WEBJOURNALISM AND CHALLENGES OF EDITORIAL FUNCTIONS:THE CASE FOR NIGERIA

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Abstract

Web-journalism *connotes the use of the Cyberspace gather, process, store, exchange ordistribute information. This development, like other previous forms of communication technology is bound to have tremendous effect on the prevailing media of mass communication. Much of the commentaries and research reports have concentrated on how to manage a news websites in terms of design and layouting as well as the business dimension and influences on the survival of the traditional organs of mass communication. However, the cyberspace as a news medium tends to demand an integrated approach to news production that combines the elements of both the print and electronic media. Not much if anything has been done on the criteria for news types or styles required for a more effective web-journalism. This paper, however, aspires to provide a theoretical analysis of content selectivity in a multi-media editorial environment. The web is a medium with a global audienceand the format is multi media. This situation is bound to pose some challenges to the choice of news that would satisfy a multi-media audience with its unique characteristics. The value of thisarticle is the attempt to find the possibility of accommodating the craft and postulations of scholars and practitioners of Web-journalism in the mainstream of mass communication theories using McLuhan's Media is the Message as a platform.*

Introduction

Many newspapers and broadcasting outfits all over the world have found their way tomaintain visible presence in the Internet. The opportunities offered by the web are utilised intwo ways. They are either established as an autonomous and wholly online news service oran offline subsidiary of a parent publication or broadcasting station, i.e, conventionalnewspapers or television distributing its editions in the Net while still sustaining the printed copies (Onogueira, 2008).

The work identified two stages of web-journalism as a conventionaltelevision with online presence, a Web- TV born on the web only for regular dissemination ofnews, either live or on demand, and finally a video file online that is constantly updated.The primary features of web-journalism are multimedia, hyper-textuality, interactivity andarchiving. This allows journalists to blend texts with images, sounds and links to moreinformation at a time in the same stories (Dimitriva and Neznanski, web, 2011).

Much research reports and essays hasbeen done about the uses of computer in the newsroom for reporting and story production,news gathering routines, editing and presentation as well as content improvement in the newsmedia and how newspaper news format is transformed into webpages (Shannon, 1998). Somescholars have also studied the audience profile of web news and the business aspects,considering advertising potentials and circulation.

With these set of studies much could be considered to have been achieved and nobody isdoubt any more if the web can answer for a medium of mass communication. If in practice,this has been proved, there is now need to consider moving computer-mediatedcommunication into the mainstream of media studies by associating some of the practicalfindings to media theories. There is dire need to theoretically account for the differences in thecyberspace and the traditional mass media space in order to explore the link between these different media formats and their implications for the traditional editorial functions oftext production; story selection, rewrite, headline casting and graphics.

Another dimension tothe technical nature of the cyberspace is that it is a global media space, considering its audienceand by its reach. Anybody who has the means can access cyber news irrespective ofterritoriality or nationality. It therefore anticipates a blend of local and global news to satisfya global audience. This will change the usual criteria for news headlines and newsworthiness.It is expected that as more and more newspapers are providing online news services, reporters and editors should learn that news content accessible and acceptable in one medium formatcan no longer remain in the same form in the others as there is need to reassess their news values as they move from one format to the other (Shannon, p.65).

To a great extent, online publishing is a global medium which is different from the morerestrictive national media space in which the offline media existed. This context has thepower to change issue selection and priorities in news editing. Neil Thorman (2007) hasillustrated this globalised tendency of online journalism a comparative study of readers ofBritish online newspapers. He found that many newspapers and media organisations havegone from a modest interest in international readers to an active adaptation of news materialsand advertisements to fit transatlantic audience.

A report on the study of CNN online and offline news shows that online journalists attempt toproduce news as quickly as possible and edit later through constant updating and re-editing (Kautsky and Wildhom, 2008). It is alsorelevant to note that from the same study news text is found to be the basic element of online journalism. News texts, especially the captions and summaries are the first items that readersnotice in order to acquire journalistic information, and only after consulting the selectedarticles on the home page do they proceed to photographs, graphs or the moving images.

Thestudy further reports that in online journalism, the text captures attention but in thenewspapers and magazines, the images are what attract attention. It was found that shortarticles are read three times more than long ones and people go more deeply into readingsubjects of special interest.

Some of the reasons that can account for the difference in the editions can be attributed todifferences in the media technology in which they exist. The offline edition exists on a printformat consisting of ink and paper, the online edition is made possible through a multimediaformat. These two media technologies have distinctive opportunities and challenges.

Colin Sparks(2000, p. 272) argues that the online news gathering and production process is free from thearbitrary deadlines imposed by the physical constraints of printing and distributing aconventional newspaper. Comparing the two formats, Sparks stated that there is nolonger lengthy period required as in the mechanical tasks of printing thousands of identicalcopies and distributing them throughout the circulation area are achieved.

In addition to thetechnical conditions that make all the differences in the two newspapers' formats, the onlineand the offline editions are also demarcated by news globalization i.e access to by global audience. This phenomenonprovides the framework for subsequent discussions in this paper. How do we characterize this audience and their peculiar news needs? For the web based news to be effective, they have to be specifically packaged in in ways that are unique to the online environment. This is probably what EM Grifin (2012, p.396) has in mind when he stated that the trend todays practicing journalist is far less a print or broadcast journalist or a web journalist and far more a multi-media journalist whom he describes as a reporter skilled in all the media and able to operate comfortably regardless of the desired media mix.

Internet and News Globalisation

The Internet is fundamentally a global medium. The emergence of the Web technology has inan unprecedented way facilitated the speedy consolidation of a global network with a globalaudience. A newspaper, in its conventional sense is at most a national or local communitymedia. To a reasonable

extent, the editorial content of the newspapers are determined by theinformation needs of the target readership which invariably is local or national communityinterests.

The concept of globalisation is associated with Marshall McLuhan's notion of theglobal village.

Even at the risk of oversimplification, the global village assumes that as themedia shrinks the world, people will become increasingly involved in one another's lives andas people come to know more about others who were once separated from them by distance,they will form a new beneficial relationship (Baran, 1999, p.441). On this account, McLuhansaid the human tribe can become truly one family and man" consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture. Saying the same thing a different way, William Gibson(Baran, p.442) stated; we are moving towards a world where all the consumers under acertain age will identify more with their consumer status or the product they consume thanthey would with antiquated notion of nationality. If television which was the spectacle thatattracted these comments could do much with its limitations; the Internet would do more in creating agreater village square, whether of consumers or citizens.

This position is amplified in Robert Kautsky (2008) citing Neil Thorman (2007). Heillustrated the globalised nature of online journalism when made a comparative study ofnational and international readers of British online newspapers. It was reported that manynews organisations in Britain had moved from a modest interest in international readers to anactive adaptation of news materials and advertisement to suit transatlantic audiences whichconstitute 78% of Guardian online in Britain.

Globalisation refers to the intensification of global interconnectedness through a

whole range of relations such as international communications and media networks, financialsystems, the expansion of transnational corporate activities and the flow of people includingmigrants, refugees and tourists across national boundaries (Chambers, 2000, p.113).

Of all these forms of international contacts, the Internet appears to be moreformidable as a result of its capacity to collect and distribute news and other information,instantaneously. The Internet as global news media is associated with the emergence of a global news audience that is different from the local or national audience served by theoffline newspapers.

In recognition of this development, newspaper editors need to apply a new set of newsselectivity criteria in online publishing or distribution of the offline edition. The needs of theonline audience have greatly influenced and necessitated creating different news agenda forthe same newspaper. Global news agenda revolve around global themes such as environmentand industrial pollution, political violence and refugee problem, terrorism, good governance and economic cooperation.

There are obvious implications for newspaper content editingarising from its trappings at the vortex of reinventing or shedding its local orientation to be able to fit into the global platform. Will the newspapers abandon its nationally defined socialresponsibility by covering more of such global issues or provide different contents for theonline and offline editions especially by established newspaper companies. The response is that cyber-journalism is yet to evolve a separate news content format other than the traditional news media (Chan-Olmsted and Jung Sunk, 2000).

It is important to identify and explain those pressures that the entrants or participatingonline newspaper editors would face in the globalised media environment. In this connection,the adaptation of offline newspaper to a multi- media system and its consequences for contentediting as well as options for survival are further examined.

MEDIA IS THE MESSAGE

There are fundamental influences of the media in determining the kind of informationpresented and the style of presentation of such information, hence the postulation of MarshalMcLuhan that the "media is the message". Newspapers are conventionally delivered as printmedia and the content is dominantly literary.

It is analytical and predisposes the reader to adetachment and private experience of configuring the meanings of the written words. On the
contrary the television screen which is the medium of computer encourages demonstrationand showmanship; seeing is believing, which Andrew Buike (1976) refers to as ThomasSyndrome. It is real if it can be seen or heard! It is a world of oral and visual expression.
Postman (1993, p.16) has clearly made the distinction between the print and the
electronic media when he wrote: " on the one hand there is the world of printed word withemphasis on logic, sequence, history, exposition, objectivity, detachment, and discipline. Onthe other, there is the world of television with emphasis on imagery, narrative, presentness,simultaneity, intimacy, immediate gratification, and quick emotional response". Now theworld of the Internet combines these two worlds for newspaper publishing, not only for theonline but with tremendous influence on the offline contents.
He further explains that new technologies alter the structure of our interests, the thingswe think about, what is valued and the nature of the community. To this extent, the editorwho operates in the world of print and television as represented by the internet has a greatchallenge. The analysis being driven here is further compounded in the light of Postman'spostulations elsewhere (2005, p.24) by making the point that the weight assigned to any formof truth-telling is a function of the influence of media of communication, arguing that a majorshift in medium would change the structure of discourse by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, favouring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom and demanding certain kindof content or new forms of truth telling. Journalism as expressed in newspaper editing ie, content selection and style of presentation, now faces the challenges of a world of mediaconvergence.
Prunila (2006) makes such distinct attributes of both offline and online newspapers thatleaves no one in doubt that they are indeed different media that require different contents. Itwas contended that electronic newspaper is based mostly on the stories of the offlinenewspaper but contains much more less stories and only one story per page compared to thehard copy and there is less room for pictures. The electronic newspaper layout is made suchthat news, features and advertisements and other service information which used to be planned together are now sorted out and classified in separately.
Usually, the home page of the electronic newspaper contains subject heads under whichthe editorial items and other contents appear, such as foreign news, political news, economy,feature, entertainment, etc. Readers do not have immediate access to the specific headlinesuntil they click on these subject heads. It could be further considered that while offlinenewspapers offer surprises and chanced reading as the reader moves from page to page, theresmaller stories and bits of information that may be stumble upon and add value to the paper.This is what Sparks (2000, p.281) refers to as unbundling.
By this, he states that the two main constituents of the offline newspaper, public affairs and advertising are no longer joinedtogether, apparently because of the logic of the Web as a news medium.One of the significant attributes of the online newspaper is its capacity to update itseditorial contents with the breaking news. This has transcended the usual limitations of theoffline editions that had to wait for upwards of 24-hour news cycle before they print newinformation.
As already pointed out, the offline edition of the newspaper exists in the global sphere where news events take place very fast and in different aspects of the community, soare demands for such information and the need to update on a high competitive level withnumerous other media. In addition to the demand for the latest information, readers who havecultivated the habit of reading in-depth and reasoned arguments and interpretations in theoffline editions are also harbouring the same expectations of the online.
Furthermore, whilethe online edition of the newspaper would normally aspire to serve a global readership theoffline is still holding a local monopoly over local news by virtue of being a local medium that has a limited interest to carter for. This could be what Stoval (2004) when he stated that we news had built its strength on news that can be used, which are community based. However, it remains to be resolved how

the Internet which is essentially a global space can derive its efficiency from community based news agenda.

One more attribute that distinguishes online from offline newspaper is the capacity forinteractivity. Online newspaper has opportunity for real-time feedback as readers can sendtheir reactions to a newspaper story instantly to the editor of the electronic paper and it is published immediately. Clicking pictures, texts and other links attached to a story, readersare equally engaged in interactivity. From the analysis of the attributes of the online andoffline newspapers, it is suggestive that going online is not just a matter of transporting orposting an offline edition to the Internet wholesale. They both have different news values anddifferent readership as well as different opportunities emanating from their differenttechnologies.

Describing the format for televised news, Postman (2005, p.88) states; they are notassembling the news to be read or broadcasting it to be heard, they are televising the news tobe seen. They must follow where the medium leads and a good television aims at applause and not reflection, issues are presented in a format of entertainment and drama.

Postmanfurther argues that it is the nature of the visual medium like television to that it must suppressthe content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest ie, the values of show business. Describing the influence of visual media in the United States, he claims that Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchangeideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with goodlooks, celebrities and commercials.The import of this review is that the news website in the Internet possesses the threeattributes of print, television and global interests, all of which operate to condition the currency, topicality and style of online news editing.

Challenges of Online Editing Technology in Nigeria

When the possibilities of the Internet first became apparent, the newspaper industry saw in ita new, cheaper and faster means of circulation., and many newspapers simply copied and posted pages of the offline editions of their papers to the net. Since the last two decades, mostnewspapers and magazines in Nigeria have acquired websites for this purpose. Notablyamong the newspapers that have embraced online newspaper practices are *The Guardian,ThisDay, Champion, The Post Express, Vanguard, Daily Trust, TheNews, PM Nnews*and

others which could be found in the website of a United States based organisation,*ALLafrica.com (*Mbachu, 2003, pp.184-186*).

Mbachu explains that *Allafrica.com* haspositioned itself as a key Internet portal for the distribution of the Nigerian and othernewspapers in Africa. He however observed that the vastness of the Internet has created much demands for content that has been difficult to satisfy since it is not enough to post anelectronic look alike of the offline editions to the net.

As noted in the conceptual framework to this analysis, the online newspapers have tocontend with the Internet technological which is multi-media in status and also to deal withthe issue of internationalised news audience which the locally orientated offline news pages and contents cannot be adequate.

Newspaper journalism in Nigeria has been predominantly wedded to the course of social andpolitical advocacy. The overriding news agenda featured nationally bound issues of politicalpower sharing and governance. This position can be confirmed from the duties andobligations of the press which is contained in the Federal Constitution.

According to thisprovision, the press and other agencies of the mass media are expected to uphold thefundamental responsibilities and accountability of the government to the citizens. Thisprovision is a formalisation of the historical role played in the political development of the country from the colonial times through the post- independence and to the consolidation ofdemocracy in the country.

Aside the role of journalists in the nationalist struggles, their resistance to the protracted military political leadership marked by all kinds of human and civil rights abusesremains a visible identity of professional journalism in the country. As generallyacknowledged, the press in Nigeria was born of anti- colonial protests, baptized in the flood ofnationalists propaganda and matured in party politics; and the pre-independence politicalactivism of the press is a living memory for most contemporary journalists, its success atribute to their craft (Golding, 1977, p.301).

Though the above observation was made over thirtyyears ago, the position is even truer today. Nothing has changed in terms of the basicdefinition of the goal of journalism.The ideological orientation of the press in Nigeria has obvious implications for thekind of professional attitudes exhibited the course of issue selection and style of presentationin the editing process. To this extent therefore, newspapers in Nigeria have become a schoolwith an elaborate political curriculum, not only to educate the citizens about the ideals ofgovernance, but also to defend the civic rights of the public, which often cut the image of opposition or adversaries to the political and economic power holders in the country.

The first feature to be noticed in the Nigeria newspapers is the inevitable long essaysmasquerading as news reports. Integrating news and opinions in the name of interpretativereporting has become a highly rated journalistic virtue. Journalism of opinions and high levelpolemics are the order of the day in Nigerian journalism. There is the challenge of literarynews style that fit the multi- media environment of the online journalism.

As already stated,online journalism is more than wholesale copying of the pages of the offline editions postedto the net. It is necessary to reason that there is a limit to the duration and kind of analysisthat can be endured by an average reader on the monitor screen.

In his study of the online behaviour of news users in the United States, Sparks (Ibid)concluded that majority of the people make visits to online sites but they go for brief accountof events or breaking news and headline checking. He is of the opinion that based on thisposition, there is apparently no basis for the kind of detailed reporting that are the historicalstrength of the conventional newspaper (p.284). Nigerian newspapers are not used to news asmere facts of daily occurrences!

Although, there provisions for linkages to other news sites, private and corporate sitescould as well be part of the linkages that serve as background material or further readingpertaining a given news item, there journalistic challenges in doing that. In conventionalnewspaper, journalists take responsibility for the authenticity of the information published. This cannot be so any longer as the journalist who is providing a link to another websitemay not have accessed all the information provided to ascertain their veracity. Moreover,there is the issue of unbundling or disintermediation (Sparks, 2000, p.286). The separationbetween advertising and news is no more respected. Corporate advertising would now beascribed with the credibility that were formerly reserved for news as social public service.

It is also observable that the newspapers thrive on local daily news menu such asofficial corruption, cock and bull fight among the parliamentarians, ethnic and religiousclashes, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure, uneven distribution of the nationalresources, constitutional changes and high crime rate in the country. These are highlylocalised issues that may be of no consequence to attract a globalised Internet news audience.

How would the press in Nigeria harmonise its ideology of public service of lengthy essays onstrictly local issues with the news expectations of an international audience to be able tomake it attractive to an international audience, where such topical issues as science and technology, environmental and declining world finances take precedence?

The real question is whether the journalists functioning in the conventional newspaperenvironment could be used to manage the online editions or should they employ a differentset of personnel, who need not be journalists but website engineers? Should the newspapersabandon their offline editions or go it together by

reinventing the offline news operations such that the news pages produced in that format could fit into multi-media environment?There seem to be no final answers yet to all of these ponderings.

Options for Nigerian Journalist
There are indications that in some countries, the real options are for the newspapers to choosebetween abandoning the offline editions and go for online editions only. However some ofthe newspaper houses can afford to keep the two versions at great cost in terms of usingparallel staff separated from each of the edition lines. Nigeria does not seem to be prepared for any of these than to continue to pretend that what is good for the offline is also good forthe online newspapers.

The real challenges are enormous. These include the low penetration of the Internetfacilities among the populace; only few people are have access to Internet connectivity as aresult of exorbitant cost of personal computers that could facilitate access, high cost of airtime in the cybercafé due to low bandwidth and its attendant over congestion. The congestiongives rise to undue elongation of response duration and cyber tickets are sold in minutes, somore air time is needed to read longer stories and background materials. To that extent,

Internet news patronage can only be too low.

What appears to be feasible in the present circumstances for Nigerian newspapers isto maintain its monopoly over local news through the consolidation of the offline editions.There are no visible evidence yet to show that the news agenda which offline editions thriveon could command reasonable attention in the online global environment. Also, no researchevidence has shown that newspaper readers in Nigeria are migrating from offline to online

editions. It is not possible for the offline newspapers to abandon their news structure which isdictated by over a century media ideology rooted in the principles of the Fourth Estate andsocial advocacy. For now the adoption of online newspaper by media houses remain crudeand at best an image project. It is significant also that to be pro-active and current in masscommunication should take full cognisance of the fact that the unfolding Internet technologyholds unlimited opportunities that could change the news environment in Nigeria as it affects newspaper publishing.

As recommended by media scholars,media convergence presents a new challenge to news producers tasking their ability to tell stories in all media which include text,photos, audio, video and the combination of all these crafts and how they are used in the cyberspace is absolutely required (Sterin, 2012). According to him, scholars are yet to have a unified theory that can account for the unique nature of the cyberspace and the type of news suitable.

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