Internet and Journalism Development in Nigeria: Benefits and Pitfalls

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Abstract

Since 1956 when Licklider, an American psychologist foresaw home computer consoles and television sets being connected to a nation-wide network that has the capacity to effectively receive, transmit and store information in virtually every subject matter, the communication world has continued on the path of technological advancements. Enthused by Joseph Licklider's vision, scientists went into research, and the result of their research is the development of what we know today as the Internet. With the advent of the internet, the human tribe truly became one family in which man's consciousness has been liberated from the shackles of mechanical culture, thus enabling him to roam the cosmos. The internet which is a global network of interconnected computers that enables man to freely communicate, share and exchange information has become such an important phenomenon in contemporary journalism. As a cardinal tool of communication which has transformed the journalism industry, there is a need to take a critical look at it with a view to identifying its merits and demerits. In doing that, the study relied on the technological determinism theory. It equally adopted the discourse analysis method of research to review secondary data on the subject matter. The study identified among other things, flexibility in editing as a major benefit, and gap between speed and accuracy as a major pitfall of the internet in journalism development in Nigeria. It then concluded that the internet has not only become an inseparable tool of journalism, but has also significantly affected the development of journalism in Nigeria. Be that as it may, such a development can be said to be a two-edged sword which poses a serious threat to the professionals in the business.

Keywords: *ICT's, Internet, Journalism Development, News-gathering, Nigeria*

Introduction:

Before the development of ICTs newspaper reporters had all kinds of limitations in gathering and processing of information for dissemination. Their major tools were pen, paper and typewriter. According to Itule and Douglas (2008, p.150), "for generations, reporters have done their jobs using tools no more technical than typewriters and telephones. Carrying nothing more complicated than pads of paper and a pencil, they could go to the scene of a crime, the mayor's conference, the big football game." This caused delay, frustration and tardiness in the newsgathering and processing tunnel. It took days and sometimes weeks before news could be reported. Reporters wasted a lot of energy to gather and process news. Moreover, people living in remote areas hardly had access to news.

Hanson (2005) and Harcup (2009) point out that the advent of radio and television caused more havoc for the newspaper reporters. Radio and television enhanced newsgathering, processing and dissemination as they could present news as it was

happening, keeping their audience updated every minute. They brought news twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Radio and television were everywhere at the same time especially with electronic news gathering at satellites. Then in the 1980s, the Internet emerged and gradually became a major source of newsgathering and dissemination, leading to more erosion of the audience and financial base of the newspapers.

Therefore, to remain competitive and not go into extinction, newspapers have to find a new way of gathering and processing news. (Pavlik & Mclntosh, 2011). They needed to reduce the length of time involved in meeting deadlines and also hold on to in-depth news reporting. This brought fresh challenges to the media industry as newspaper reporters resorted to the use of ICTs to meet deadlines and started publishing on-line editions.

Today, news spreads faster than ever. The concept of immediacy is being re-defined. The world has become a hamlet where news is served at momentous speed. The speed and accuracy are largely determined by the application of Information and Communication Technologies in gathering, processing and distribution of news.

Information and Communication Technologies have coalesced the world into a single community where individuals and nations can share messages with ease. According to Olise (2011), ICTs have helped man to create, assemble, process and disseminate astonishing amount of information every second on any possible subject whether in education, business, politics, communication, etc., ICTs have changed the way people do things, communicate ideas and relate with one another. We are in a world of e-journalism, e-banking, e-commerce, e-learning, e-transact, e-ticketing, etc. The question remains in what areas are Nigerian newspaper reporters exploiting ICT resources?

Theoretical Framework:

This paper takes its bearing from thee technological determinism theory. In the said theory, the technological determinist, Marshal McLuhan predicted that changes in communication modes will largely determine the course of history. In the strict sense of it, McLuhan's interest was primarily on the causal relationship between media technology and culture. Put the other way, it could be rightly said that the main thrust of the technological determinism theory is to draw the attention of internet users to the hidden effects of the communication technology. With particular regard to the subject matter of this discourse, "Internet and Journalism Development in Nigeria: Benefits and Pitfalls", it could be rightly argued that both the benefits and pitfalls of the internet on journalism development in Nigeria have direct implications on conventional journalism practice in the country. The technological determinism theory links the historical, economic and cultural changes taking place in contemporary world to the invention and subsequent development of the new media technologies. No wonder why Griffins (1991) cited in Izuogu & Nwachukwwu (2014, p.19) declared that the radicalization of the journalism profession across the globe is a direct result of information explosion, occasioned by television and computer.

Just like every other theory before it, the technological determinism theory has attracted a lot of criticisms. For example, Gordon (1982) notes that "not one bit of sustained and replicated scientific evidence' inductive and deductive has to date justified any one of McLuhan's most famous slogans, metaphors and dicta…" (p.42). As a matter of fact, Gordon was of the opinion that McLuhan's ideas should be discountenanced in academic circles,

for lack of empirical support. Such criticisms notwithstanding, it could however be argued that McLuhan's idea of technological determinism has found greater expression in contemporary journalism more than ever before. To that end, Baran (1999) declares:

What has returned McLuhan to the forefront of the cultural discussion surrounding the mass media is the interne. McLuhan's idea resonates with those who believe that the new medium (internet) can fulfill his optimistic vision of an involved and connected global village. Those who think the potential vision of the internet like that of television before it, will never fulfill McLuhan's prediction are forced to explain their reasoning in terms of his ideas (p.445).

Without mincing words here, one can submit without fear of contradiction that even McLuhan's critics have not only surrendered to the supremacy of his argument, but have come to the conclusion that the internet has further condensed the world into a global family.

Literature Review

The Internet has become the most advanced form of communication network. According to Ndukwe & Chike (2011), Internet is a network, or more accurately, an inter-network, a vast collection of different types of computers all over the world that can share messages and information. Once a news reporter is hooked to the Internet through a computer or GSM handset, the person can gather information from anywhere in the universe. It removes the barrier imposed by distance and enhances speed. Watson (2003, p.231) says that, "boundaries of time and space suddenly mean nothing. I can visit by image every country on earth. I can obtain information from my own contexts, local, of national when other sources are closed to me either through regulation or bureaucratic decisions." Furthermore, Miler (1999, p.17) adds that, "through the Internet you can send e-mail, subscribe to mailing lists on a wide range of topics, get involved in discussions on news groups and copy to your personal computers around the world." It means that the newspaper reporter has access to infinite quantity of information every second and can work from the office or home and gather information from any part of the globe instantly. This is because the Internet is a boundless and gigantic reservoir of knowledge. Miler (1999) agrees that the cyberspace has become a place to contact sources, carryout interviews and gather information for stories. The Internet and other on-line resources make people and more data available than ever before.

Internet tools and newsgathering

E-mail: One of the news gathering tools available to the newspaper reporter is the email. Hanson (2005) defines the e-mail as "a message sent from one computer to another across a network." with the e-mail a source hundreds of kilometers away can reach a reporter with news, photographs and graphics within minutes. It is possible to conduct an interview through e-mail. Itule &Douglas (2008, p.168) argue that it is one to one communication which involves the electronic exchange of messages between one computer user and another. . Hanson (2005) adds that the Instant Messaging (IM) is an enhanced form of e-mail which makes it possible for users in different locations to discuss with one another in real time and hold virtual meetings that may span multiple locations.

Therefore, newspaper reporters have their contacts open always. Biagi (2003, p.45) identifies the strength of the e-mail as accessibility.

> Just as telephone answering machines changed voice communication by allowing people to send and receive messages on their own time schedule, e-mail allows people to communicate and receive information at their convenience….e-mail at school, work, at home is the way most people are communicating in an electronic environment. E-mail is easy to use and convenient.

In using e-mail to gather news, reporters should understand that although it is private and confidential, it is subject to interference because snoopers can secretly read other people's e-mail. Also some authorities allow people to spy on e-mail legally.

When an e-mail is sent, which usually comes in text form, it registers directly on the box of the owner and cannot be accessed by another person. For the newspaper reporter, it becomes difficult to misquote the source. Also it makes it easy to reach hard-to-reach individuals.

Bockzowski, McGruire, Stillborne, McDams and Hyatt (2006) suggest that the e-mail empowers the reporter to reach his newsroom at any time to file his report. The reporter can reach experts and professionals in various fields for interviews, and can download press releases, reports, weather updates, etc.

On-line chats: Newspaper reporters use on-line chats when they desire immediate information from a source. A chat room is where the reporter keys-in conversation on-line and interacts with others who are in the same chat area. It is used to conduct on-line interviews. Itule & Douglas (2008, p.172) observe that "some journalists have found that conducting an on-line interview in a private chat room is an efficient and effective technique. Also major web sites frequently host sessions with prominent people, some of whom might be important or interesting story sources."

World Wide Web (WWW): The web, a global hypertext-based computer that uses Internet is the most efficient way that individuals, organizations and government send and receive data. Itule &Douglas (2008,p.172), argue that the web is the primary way government agencies, news organizations, associations, interest groups and individuals are packaging, displaying and disseminating information on the Internet. Every minute a web page is created and updated. Web page owners have e-mail addresses where comment/reactions can be posted. Its attraction to news reporters lies in the fact that it is easy to use. Garrison (1998) points out that it allows the news reporter to link to as many computers systems as he wants. Therefore, the reporter is able to launch into unlimited information reservoir.

Mobile phones: Olgbamigbe (2006) highlighted the importance of mobile phones by saying that mobile phones are used for call service, short messaging and Internet services. Udofia (2006) added that some GSM phones have in-built digital cameras, television, radio, monitor, notebook, recorder, gallery for pictures, etc. They are handy equipment that help the reporter in gathering and processing of information easily. Journalists can interview and relate with their sources as events are happening. They can update their news room every minute, depending on need.

With an in-built digital camera in the mobile phone, the use of a photographer is eliminated. Events can be recorded for references and can be transferred and stored in a computer. The news event can be sent to the newsroom through the Internet. Moreover, phones are now manufactured with software that makes it possible to surf the Internet without a computer. Some GSM handsets equally have in-built radio to enable the reporter access news, business, entertainment, sports, politics, etc, making it possible for the journalist to be in constant touch with updates (Etukudo, 2009).

Reliability of Internet Sources

A journalist must be careful in using Internet and related materials as a base of his story. This is because a considerable percentage of information /data posted on the web, do not have sources or reputable sources. The Internet is a free for all market of data and therefore unreliable sources may deceive unsuspecting reporters/ users. The following checklist criteria may assist a reporter in determining the reliability or otherwise of the data posted on the Internet: authority, objectivity, accuracy, currency and coverage.

Authority: The sponsoring organisation should identify itself and mission. Sometimes, the journalist may have to authenticate legitimacy by calling the phone number (if any) in the e-mail address on the website. The person should find out if the organisation has a known address or not, Miler (1998, pp. 220-221) warns journalists, "if you are online, do your best to figure out where your information originated. The source may have an agenda that you that you are not aware of. If you get a hot-tip by e-mail, find out if the sender is who he or she says he or she is and verify the information just as you would verify any tip you got."

Accuracy: Further effort should be made to determine whether the data is factual or not by finding out if sponsoring organisation listed sources of its information. It serves the reporter to audit the data by verifying it from other sources. Miler (1998) argues that journalists need to exercise extra caution as to how they gather and report the truth and how they relate with news sources and readers. According to Miler (1998), "you also have a mandate to be accurate and thorough. So remember that information you find online or even in data given to you by a government agency may not be correct or complete." This to avoid errors that may lead to retraction or libel. Ramanujam (2008) agrees that speed is in contrast with accuracy. The reliability of online information is doubtful because the Internet does not have gatekeepers whose responsibility it is to monitor the veracity of information (Fredrick, 2009). With the cyberspace providing breaking news, every second, the reporter has to be extremely cautious in choosing what constitutes news to avoid publishing inaccuracies.

A reliable site should be free from grammatical inaccuracies. It is usually free from spelling and grammatical slips. According to Itule and Douglas (2008, p.178), "these kinds of error not only indicate a lack of quality control but also can produce inaccuracies of information. Similarly, Quinn & Lamble (2008) confirm that poor standard of English language such as inconsistency in expression, misplaced capital letters, inconsistency in fonts, and inappropriateness in punctuation and word usage are indicative of incredibility. Therefore it is advised that journalists are to scrutinise, confirm, crosscheck and re-crosscheck every information before transmitting it to the newsroom.

Objectivity: The sponsoring organization has to be differentiate facts from its prejudices so that users do not mix things up. Promotional effort must be separated from facts. Ramanujum (2008) maintains that journalists in the cyberspace should balance the thirst for breaking news with fairness, completeness, balance

and accuracy. Therefore, the interest of the readers and the society should placed at the forefront.

Currency: The organization should indicate the date the data were posted or revised. Sometimes, such issues as when a user last visited the site assist the journalist to know whether the contents are still current or not. Itule and Douglas (2008, p.178) provide a guide on currency "Are there dates on the page to indicate when the page was written, when the page was first placed on the Web and when the page was revised? Are there any other indications that the material is kept current?"

Coverage: The extent of coverage of the topic is important. Bits of ideas which are scanty can be deceptive. The user should ask himself if the topic has been exhaustively discussed. He should find out if the page has been completed or still under construction. Therefore, Miler (1998) advises journalists to get every angle of a story and not just the computer-reported side. That is, they should confirm the extent of coverage by complementing other computer based sources with other sources. Itule and Douglas (2008, p. 278) have listed the following test of coverage.

Is there an indication that the page has been completed and is not still under construction? Is it clear what topics the page intends to address? Does the page succeed in addressing these topics, or has something significant been left out? Is the point of view of the organization presented in a clear manner with its argument well supported?

Benefits of Information and Communication Technologies

Today, it has become possible for newspapers to report events as they are happening through the on-line newspapers, while the print version reports events faster than it has ever done before. Computer Assisted Reporting has become another gateway for journalists to access, analyse, follow up and do in- depth reports. Newspaper in an effort to survive, deviced new ways of coping with challenges posed by the electronic medium. There are some advantages of the application of ICTs in newsgathering in newspapers.

Flexibility in Editing: There is computer package that assists the journalist to carry out editorial work in a news manuscript. Computers now come with grammar and spelling checks, (in built dictionary) so that some of the tasks done by the journalists have been taken over by the computer with the use if such computer package, editing is made lot flexible for the journalist.

Cheap Cost: The modern ICT techniques are cheaper. They save the money that could have been used in traveling very far distances. For instance, if a journalist in Nigeria was covering Michael Jackson's Memorial Concert and he had to travel to USA, stay in a hotel and pay for his incidentals, the cost would be enormous. But he could stay in the comfort of his office and cover the event as it takes place in USA. Ramanajum (2008 p.7) states that, the increase of computer based technologies within newsroom has the effect of both reducing costs and increasing revenue, and the introduction of CAR techniques provides innovative ways to expand publications," It is possible to gather information through the net free of charge. It reduces the cost of gathering information on location and saves the transportation fares of reporters. Fredrick quotes Mwila as saying, "Once fully adopted and adapted, the ICTs will transform the newsrooms into cabled and networked centres with all journalists discharging stories on to a network, editors picking them before sending them to page designers or casters in the case of electronic media."

Immediacy: The concept of immediacy has been redefined to mean 'nowness'. It is news as it is happening. According to Ataba and Umar (2005), the GSM has transformed news gathering and enhanced speed. The Nigerien coup d' etat that happened a few days ago, was reported across the globe within seconds. This is the beauty and effectiveness of ICTs. With mobile and satellite phones, it is easy to file in stories wherever reporters are. They are perpetually connected to their newsrooms (Fredrick, 2007). Rajesh and Geetika observe that " the introduction of online filing of reports and online supply of pages to either editorial desk or to production units, have considerably improved the production time leading to timely publications of final printed copies".

Access to Remote Areas: The world is said to be global village because ICTs have made it possible to reach the 'the uttermost parts of the earth' in a matter of minutes. Through the use of satellite in news gathering, it is possible to access areas with difficult terrain and far distances so that 'everywhere' becomes a subject of news. Fedrick (2007) sums it up thus:

Think of a situation where a story that happens in far countries, say Iraq, and is read on remote/ rural radio in Western Uganda. How could it reach a remote-stationed media house within a short time? With ICT, this has been solved. You just go to websites that offer news services and get the story. Such stories are later used by media houses as foreign news stories.

However, the journalist needs to authenticate his sources before publishing the news. He can do this by accessing multiple sources. This is to ensure that he reports the facts and facts alone.

Related to the above is that computer assisted reporting gives unhindered access to people who are difficult to reach. Nwabueze (2009) cites a typical example with Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) which journalists can hardly reach their leaders. Sometimes journalists post questions to them on-line through their websites and e-mail address and also receive feedback through the same channel.

Access to Newspaper Archives: In the analogue tradition, for a reporter to conduct research, he would need to visit the library and go through newspaper clippings. This wasted time and energy. But the ICT driven research uses computerized story archives which speed up access and enhance quality. In addition, Itule and Douglas (2008) said that companies such as Lexis/Nexis and Dialog have developed large text databases which they allow journalists to access on payment of a fee. So it is possible to research on events around the world by hooking on to such companies.

In-depth News Presentation: Fedrick (2007) strongly believes that the application of ICTs has assisted journalists to conduct thorough investigation of news stories. The mobile phones make access to news sources possible anytime, anywhere. Journalists can reach multiple sources. Moreover, large volumes of information are available on any topic-education, environment, religion, government, politics, journalism, etc-on-the-internet.

Before now, access to information was usually in the paper format. The journalists visited the library. This meant that research was time consuming and difficult (Ramban, 2010) .But with the emergence of computer and the internet, journalists have access to large database in the internet.

Pitfalls in Using Information and Communication Technologies for Newsgathering

Journalists and newspaper houses in Nigeria are confronted by a number of challenges that hinder the use of ICTs in newsgathering in Nigeria. These multifarious challenges include falsehood associated with speed, illiteracy, plagiarism, cost, epileptic power supply, etc.

Gap between Speed and Accuracy: Immediacy has brought an added pressure on journalists. Reporters and their newspaper houses want to be part of the breaking news culture. Many of them rush to the press without proper verification of facts. According to Ramanujam (2008 p. 251), "one dilemma is the question of speed versus accuracy. In all forms of journalism there is conflict between choosing to publish immediate information or waiting to verify facts and ensuring accuracy. This is exacerbated by the multimedia environment." People may deliberately distort information and post it on the web. Miller (1998) cautions journalists to remember that online or database information may not always be accurate and complete. There is the need to exercise restraint in lifting information from the internet and sending it for publication without double checking it. Reporters should always know that their credibility and that of their organization is at stake.

Plagiarism: Another challenge is that digital technology has made it easier to plagiarise other journalists works undetected. Many journalists assume that any information in the cyberspace belongs to nobody. Miller (1998) observes that when journalists access Gopher or World Wide Web site, it becomes difficult to determine the sources of information. Although, it is still a gray area in copyright law, it is important that acknowledgment is made.

Lack of Information and Communication Technology knowledge: Many journalists lack basic knowledge and skill of ICTs. Some of them do not use the computer beyond keying in of words. According to Kaonga (2008), this inadequate skill defeats the purpose for the availability of the internet. The solution lies in the redesigning of the curriculum of journalism studies to accommodate intensive courses in ICTs.

Inadequate Information and Communication Technology Infrastructure: Many newspaper houses do not have enough computers; electricity is in short supply in Nigeria; and Internet connectivity is usually poor. Sometimes the network can be so slow or unavailable making it impossible to send e-mail or make a call.

Cost: The cost of procuring Information and Communication Technology equipment, computers, designing and managing them remains high (Nworah, 2010). Broadband costs millions of naira and to subscribe through an Internet Service Provider (ISP) is equally expensive. The pre-billing system presently operational in Nigeria further complicates the matter.

Conclusion:

There is no arguing the fact that the internet has become an in-seperable communication tool in the hands of contemporary journalists. In fact, the emergence of the internet has not only confirmed the possibility of a global village as foreseen by Marshal McLuhan; but has gone further to condense the world into a global family, by reason of our choices and preferences. So, in spite of the observed pitfalls/abuses, the internet has become an inescapable tool for journalism development in Nigeria, nay, the world.

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