the Centre for Information Science and Technology (CESTI) at the Cheik Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal.

I had on occasions advocated for inclusion of journalism lecturers in the training provided at the Highway Africa with the argument that a teacher trained would reproduce him/herself in many of his/her students. I, for instance, had been a participant and a

speaker in two editions of the Conference. However, journalism schools would need to do more to help themselves. There should be, first and foremost, the inclusion of ICT journalism courses in the curriculum. If there are no competent hands to handle the courses, New Media experts could be engaged, even if on part-time basis, to give the training. For the trainings to be as practical as they should be, necessary facilities and infrastructures should be put in place. Specifically, our journalism schools should have well-equipped new media laboratories. Only very few journalism schools across the continent can lay claim to new media labs.

At this stage, students and their schools should not just be made to underwrite these trainings. The news industry should bear some responsibility as it is the final consumer of the products from the schools. Corporate organisations should see this as a responsibility to the society. The case of the Rhodes Highway Africa is a classical example of what can be achieved when corporate organisations are made to come into partnerships in this kind of venture.

CONCLUSION

Despite the shock that has been experienced by news organisations, partly because of the new media phenomenon, there is still the conviction that the Internet could help journalism to be better than before. The new, young, tech-savvy staff members are infusing the newsrooms with a competitive energy. There is also the admittance that news products are better today than it was a couple of years ago (Pew, 2008). The benefits of the new technologies would, however, only rub off on news organisations and journalism graduates that are prepared for it. The Pew Research Centre's study reveals that overall, newsroom executives say they feel broadly unprepared for the changes sweeping over them and seem uncertain where the changes would lead. The Virginian-Pilot editor, Denis Finley was quoted thus:

> I feel I'm being catapulted into another world, a world I don't really understand. It's scary because things are happening at the speed of light. The sheer speed (of change) has outstripped our ability to understand it all (Pew, 2008: http://journalism.org/node/11961).

The only organisation and individual who will not be perplexed in this scenario is one who has adequate grasp of the import of the new media. While the news organisations struggle not to run out of business by moving along with the current practice and model of business, journalism schools also need to overhaul their training orientation for their products to be in line with the demands and dictates of the time; and for them to also remain relevant citadels of learning assured of subscriptions. The shocking impact of the new media on traditional media industry in Africa may not have been as overwhelming as it has been in, for instance, the United States due to varying levels of digitalisation, what is however certain is that the reverberating effect of it will soon come to be palpable on the continent.

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