

## From *mass communication* to *citizen journalism*: New perspectives in contemporary communications

### Abstract

This paper explores the growing impact of the online culture on contemporary mass communication. Throughout the world, including parts of Africa, the new online culture is beginning to alter some fundamental assumptions and basis of traditional journalism and mass communication. Consider, for example, mobile phones, blogs and social media such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace. These new media platforms are gradually undercutting the monopoly of information gathering and dissemination from the traditional, corporate mass media. They are indeed undermining the powers of the big media and the companies that own or operate them. The result is the shifting of the sovereignty of mass communication from media empires to the public – though it is still evolving. In basic communication models, the public is *the receiver*. In the contemporary new media environments the public is increasingly taking up *the sender* role as well. Thus, the concept of *mass communication* is gradually giving way to a new, more inclusive concept of *citizen communication*. This is the basis of *citizen journalism* or *citizen communication* rather than *mass communication*. The term citizen journalism, once treated with scepticism by the gate keepers of traditional media, has taken on new and powerful meanings, with such synonyms as civic journalism, open-source journalism, citizen journalism and participatory journalism becoming more widely accepted even among traditional mass communications scholars and practitioners. Increasingly, communication is no longer something to be manufactured and handed down to an almost passive mass audience. To wit, the masses themselves are fast becoming the initiators of communication in very substantial ways. *Citizen journalism* is the concept of members of the public “playing an active role in the

process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis, 2003). In their 2003 report, *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*, the authors say: “The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.” The paper also takes an African perspective and concludes that only limited Internet access stands between the African public and these new platforms and their potentials for tackling many Africa-specific social, economic, political and cultural problems. Even so, the emerging African picture with regard to the new media technologies is encouraging.

**Key words:** Social media, Internet platforms, citizen communication, mass communication, democratization.

## **Introduction**

The term public journalism, once treated with scepticism by the gate keepers of traditional media, has taken on new and powerful meanings, with such synonyms as “public”, “participatory,” “democratic,” “street” or “open-source” journalism, becoming more widely accepted even among traditional mass communications scholars and practitioners. Increasingly, communication is no longer something to be manufactured and handed down to an almost passive mass audience. The masses themselves are fast becoming the initiators of communication in very substantial ways.

The history of mass communication shows that the *mass* of the communication has been located at the disadvantaged position of the underdog in the process of cultural production and reproduction. Those who study the sociology of mass communication identify this *mass* within the context of social stratification. For example, Murdock and Golding,

writing in the seventies, insisted that “the sociology of mass communication should derive from, and feed into, the continuing debate on the nature and persistence of class stratification” (1977, p. 10). They defined the central task of the sociology of mass communications as “explaining how radical inequalities in the distribution of rewards come to be presented as natural and inevitable and are understood as such by those who benefit least from this distribution” (p. 10). In other words, the relationship between the media and their audiences has traditionally been viewed in terms of the elite values of the media being foisted on an unsophisticated mass, which had no say in determining what was handed to them.

Murdock and Golding cite Marx and Engels as explaining that, “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (1977, p. 14).

This dichotomy is still the basis of the works of critical cultural theorists and their criticism of contemporary mainstream media. Berkowitz (1997) reasons that journalistic products tend to reflect the preferences of the dominant power structures of the society. Hall agrees that the mass media impose the dominant ideology on the rest of society (Griffin, 2000). The critical theorists reject the notion that the agenda set by the press is a truly people’s agenda. Rather, they believe that it is the patterns determined and institutionalised by the elite class that get promoted as mass communication (Poulantzas, 1965; Westergaad, 1977; Hall, 1974, 1975, 1989).

Gans (1979) asserts that editors and reporters have no knowledge of, nor are they really interested in knowing, the audience they are supposed to serve. He found in a study that “they paid little attention to it (audience); instead they filmed and wrote for their superiors and themselves, assuming that what interested them would interest their audience” (1979, p. 230).

Critical cultural theorists, therefore, view their primary task as that of raising “the public awareness that entertainment and news media promote the interest of the dominant groups of society” (Griffin, 1993, p.316). Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1995) assert that the paradigm of the press as watchdog had passed, replaced by the press as the guard dog of the status quo (p. 118). That, too, seems to be passing.

### **The flattening world, aka, globalization**

In the face of new media and communication technologies, the concern for the “radical inequalities in the distribution of mass communication” has begun to be addressed seriously. For example, one of the chief attractions of Internet media and the burgeoning online technologies is their interactivity. As Stovall puts it: “The technology of the Web offers a level of interactivity between producers and consumers that goes beyond what other media are capable of” (2006, p. 175). First of all, there are lots of materials on a typical website that a visitor to the site can access. Besides, visitors can choose what parts of the website they want to see. “Visitors can communicate directly through e-mail or other means set up by the producers ... and they can communicate with other visitors to share thoughts and reactions about what is on the site” (p. 175). There may also be a variety of links indicated on a particular website that consumers can go to, depending on their objective. It is such capabilities that have empowered citizens who have something to say to be able to do so on their own terms. The interactive attributes allow the consumer to interact with the product, the consumer with the provider, the consumer with other consumers, and for the consumer to become a provider (Ward, 2003, p. 24).

The empowerment of audiences once regarded as *mass consumers* without identity and without a voice fits into the expanding mosaic of globalization or what Friedman (2007, p. 10) describes as “the flattening of the world.” Like other commentators on this 21<sup>st</sup> century

phenomenon, Friedman attributes this revolution to the Internet: “The flat-world platform is the product of the convergence of the personal computer...with fibre-optic cable ... with the rise of the work flow software...which enabled individuals all over the world to collaborate on that same digital content from anywhere, regardless of the distances between them” (2007, p. 10 – 11).

### **The new audience: *receiver as sender***

In classic communication models, the communication consumer was defined as a *receiver*. One decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, consumers of mass communication have become more authoritative and are appropriating the benefits of this wired world to their own advantage. As Gillmor has declared: “Once mere consumers of news, the audience is learning how to get a better, timelier report. It’s also learning how to join the process of journalism, helping to create a massive conversation and, in some cases, doing a better job than the professionals...In the end, we’ll have more voices and more options” (2004, p. xiv).

Bruns (2007) characterises what emerges from the mix of collaborative production and usage as user-led content, which gives rise to what he models as *produsage* - “the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement.” He explains that “in such models, the production of ideas takes place in a collaborative, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers” enabling all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge.

## **The Blogosphere**

The most familiar of the media platforms in this collaborative and participatory environment nowadays are blogs, mobile phones and social media such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace. Of all these, however, blogs and Twitter provide the nearest thing to news-like information. A blog, “a personal journal that a writer posts onto a website” (Stovall 2006, p.185), is an open forum available to anyone who has an interest in the issues raised on the blog by way of commentary or news on a particular subject. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, Web pages and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Many celebrities, ordinary individuals and professionals such as TV, radio, and newspaper people maintain blogs. It is easy to see why blogs have become an important resource for those who have something to say and cannot get to the mainstream media. According to *Compete.com*, “the most recent count of blogs indexed by Technorati currently stands at 133 million” (Meribe, 2010, p. 26). Whereas Friedman (2007) asserted that blogs grow by about 70, 000 a day (p. 118), Meribe quotes Jantsch (2009) as saying about 900, 000 blog posts are being created every 24 hours. If that figure holds, there would be no fewer than 163 million blogs by March 2010.

The contention between mainstream media people and bloggers that raged in the inchoate days of the blogosphere has paled and blogging is being increasingly accepted by mainstream journalists as a platform for the provision of information (including news) by persons they once regarded with irritation. Rosen (2005) says, “Bloggers vs. journalists is over. I don’t think anyone will mourn its passing.” In his view, the debate was unnecessary in the first place. In the end, the issues were settled principally by practitioners in the mainstream media. Rosen cites John Schwartz of the *New York Times* (Dec. 28, 2005) as

declaring: “For vivid reporting from the enormous zone of the tsunami disaster, it was hard to beat the blogs.”

## **Twitter**

Twitter has joined the fray with a bang. This free social and micro-blogging service enables its users to send and read messages known as *tweets*. Tweets are defined as text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as *followers*. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access. Users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, SMS or external applications. As a micro-blog, its use for breaking news or other public interest information is obvious. According to the State of the Media Report in the US for 2009:

Producers of content have found value in offering one-line descriptions that link to larger pieces of work. News audiences turned to Twitter feeds for eyewitness accounts of real-time events. When gunmen stormed hotels and other sites in Mumbai (the former Bombay) in November, twitter.com was flooded with entries from users in the city who provided updates based on their observations on the ground.

The same report indicates that “between December 2007 and December 2008, unique visitors to the site grew more than tenfold to 2 million. That compared to 20% growth between December 2006 (soon after it was launched in July 2006) and December 2007.” During the Mumbai attacks, it was reported that posts about Mumbai were being published at a rate faster than one message per second. Many of the tweets were being posted from cell phones of journalists and citizens at the scene of the attacks.

There couldn't be a more dramatic role for Twitter in the dissemination of news-type information than during the 2009 post-elections protests in Iran. The following report from NetworkWorld.com encapsulates the impact of social networking in the empowerment of the people:

**Network World** - This past weekend, something strange happened in the U.S. media landscape: Twitter helped shape coverage of the Iranian elections protests...Because the Iranian government has successfully stifled serious dissent within its borders for the past 30 years, the spectacle of mass demonstrations in its capital streets was something tailor-made for America's 24-hour cable news networks.

But all throughout Saturday, as the demonstrations engulfed the Iranian capital of Tehran, America's three cable news stations were taking flack for their relative silence... Tweeters mocked the network's lack of coverage, particularly its decision to show a Larry King repeat on Saturday night while Iranians marched through the capital streets and clashed with riot police....But Twitter wasn't merely used to pressure the major networks to get on the story – it was also being used to deliver on-the-ground reports from both professional journalists and Iranian protestors themselves. Native Iranian Tweeters such as *persiankiwi*, *StopAhmadi*, *IranianElection0* and *Change\_for\_Iran* were providing real-time updates of protests in their areas, as well as linking to pictures and videos of riot police beating demonstrators with batons and breaking up peaceful protests....(NetworkWorld.com, 2009, June 15).

Indeed, in the wake of those protests, the US State Department reportedly urged Twitter to delay a scheduled maintenance to avoid disrupting communications among Iranian citizens as they took to the streets to protest the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.



According to *Washington Post Online*, “Because the Iranian government had barred journalists from ‘unauthorized’ demonstrations, people communications networks became the only means of getting information on the unfolding drama out of Iran to Iranians living abroad and the rest of the world audience.” The *Post Online* commented further that, “The move illustrates the growing influence of online social-networking services as a communications media” (2009, June 17).

The very personal, laconic nature of the Twitter platform means it is tailor-made for ordinary folks who have bits of things to say and prefer to say them to “neighbours” – the kind of people who have problems and views on issues similar to theirs. Spread over thousands of such “neighbours,” i. e., friends on their social network, they become a powerful segment of citizens who are talking about the things that affect them. They have ceased to rely on the traditional media to speak to or for them. It is the plain-folk character of Twitter that has built it into a platform for more than 5 million followers. Not surprisingly, celebrities, many politicians, including US President Obama, and business leaders have recognized the importance of this people-oriented media platform and “have accumulated hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and use the tool to let their fans know when and where events are being held” (*uwire.com*, 2009).

### **YouTube, Facebook and MySpace**

These other open-source media which foster citizen communication are usually referred to as social media. They are among the most visible and successful social media platforms of the contemporary digital age. Social media clubs have been formed around the world to take advantage of what these new platforms offer and people are tapping into them for a variety of things, including businesses - small and big. As the president of the Social Media Club Nigeria, Yinka Olaitan, observes, “social media have provided an equalizer for any business,

no matter how small, to communicate, build engagement, support and word of mouth opportunities” (Meribe, 2010, p. 26). Nothing could be more “word-of-mouth” than tweeting or the postings on Facebook or MySpace or the swapped videos of YouTube.

According to *uwire.com*, which offers reporting from more than 800 colleges and universities worldwide, the communications director of Princeton University in the US, Lauren Robinson-Brown, argues that “these platforms by nature are social and therefore much more casual than the official news that we manage...We intend to adopt a casual style so that the intended audiences will find the information we post relevant” (*uwire.com*, 2009).

YouTube is a video sharing website on which users can upload and share video. It uses Adobe Flash Video technology to display a wide variety of user-generated video content including movie clips, TV clips, and music videos as well as amateur content such as video blogging and short original videos. Most of the content on YouTube is uploaded by individuals, although media corporations including the TV networks - CBS, BBC, the Universal Music Group and other organizations offer some of their material via the site, as part of the YouTube partnership programme. Being an open-source platform, it is open to use for a wide range of public issues, including politics and social activism. It is thus part of the rapidly growing alternative media. The 2008 US presidential election essentially authenticated YouTube. The major presidential candidates and the potential running mates appeared on YouTube at various points during the campaign and videos – negative and positive - concerning the various campaigns surfaced on YouTube.

MySpace is one of the world’s leading social portals which integrates personal profiles, photo sharing, professional and viral videos, blogs, mobile, instant messaging, and the world’s largest music community. It has built a global community, empowered its global community by the Internet; its international network of more than 30 local community sites

spans North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, Australia and, increasingly in the mid-2000s, Africa.

Facebook is among the most popular online social directories used by millions of young people across the world, especially in colleges and universities, as a platform for telling their own stories. As with other social media, the big thing is about uploading, viewing and sharing a vast array of materials made either by the users themselves or others. What do they upload? Videos, parts of movies, TV clips, music videos, lectures, or comic performances and bits about their lives! It does not stop there; they swap information on current affairs, politics, conflicts and disasters. The point is that they have platforms on which they post anything that grabs their fancy.

Disillusioned young people foray into everything the traditional mass media are covering, except that they view all these from a different, usually dissenting, perspective. But as Friedman observes, “beyond the sheer amateur quality of much of the content, it is bringing some troubling social and legal issues our way faster than we - or our legal systems – are ready to handle” (2007, p. 523). Beyond that the users of Facebook hold and share views on public figures in politics, sports, entertainment, education, media, business and government. Indeed, in most high schools in North America, students are using the Web to rank their teachers, “where more than 6 million ratings have been posted by students on more than 900, 000 teachers at more than 400, 000 American and Canadian middle and high schools” (Friedman, 2007, p. 119). Facebook has become a kind of Leviathan of the social networks; everybody seems to be on Facebook. In 2009, it grew by 210 percent; by March 2010, it had surpassed Google in the number of unique visitors it received.

(A few weeks ago I took a peek into the Facebook wall of a Christian Academy in south-eastern US, where my son is registered as an international online student. Tenth graders and even fifth graders had no qualms about commenting on their teachers. One wrote:

“Joshua McCausland, I think he's a cool teacher, but he's only in third place when compared to Mr. Calbert and Mr. McBride).

Statistics show that children as young as 6 are in the social directory business. Viewed across the globe, this amounts to a huge population of young people, who are tech-savvy (more so than many adults), engaging, and critical of contemporary world affairs. The 21<sup>st</sup> century society can only ignore them at its peril.

The social media are part of the growing phenomenon of social networking. Social networking is fostered mainly by two factors: social activism and the human need for social interaction. Friedman identifies social activism with “this generation’s social activists and entrepreneurs, who have been empowered by the flattening of the world” (2007, p. 489). He explains: “The Internet today gives even the smallest groups the ability to upload and globalize the activism – by building global coalitions that expose or embarrass the biggest multinationals” (p. 489).

### **Mobile news**

In advanced communication markets such as North America, Western Europe, and parts of Asia (India, China, Korea, Singapore) not only are more people getting their news from the Internet, but, as noted earlier, they are also doing it in new and different ways, much of it enabled by news organizations developing more ways of disseminating their content. In its *2009 Annual Report on American Journalism*, the Project for Excellence in Journalism stated that, “mobile viewing, the sharing of stories on social networks and video sites, and posts on a multitude of microblogs became more widespread in 2008 while earlier tools like e-mail and RSS remained popular. By compiling, sharing and customizing the news they consume, people in a sense are becoming not only their own editors, but also critical agents in the trajectory of a news story.

The report notes that the technology that got some of the most attention in 2008 was mobile phone communication. Purchases of iPhones, BlackBerries and other smart phones grew rapidly in 2008. In the first quarter of the year alone, Smartphone sales in the US went up by 106.2 percent over 2007, with total sales of 7.3 million units. News outlets began more aggressively to take advantage of this digital platform to deliver instantly updated text, audio and images. Regular viewers of CNN, BBC and users of online newspapers such as the Washington Post, The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, The Times of London, Time magazine, and The Economist would observe the rise in Mobile news service offers by these outlets.

According to the PEJ Report, “The Pew Internet & American Life Project found in March 2008 that 62 percent of all American adults had used the Internet through a wireless connection: 58 percent had used their cell phone or personal digital assistant for things other than talking; and 41percent had logged onto the Internet away from home or office with a handheld devices or laptop computer” (*State of the Media*, 2009). Many, of course, had made such connections both ways. By the end of the year, according to Nielsen Mobile, there were about 40 million active users of the mobile Web. That amounts to one-fourth the universe of the 160 million adult using the Internet on computers (*State of the Media*, 2009).

Mobile phones have had a long history of being used to enhance the human need for interaction via SMS text messages. Ward noted a few years ago that Finland, home of the Nokia, “has one of the highest levels of mobile phone usage per head of population in the world” (2003, p. 16), where young Finns use their SMS text messaging system as their primary means of mobile communication. That report was in the early 2000s when the Internet was just coming of age as a mass media system. Alozie, Akpan-Obong and Foster (2010) note that:

The technology (Mobile) has become the ICT of choice in the region (Sub-Saharan). This is so because of both the unassuming properties of the technology itself and other compelling derivatives of the African context. First, mobile telephone service is relatively cheap to acquire. Second, the technology is so user-friendly that one does not require any particular level of sophistication to utilize it, a feature important among Africa's largely illiterate populations. Third, the technology offers instant access even in transit. Fourth, the technology has bypassed the severe infrastructural constraints that hindered the old land-line technology.

No wonder then that by the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the mobile phone has become a major platform for *Twitter*.

## **Discussion**

The prevalence of blogs and the social media represents what a BBC discussant once described as the reconfiguration of power. Anything that happens in the public or public space now becomes instantly available. There was a time when such information could be managed, controlled and manipulated to present a particular perspective (for example, making someone, group or country look good) – usually in the decision-making process of the traditional media – through gatekeepers (editors, producers and other media managers). Now, such information is very likely to get straight into Internet media. Once in cyberspace, it is fair game for anyone who has access: to peruse, analyze, and judge. Such information can go through the whole range of multimedia without gatekeepers' intervention.

Simply put, the reconfiguration of the power that comes with the control of information lies in the extension of “the press” to the people who have been traditionally called the public. The extension of the public service franchise (the concept of public service franchise,

though uniquely American because it is mandated by the Constitution, applies with greater demand to developing countries, manifesting in the concept of development communication) is fuelled partly by the perceived inability of the mainstream press to cover all shades of voices. There are various segments of the population - business, politics, and the social spectrum, youth, women, and minorities - which believe that they don't get a fair hearing in the traditional media. Such groups are increasingly turning to the social media to get directly to their constituents, communities, supporters, peers and friends.

New technologies always spawned supportive technologies. There are sites which track what items weblogs are linking to and talking about - news stories, weblog posts, new products (movies, books, software), whatever subject is catching their attention. Bowman and Willis (2003) note that bloggers rely on several technologies to power their passion, including “a mechanism that automatically finds other comments about a blog post on a weblog, and provides excerpts and links to the comments alongside the post. It's like having an editorial page of commentary on the Web, automatically generated to appear alongside a story.”

One of the attractions of the blogosphere is the freedom that individual participants have “to play multiple roles simultaneously - publisher, commentator, moderator, writer, and documentarian. Weblogs have also proven to be effective collaborative communication tools. They help small groups (and in a few cases, large) communicate in a way that is simpler and easier to follow than email lists or discussion forums” (Bowman and Willis, 2003). Because they come from a background of dissenting with the mainstream media, bloggers are meticulous about correcting their mistakes, relying on audience feedback, through blog commenting forms, email or remarks made on other weblogs as a method of correction. They are thus reliable about correcting their mistakes, and a great many frequently link to dissenting viewpoints on the Web.

Therefore, people who seek alternative viewpoints to events, people who feel “betrayed” by the news angles of the mainstream media, segments of the population who feel under-reported, and people who are around or are at the scenes of unfolding events can turn to blogs. Bowman and Willis list among the strengths of blogs the ease with which a blog can be set up, operated and maintained. By the 2004 United States election, bloggers had become a key element in the news. Indeed, during that election campaign, three dozen bloggers were given full press credentials at the Democratic national convention. Reporters from the mainstream media promptly dubbed 2004 “the year of the blog” (Zelizer, 2005; Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 2007). Zelizer, drawing also on the experiences of covering the war in Iraq, notes:

From the beginning, bloggers actively and systematically told the story of the war in their own words. Calling themselves personal journalists as contrasted with either professional or amateur reporters...these online diarists linked together information, opinion, and intimate details into ways thought to supplement the stories provided by recognized news outlets (Zelizer, 2005, p. 206).

### **Citizenship journalism**

All of this signifies the triumph of civic journalism. The blogger may not provide breaking news, as Zelizer points out, but they focus attention *on news reported but buried by the mainstream news organizations* (emphasis added). Citizen journalism involves members of the public “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis, 2003). In their 2003 report, *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*, the authors say: “The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.”



It needs reminding here that the intent of the social media was primarily defined by the desire of mostly young people (especially university and tertiary college students) to freely swap movies and music online. But, as Lucas Graves (2007) argues in his essay on *affordance*, it is humans who drive activities associated with any new technology. Addressing specifically the advent of social media, he notes, “During the past decade, a combination of file-compression techniques, high-speed Internet access, and peer-to-peer software has made it possible for tens of millions of people to freely swap movies and music online. *At every juncture, humans drive this activity* (emphasis added) — they load up the software, they rip ‘content’ off of discs, and they come together into the networks (often quite social ones) where file sharing happens” (2007, p. 335).

Though Lucas is making a case for a middle ground between technological determinists on the one hand and the constructivist school on the other, he makes the point that technology merely “sparked, unleashed, or even created the new habits that the entertainment giants claim have transformed their industry” (p. 335). That is to say, what inspires the use of any available technology to thrust out in new, sometimes uncharted directions is the human spirit of seizing the moment. The initiators of social networks saw in the available Internet technologies an opportunity to make a statement on what they perceived as the failings or inadequacies of traditional providers of public information. They decided to combine the “offering of photos, diaries and descriptions of their interests and their friends’ ” with sharing news-type information, comments and, sometimes, shorthand critiques of mainstream media.

The progress made by civic journalism is testified to by the fact that mainstream journalists and media operators no longer treat it as a threat to the profession. For a long time professional journalists and traditional media people argued that participatory journalism amounted to the abandonment of the practitioner’s neutrality and objectivity. Some of the critics described it as “biased” journalism. The business of journalists is to stand back and

report events from a dispassionate observer's perspective, not to get involved in the "making" of news, the argument went. Thus, they argued, the basic concept contradicted the "traditional role of remaining objective and uninvolved in the news" (Rich, 2003, p. 23). Rich cites Overholser (a columnist and former ombudsman for the *Washington Post*, a former editor of the *Des Moines Register* and a faculty member of the Missouri School of Journalism) as saying, "This is not the newspaper editor's role. It is to make sure the truth is told, that the word goes out, that the whole picture is presented...Let us not care what one individual thinks of us on one given day. For truth telling will have its victims" (2003, p. 23).

The momentous events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – terrorism, catastrophic natural disasters, unending wars and conflicts, the collapse of the world's economy, immigration – have convinced advocates of the new approach to mass communication of the rightness of their cause. Rosen (cited by Brooks, Kennedy, Moen & Ranly, 2002) came up with a set of contrasts in the beliefs of traditional journalism and public journalism:

- While civic journalists believe that public life should work, and journalism has a role in making it work, traditional journalists believe it would be nice if public life worked, but it's beyond their role to make it work.
- While civic journalists believe that something basic has to change because journalism isn't working, traditional journalists believe that the traditions of journalism are fine; if anything needs to improve, it's the practice (Brooks, et al., 2002, p. 11).

Developments in the third millennium seem to have compelled the protectors of this tradition to concede that there are too many stakes to trust a hegemonic press community to represent all sides adequately. This is compounded by the demands of the many voices that are rising above the clamour of the debate. According to Rosen (2005), Overholser now agrees that it has become "unmistakably clear that objectivity has outlived its usefulness as an ethical touchstone for journalism." The critic has wised up to the reality that the way

“*objectivity* is currently construed makes the media easily manipulable by (those) intent on and adept at controlling the message.” More important, as Rosen sees it, the critics now concede that the pursuit of objectivity in its present concept “produces a rigid orthodoxy, excluding voices beyond the narrowly conventional.” As a 2003 report noted, “Journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where ... its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves” (*New Directions for News*). Rosen’s conclusion is apt: “Open source media have enabled people who would otherwise hope forever that the editor will publish the letter-to-the-editor to react to events and issues instantaneously with the news of the event” (2005).

It is, however, pertinent to note in this concluding part that it would be wrong to pronounce the *nunc dimitis* of mainstream or traditional media. For, in spite of the phenomenal growth of the social media networks and the burgeoning of blogs, their news-type information content has not risen proportionally with their popularity. A careful examination of Facebook, for example, reveals that it is dominated by personal information, data and friend-to-friend “graffiti.” As Fletcher phrases it, “The famous and the unknown put up their lives for scrutiny on ‘social networking sites’ ... offering photos, diaries and descriptions of their interests and their friends” (Fletcher, 2007, p. 41). But videos of political issues and social activism are part of what goes out on YouTube and Facebook as Morozov (2009) noted: “Many blog posts are also being updated in real-time - minute by minute. There are also plenty of videos on YouTube and photos, including those uploaded to Facebook.”

Citizen journalism is thus loosely conceived in this article as a broad church that encompasses various dimensions of alternative journalism. The reference to “alternative” is, indeed, recognition of the other more established form, namely, mainstream journalism. But these 21<sup>st</sup> Century developments signify a major leap in the democratization of information.

This democratisation has been largely fostered by the Internet and the technologies it has spawned. Anim argues that “the concept of *democratization* of the Internet is associated with the characteristic of the new technology to promote social equality – latent or manifest, as well as its expansion into mass application (2008, p. 1).

### **Contextualizing the concept**

Though these developments are only beginning to build deep-rooted impact in most parts of Africa, the continent greatly needs these open-source communication platforms in the face of its social conditions. The continent is plagued by underdevelopment, bad governance, poverty, social exclusion, xenophobia, sexism, the propensity to suppress independent media and the like. At the infrastructural level, the continent enjoys comparatively limited media access, especially in Sub-Saharan. Newspaper circulation is low (except in South Africa where some 14.5 million people buy the urban dailies and community newspapers reach a circulation of 5.5-million). Television has grown in most countries but they lack the resources for good quality, motivating programmes, and have to depend on cheap entertainment or boring government documentaries as their regular fare. Besides, the domination of the broadcast media by governments places a limit on the voices they represent.

At a time when computer-generated, information-based technologies are increasingly necessary for successful economic performance, computer literacy is still very low, and it seems not enough effort is being made by governments to enunciate educational policies (from primary to tertiary-level education) which ensure that the requisite skills are acquired by an ever-increasing proportion of the younger population. Internet spread and Internet is also poor. Media literacy, defined by Campbell, Martin & Fabos (2007, p. 600) as “an understanding of the mass communication process through the development of critical thinking tools...that enables a person to become more engaged as a citizen and more

discerning as a consumer of mass media products” is still very low compared with the developed economies.

Still, the purpose of this article is to show the great possibilities of Internet platforms for greater diffusion of the information the people need as well as the assimilation of such information. For the majority of Africans, the potentials are just waiting to be tapped. The rising Internet penetration in some African countries, such as Nigeria (10 million users – Internet World Stats, 2008, cited in Akpan-Obong, 2009, p.165) and South Africa shows that the environment for the emergence of *citizen communication* is not as far-fetched as the general African picture would portray. Against this background, the advantages that could accrue from the Internet platforms discussed in this article apply with greater necessity to the continent. Access to these open-source media by African audiences is vital in challenging and, perhaps, changing the status quo in information management. Governments in the continent are becoming increasingly aware of the indispensable role of Internet technologies in pursuing the Millennium Development Goals, the UN-backed framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century development. What they lack most is the political will to invest in infrastructure – such as optic fibre links - that will lead to reductions in costs of access to the Internet.

In this regard a great responsibility lies with the academia to serve as the training ground to help raise a new generation of Africans who are in tune with all the ramifications of the new Internet platforms and the associated technologies. The history of the social media shows clearly that the momentum was created by the younger segments of populations across the world, especially those in high schools and universities. However, if the Nigerian experience is anything to go by, there does not appear to be enough effort coming from the academia. A 2008 survey showed that “failure to prepare university teachers of communication for a new role in the Digital Age (has) left the university system with many teachers who are not computer-literate and are not conversant with the demands and complexities of the new

media and communication technologies. They cannot impart to the students what they do not have,” (Anim, 2008, p. 6).

Additionally, university curricula need to be continuously overhauled to cover the expanding technologies associated with the Internet and the whole new vista of communication possibilities they have opened.

## **Conclusion**

This article does not suggest that this growing movement means the demise of newspapers or the other major media of mass communication. The newspaper, for example, has proved its staying power in the face of new media and technologies. It has survived by adapting to the new circumstances and adopting aspects of new technologies.

The kernel of this article is rather that the traditional media have lost their monopoly as the providers of information to the public. This new-age public:

- Is more diversified and more sophisticated than the original “masses” of mass communication.
- Demands to be heard because it understands that different voices need to be heard, for the issues of the contemporary age are more complex than the traditional media tend to portray.
- Demands that the nuances (often left out of crisis communication coverage by the traditional media) which lend contexts to events be added to reports of the events. The social media, built as they are on the interactions of a mixed array of providers, come in very personal ways to each user. As one blogger said, “I was telling everybody who was reading the web log...what the streets looked like...I was telling this because journalists weren’t” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 207).

Thus, not satisfied with what is on offer, this new consumer has decided to participate in the gathering and distribution of information, thanks to emerging technologies fired by Internet technologies and resultant delivery platforms. Sullivan (cited by Zelizer, 2005) writing with reference to the Iraq War, mused about “the very personal nature” of the blogger’s world, which “had far more resonance than the more impersonal corporate media products” (2002). He noted that “readers were more skeptical of anonymous news organizations anyway, and preferred to supplement them with individual writers (bloggers) they knew and liked.”

This means, as suggested in the beginning of this concluding part, that what is emerging is complementarities of the models. There is a lot that *mass* communication can borrow from *citizen* communication in order to meet the expectations of those who look up to the communications community to filter for them the unrelenting flow of information that makes the world go round. “One will not replace the other, but I think the two together are good for each other,” as reasoned by Xenia Jardin, co-editor of the *BoingBoing* blog (cited by Rosen, 2005). Friedman (2007) recalls the July 7, 2005 underground bombings in London. On that day the BBC website invited viewers and listeners to send in photos of what they had seen. As the report goes, in 24 hours, BBC received 20, 000 written accounts by email, 1, 000 photos, and 20 videos. “The BBC, the *Guardian*, and MSNBC.com were among the big media sites that walked the walk of citizen journalism, allowing their readers to become contributors at a moment’s notice – with zero journalistic training” (2007, p. 118). More important, Friedman makes the point that “...what we are likely to see are more blended approaches, in which the traditional news organizations absorb, filter and select the best from the blogosphere and blend it with their more traditionally edited news” (Friedman, 2007, p. 118).

Finally, in the context of Africa, the continent needs these liberating technologies even more than the other continents. Yet, there are limitations placed on such adoptions by certain factors:

- The slow spread of the Internet in the continent.
- Low media literacy.
- African governments' tardiness in grasping the importance of the Internet for positive development in the interconnected world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, broadband is yet to become an integral part of African Internet access. That is why the "arrival" of three fiber-optic cables in East Africa in 2009 was news for almost three months.

Also, from the academic perspective, this article suggests that the academia which should be producing a new Internet-savvy generation is not doing enough because many mainstream journalism and mass communication teachers are themselves not adequately equipped with the knowledge of what is going on in the world of new media and the Internet technologies.

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