

Friends or Foes? Seeking Common Grounds for Collaboration among Citizen Journalists and Mainstream Journalists

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Abstract. Collaboration among mainstream media and citizen journalism is not new, neither is the tension that have existed among them. What is interesting is the hydra-headed nature of their relationship. After over two decades of co-existence and co-optation, it is anticipated that a robust mutually beneficial relationship has been forged. This is not the case however, as some mainstream media still view citizen journalism as a threat and vice versa. This paper is an attempt to revisit the notion of collaborative reporting and x-rays the inherent benefits that accompany such healthy relationship. Through the lenses of the communitarian theory, the paper provides the Collaborative Media Octopus as a model that explicitly relays the outcomes of a positive and negative citizen-mainstream journalists relationship. The paper further argues that in a digital era, journalists from mainstream media and user-generated platforms must view themselves as friends rather than foes due to the immense positive consequences that far outweighs the negative.

Keywords: Friends, Foes, Common grounds, Citizen Journalists, Mainstream Journalists

1. Introduction

The rise of citizen journalism in the last two decades has presented a number of challenges to professional journalism or media in general. This challenge is not from new technology directly; it is not from competitors of other media outlets, but essentially from the audiences who have been actively contributing to news content generation and development (Bowman and Willis, 2013).

It is as a result of the changing landscape of the media that broadcast and print media are rethinking new ways of establishing their relevance. Seng et al (2008) assert that the evolution of the new media not only encourages participation by audiences but also provides a rationale for collaboration and networking between mainstream and new media. The possibilities provided by the internet and multimedia application on mobile phones created an unconsciously romance between media houses and users (individuals or groups) in news gathering and reporting. Ever since, this romance has blossomed and continuous to metamorphose in unpredictable forms; although there have been several downsides to the relationship.

Kperogi (2011a) notes that iReport.com is a Cable News Network (CNN) citizen journalism experiment, launched on August 2, 2006, that gives audiences around the world an opportunity to contribute to making news. With *iReport*, CNN has been able seemingly provided a platform for the democratization of journalism, thereby denying professional journalists the exclusive right for defining and determining news. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has also seen the need to proactively engage citizens in reporting news. The Corporation birthed *Action Network* (formerly called *iCan*) in November 2003 as a platform that enhances citizen involvement in reporting their communities and concerns. An editor with BBC reports that in breaking and developing major news events, the public is capable of providing new dimensions and information that determine the angle

of coverage (Sambrook, 2013). Through *Action Network*, BBC is able to achieve a working partnership with citizens, who are willing to contribute to community reporting.

Perhaps, the greatest form of media which has been and is being influenced by the tide of citizen journalism is the print media, specifically newspapers. Communication scholars predict that the internet will transform newspapers and not make them obsolete (Bressers, 2005; Briggs, 2005). However, there are peculiar changes that must happen such as re-inventing themselves and producing better business models through strategic behind-closed-door meetings (Morton 2005). The proposition Morton suggests is already happening. Most newspapers have gone online and more are striving to provide avenues for user-generated content (news) to be published. The basic feature of such accommodation has been the interactivity platform on their websites. This interactivity feature includes textual, audio and visual contents that converge on one platform (Andrew, 2005).

In the midst of all these profound changes is a crop of professional mainstream journalists who are yet to come to terms with the fact that users are beginning to become a huge and germane component of news and information production. Their argument stems from the fact that these users are amateurs and untrained in the art of news gathering. And for some who, by virtue of compulsion, coopt citizen journalism into their daily news reports; the high level of scrutiny and gatekeeping imposed on citizen reports and low level of prominence on such reports leaves more to be imagined (Akila, 2016). Similarly, Dare (2011) upholds this argument by adding that citizen journalism poses profound challenges to the hegemonic and gatekeeping powers of mainstream media. This has necessitated insightful adjustments such as collaboration.

New media scholars such as Kperogi (2011b) indicate that citizen journalism has complemented and strengthened mainstream dominance rather than challenging such. The CNN's *iReporter*, BBC's *Action Network*, Aljazeera's *Sharek Portal* and in Nigeria: Channels' *i-Witness Report*, NTA's *uReport*, The Punch's *Mynews.com* and so many other citizen-mainstream media fusion have generated award winning stories for these mainstream media houses in the past years.

2. Conceptual Framework

Technology and culture have been the focal points and determinants of change in society. In the media environment, these two indices continue to exert a lot of influence and are responsible for all paradigm shifts in the communications field (Lewis and Usher, 2014; Channel, 2010). Similarly, Adelabu (2008) highlights three factors responsible for the rise in citizen journalism – the first is the mainstream media's continues/growing interest in advertisers' interest/revenue; second, the negligence of public interest by mainstream media; and third, the evolution and advent of information technology, spearheaded by the internet. The second and third factors are undisputedly related to culture and technology respectively.

While most communication scholars agree to the fact that both technology and culture propel changes in the media as seen in the paragraph above, there is no consensus as to which of the two plays a greater role than the other. There has been a dichotomy between the two camps.

On the one hand are those driven by the theory of technological determinism as popularized by Marshall McLuhan. The major postulation here is that societal character is shaped by the evolving media technology. Simply put: society changes as media technology changes. (McLuhan, 1962). This is reductionist assumption which presumes that society's technology propels the progress of social structures and cultural values (<http://dictionary.babylon.com/>).

Theorists like Manuel Castells have been accused of being technologically determinant as they insist that technology defines our view and perception of our world and the character we give the transitions such as 'industrial age', 'information age' etc. (Castells, 2000a; 2000b). This perspective views citizen journalism as a product of technological changes and perhaps with the argument that without the internet, there would not have been more sophistication in the practice of citizen journalism. Furthermore, Van der Haak, Park and Castells (2012) project that technology will play greater role in tomorrow's journalism.

The other side of the divide accommodates those who are pro-culture in the argument for media dynamism vis-à-vis citizen journalism. Championed by a communicator and popular culture expert, Henry Jenkins made a case for society as major determinant of how media works rather than technology. Jenkins (2004, 2006) describes media convergence as an audience-inspired trend where participation and

collective intelligence of users improve media content. He maintains that it is the audience's desire to be more active rather than passive that has necessitated the invention of technologies to achieve them. Jenkins explanation is given credence when Peskin (2003) described the informed society as a generation of smart people who utilize available means to find their versions of truths. The behavior and character of people is the driving force behind all kinds of changes including technology and not vice versa.

Citizen journalism, as can be deduced by the arguments put forward, is driven both by participation (culture) and equipment (technology). They are two sides of the same coin – meaning that one cannot do without the other. For a clearer understanding of citizen journalism, it must be viewed from both technological and cultural perspective – from the perspective of the society's growing desire to be producers of news and from the perspective that discloses the inevitable role of information technologies as facilitating vehicle for this desire.

Communitarian theory as framework for this study emphasizes on the social connections amongst people using the media. Its major proposition is the relationship between the media and their audiences which is built on mutual indices in an actual community. Furthermore, the theory makes the media responsible for initiating and engaging in dialogues and promoting collaboration – “not self-interest but partnership is seen as the way forward” (McQuails, 2010).

One of the effective ways for promoting communitarianism is for the media to provide avenues where citizens and individuals can contribute and build media content. Citizen journalism partnership is one cardinal feature of the applicability of this theory. As mainstream media open up their frontiers for citizens to contribute to news; partnerships, collaborations and dialogue between them and the audience are established.

Banda (2010) points out that the communitarian theory encourages democratic journalism by building a sense of community among citizens which in turn seeks to provide deeper and more participatory journalism in which such citizens influence the news-media agenda. To him, the communitarian philosophy is the brain behind citizen journalism and comes with six (6) implications for both citizens and the media landscape:

- Limitless accessibility to news platforms for citizens.
- More visibility for society voices in news.
- Greater media ownership for citizens.
- Increased community ‘ownership’ of news.
- A competitive media landscape especially for state and media.
- More innovations for participation in journalistic content production.

The implications of the communitarian media environment cited above are very characteristic of the present media landscape where mainstream media are collaborating with citizens to produce more community-based stories. This form of partnership endears the media organizations to the public and; for those publics (audience), they feel part of the organization by contributing. In a way, this is public relations at work.

3. Friends or Foes?

Research has indicated that citizen journalists have, in most instances, undermined the credibility of stories written by mainstream professional journalists (Robinson, 2009) while on the other hand, professional journalists writing for mainstream newspapers or media houses constantly accuse citizen-generated content for lack of professionalism in writing and flaunting basic ethical standards – a “triumph of amateurism over professionalism” (Niyomukiza, 2013, p.14).

This rift described above notwithstanding, citizen journalism has been viewed as a positive force which although, seeks to challenge the existence and modus operandi of mainstream media houses, it equally seeks to compliment mainstream media and strengthen the philosophy of what journalism really is. Niyomukiza (2013, p.15) observes that citizen journalism has significantly created new opportunities for mainstream media the following ways:

- Being an asset for journalists and editors who are constrained by time and resources to gather news. Here citizens provide news tips and stories the reporter cannot lay his or her hands on.
- The immediacy provided by citizen reports can help mainstream media to break news and report more adequately and accurately.
- The social jurisdiction of news expands and changes when minorities, women and ordinary people become authors of news, as well as its readers.

Revis (2011) corroborated the argument above by providing that citizen journalism can be an effective catalyst for democratizing the media as well as nations. Her argument stems from the view that citizen journalists are activists who create moral education and citizen platforms have aided the diffusion of media monopoly. In this process, the people are given a voice to initiate and drive discourses which yield overreaching impacts such as the *Arab Spring*, *Occupy Wall Street*, *Black Lives Matter*, *Occupy Nigeria*, etc.

Just as the argument for citizen abounds, the argument against this practice and philosophy are enormous. Traub (2013) rebuffs that citizen journalism is not yet credible enough to carry out its goals. He further explains what he terms as ‘innate shortcomings’ exhibited by citizen journalists. To him, the contents of citizen media has limited effects, thwarted objectives and minimal admiration due to dearth of adequate credibility. The issues of fake news, disinformation, misinformation and mal-information have typified citizen platform ever since its emergence to the media landscape.

Skepticism shared among communication scholars and journalists alike regarding citizen journalism possess a question of whether professional journalists and citizen journalists are friends or foes. Citizens can be prone to sentiments just as professional journalists are but the ability to understand what constitutes libel and uphold the tenets of journalism practice is the mandate of the professional writer. The citizens, in most instances, do not understand the difference between objectivity and freedom of expression; between social responsibility and the will to say what is in their minds.

Amidst all these controversies, there arise fundamental questions in respect to the relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media or professional journalists: can citizen journalism still play valuable roles in information story telling? Is citizen journalism also susceptible to compromises as the mainstream media is accused of? How has it been a complementation of mainstream media and how much threat does it portend to mainstream journalism? (Intelligence Squared (2014).

Storck (2014) explains in a research conducted on citizen journalism and the Syrian war that it is often difficult for one to objectively report on issues that directly affect him as the case was for Syrian citizen journalists, however those citizens provided foreign

professional journalists most of the information they needed to know about the Syrian war of 2014. Storck’s answer/findings to the questions above, therefore, is obvious – citizen journalism plays a complementary role to mainstream media houses. Intelligence Squared (2014) also reaffirms Storck’s findings by explaining that citizen journalism is ensuring that people become part of the action and enhancing our appreciation of how events unfold in our world. They reiterate that mainstream media and professional journalists are only too comfortable to use images, footages and tweets of bystanders and eye witnesses who took those shoots using their smartphones. Although as insignificant as this citizens’ action was, images and accounts from events such as 9/11, the Arab Spring and The Syrian War would have been lost if ordinary members of the public had not taken the pains to document and share them.

While Lasica cited in Paulussen and Ugille (2008) suggests that the argument portraying citizen journalism as a threat to professional journalism further failing as journalism today see more reasons to embrace the complementary roles of each other. Lewis, Holton and Coddington (2014, p.1) also add that journalists and audiences today engage in mutual exchange of information in what they refer to as “reciprocal journalism”.

From the foregoing, it seems there is no better way to handle the explosion of citizen journalism and its threat to mainstream media than collaboration. Since its paroxysm, media leaders from the mainstream media have gathered at different times in different places around the globe to contemplate response strategies to the increasing traffic of user content on the internet. The basic conclusion of these conferences have been unanimous – how to create a better-informed society by collaborating with one another (Dare, 2011).

The friendship and enmity between citizen journalists and mainstream media journalists can best be described as hydra-headed. The actors in this script either perform a positive plot of collaboration which results to producing contents that have robust impact on society or embark on a negative relationship marred in sabotage (dwelling more on their weaknesses than strengths) leading to an unhealthy and backward media ecology. This entire series is modeled below in what we refer to as the collaborative media octopus.

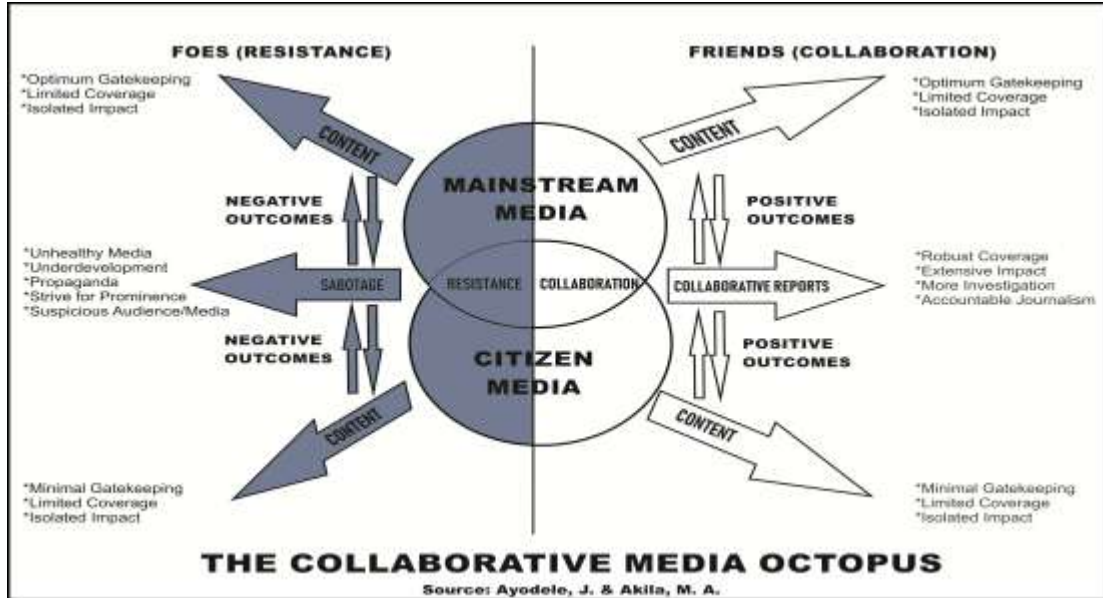


Fig. 1: The Collaborative Media Octopus

Whatever actions citizen and mainstream media journalists make, there are resultant consequences. On the left are actions resulting in enmity and resistance from one another and on the right are positive outcomes derived from healthy cooperation. The two media types are saddled with the responsibility of information dissemination and are capable of producing contents with considerable amount of impact. However, the greater level of impact can be derived where the two entities intersect (either through resistance or collaboration). Where they choose to collaborate, greater and robust positive impacts are made and if they choose to divert energy to sabotage, the nation suffers from their unhealthy rivalry.

Professional journalists and citizens, in recent times, have come to realize more than ever that their role is complementary and symbiotic rather than a case of competition. They are beginning to view themselves as partners in progress, hence the trending issue of collaboration between mainstream media outlets and the citizens who are the audiences (Cass, 2009; Changemakers, 2012). As ‘unprofessional’ as citizen journalists might be, professional journalists are beginning to realize how important they could be in establishing and growing story ideas that can be further investigated and developed into a well-informed story; citizens are equally beginning to recognize their relevance and importance to the ‘professionals’ (Magro, 2010; Nikkanen, 2011).

4. Citizen Journalism and Challenges to Media Gatekeeping Role

The mainstream media’s gatekeeping role is one key areas citizen journalism differ from MSM. Theoretical postulations of communication scholars like Paul Lazarsfeld and Kurt Lewin in the mid-twentieth century provide that the mass media, through the editors, serve as gatekeepers, filtering and determining what messages the public receives (Baran and Davis, 2012; Lewin, 1947; Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). Bruns (2009) asserts that the traditional news process undergo three stages of gatekeeping. The first stage is at the input stage where news is gathered only by staff journalists of the media organization (they know the house style and try to do away with excessive and ‘unwanted information’); at the second stage (output), the closed editorial hierarchy subjects the written stories to intense scrutiny and even ‘kill’ certain stories considered as unimportant and uninteresting; stage three gatekeeping occurs when editors select convenient audience responses to publish or broadcast (the kind of response/feedback include letters and calls from audiences).

However, this traditional role is been threatened by citizen journalism visa vis the democratization of media space provided by the internet (Revis, 2011). Research has shown that the internet have affected gatekeeping (Beard and Olsen, 1999). Particularly, Singer cited in Channel (2010) observes that editors are willing to relinquish the gatekeeping mandate to accommodate users voice in the news process or in the newspapers. After all, the reader has been empowered by the internet to decide what is

newsworthy and even report them without going to any producer or editor of a media house.

On the contrary, Ali and Fahmy (2013) claim that technology has not changed journalism landscape in the aspect of gatekeeping. They posit that mainstream media not only gate-keep information from their journalists but also exercise gatekeeping on news and information given to them by citizen journalists.

Girdwood (2013) adds to the argument as he observes that there are certain categories of media users who still prefer what he calls ‘classic editing and gate-keeping functions’ provided by mainstream media outlets rather than the free flowing unscrutinised reports from unpopular websites. According to him, this preference is because News can be compared to a well-prepared dish of a favourite meal and not just a recollection of the previous day’s tales – a food made for the sake of cooking.

Based on the arguments put forward by the scholars above, it can be deduced that it is a fact that citizen journalism is challenging mainstream media’s dominant gatekeeping function and making them flexible, however, the mainstream media still exert this function on certain news stories especially citizen stories. What mainstream media do is to scrutinize and verify those reports before using them. Bruns (2009) concurs to this and further adds that mainstream media’s gatekeeping function is gradually shifting because most of the earlier objectives for media gatekeeping are obsolete. These objectives included editorial policies, advertorials, etc. Today, speed and currency make such policies to be re-strategised and the number of gatekeepers reduced and mainstreamed. Mainstream media, according to him, are performing what he calls gatewatching rather than gatekeeping.

In gatewatching, the media house is expected to pay attention and observe news stories posted on the multiple media available in this information age. The aim of observing is to be able to see which news has not been reported, which news has been ill-reported and what facts are needed to make them better. These stories are expected to be submitted for instant publication after a collaborative editing process after which same stories are opened for discussions and commentaries (Bruns, 2005). According to him, two major distinctions between gatekeeping and gatewatching is that; one, the latter is open to citizens from the first stage while the former is a closed process involving only the media house; and two, gatewatching involves a thorough monitoring of other channel so that no important news is left out and an equally meticulous incorporation of facts and

details left out in the reports of those media while gatekeeping deals with a scrutinizing what staff journalists lay at the desks of editors to remove what is considered as unnecessary and add what is deemed as relevant to suit the wills and caprices of the editor and media organization.

5. Rethinking Collaborative Reporting

Today, journalism has been able to report remote issues that never could have been reported, partly because of the collaboration existing between mainstream journalism and the ‘former’ audience in curating news and producing content. Citizen journalism in itself encourages symbiotic relationship between traditional journalists and citizen reporters (Lavrusik, 2009; Bamidele, 2011). The line between the journalists and their sources are further thinning and giving room to more enhanced relationship between these two, where the source becomes a journalist too. What this portends is more collaboration (Lavrusik (2009).

Mainstream media are beginning to recognize their deficiency and inability to be everywhere at every time to report news; they have concurrently realized the wealth of stories that can be missed if there is no existing partnership with users who have become active reporters and producers of news. *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, United States of America won a Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for Public Service because of the groundbreaking partnership with citizen journalists on reports of corruption. The newspaper recounted in its Pulitzer contest entry how billions of taxpayers’ money were laundered and squandered. Citizen reporters played a huge role in unraveling the decay in America’s civil service when they took turns to share their personal experiences and corrected preliminary reports sent to them by the newspaper outfit (*The Times Picayune*, cited in Gillmor, 2013).

It can be deduced from the quote above that collaborative reporting works deeper than what most Nigerian media houses do. It is a deep relationship between citizen journalists and mainstream media that encourages conscious and voluntary participation in investigative journalism, if necessary, of citizens in news gathering and reporting. When this is achieved, collaboration can be said to have served a greater good for the community. Collaborative reporting goes beyond mere public comments on stories written/posted by professional journalists in mainstream media; it involves the information exchange relationship behind closed doors that mould and refines what comes out as news (Lyon and

Ferrara, 2013). Citizens who contribute to content online belong to a Generation C ('C' for content) and they "produce an avalanche" of information on diverse specialized and mundane issues (Trendwatching, cited in Channel, 2010, p.6). Rather than competing with this, mainstream media are finding ways to collaborate with these users and tap into the available and unreached information in possession of the users.

While some mainstream media have gladly welcomed this collaboration, some are only attempting to experiment with this idea; yet, a larger part of media organisations, especially in Sub-Sahara Africa, are foot-dragging, reluctant and skeptical towards the phenomenon. African media outlets need to rethink their strategy for coopting citizen journalists. Banda (2010) writes that the typical response of African mainstream media organisations has been to establish online platforms for their publications, which they considered enough before now. Although Banda's assertion was made a decade ago, the situation today is hardly different and sadly true. There are many better forms of collaborations that can be explored and the benefits therein far outweigh the pitfalls.

It is in this light that Channels TV and a host of other Nigerian media outlets recognized that major news events coverage is a partnership between them and citizen journalists who are believed to offer so much information. Through this process, the narrative to news coverage and dissemination is changing all over the world. It is no longer a north-south trickling of information (without probing) but an open forum for sharing and re-sharing, coverage and re-coverage, writing and rewriting of stories and contacting of sources (Paulesen et al, cited in Paulesen and Ugille 2008).

Reese (2009) indicates that collaboration/partnership in journalistic space will be a deliberate and continuous thing in the future. Hence, media houses that refuse to embrace the democratic abundance of news produsage afforded by citizen journalism might just fold up.

6. Conclusion

What remains to be seen is whether mainstream media will avail citizen journalists an equal sit at the high table of journalism practice. Countries in the developed worlds are keying into this and the earlier Africa does same, the better. Citizen journalism is already having profound impact on the journalism industry and the process of gathering and reporting

news in the future, hence, its relevance in current journalism studies and researches. The basic characteristics of the collaborative media octopus as presented by this paper above is the aggregated benefits that collaboration presents: a robust coverage through the unraveling of new facts and more voices; an extensive impact occasioned by an outpour of audience feedback; more investigation to stories as unique and distinct perspectives are added; accountable journalism is enhanced as a greater number of people are been scrutinized due to the independent and pervasive natures of media. This far outweighs the negativity and enmity of resisting collaboration by the parties which is obvious in the unhealthy relationship and the underdevelopment a nation can find itself in.

As beautiful as this relationship and collaboration is, it further puts journalism in a state of crisis. Apart from the strain on revenue and readership of media content occasioned by the rise of citizen journalism media, further collaboration puts the media ecology to stiff competition and dominance on news sources and exclusive coverages of certain important events in an attempt to outsource one another. This competition should awaken a new wave of enmity and mistrust not just between mainstream media and citizen journalist but also among competing Mainstream media organization and between citizen journalism outlet. How this pans out will be a matter of the not-so-distant future.

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