

Benefits, Challenges And Prospects Of Citizen Journalism Practice In Nigeria

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Abstract

Over the years, journalism practice has been squarely the preserve of professionals in the field of journalism. The professionals in this case are those who have acquired the nitty-gritty of the profession. However, as society began to grow, and modern technology improved, individuals began to exercise the functions of journalists. These gave them the label – citizen journalists vis a vis citizen journalism. The objective of this paper, therefore, was to examine the concept of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria with special focus on the benefits, challenges and prospects of the practice in the country. Using survey method, a census of lecturers and postgraduate students which amounted to 143 respondents from the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka was conducted with questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. The findings revealed that the challenges facing citizen journalism in Nigeria are enormous, and include; computer illiteracy, difficulty in accessing the internet and high cost of ‘surfing’ the net. Notwithstanding these challenges, it was also revealed that the benefits of citizen journalism to the country are invaluable. These include wider coverage of events, urgency in media report and encouragement of ICT in the country. As for the prospects of citizen journalism practice in the country, the findings revealed that citizen journalism will create an information society and increase the number of Internet users in the country. It was recommended, therefore, that computer literacy be taken seriously in both secondary and tertiary institutions in order to brace-up the knowledge in the citizens, while requesting government to step-up to the demands of infrastructure in the country and ensure the regulation of Internet materials.

Introduction

The growth of modern technology and the sophistication of society over a period of time became a big challenge for traditional media of communication. In other for the media to survive this challenge, they resorted to the coverage of news with economic benefits as against the interest of the citizens. On the other hand, the citizens having discovered this development, decided to look for ways of satisfying their quest to know the happenings around them. The consequence of this development became a situation were citizens’

source for news themselves and reports it without passing through the normal journalistic process. Adelabu (2008, p. 364) captured the vivid picture of this development when he avers that:

Many mass media organisations are busy repackaging and becoming more interested in meeting advertisers' needs rather than readers'/audiences' needs, many people through the help of information technology most especially, the internet are redefining the rules and roles of the game.

Another issue that led to the emergence of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria is the fact that the happenings around us far supersede the manifest content of traditional mass media. This simply means that most events occur without being reported either because there is no conventional journalist on site or none assigned to cover such beat. Burkholder (2010, p. 1) captures the essence of this statement when she notes that:

More often than not, major news happens and there is no one around to report it. By way of interviews and records of the event, reporters are able to re-create it for the morning paper. Unfortunately, there is usually not the opportunity to capture news in the making with a photograph. But when the London underground was bombed on July 7, 2005, photos of the event were published on websites and blogs, and made their way to the mainstream media. It was the people with camera cell phones that captured the images, not reporters.

By definition, citizen journalism practice is a term which describes the act of individual within a given society, community, state or nation engaging in the gathering, processing and publishing of news materials. In this case, individuals on their own create web pages where they publish news material collected within the society. They are able to do this due to the prevalence of modern technology. In most cases, they employ mobile phones and other recording materials which enable them to snap and cover event which are letter posted on the web.

Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 9) defined citizen journalism as "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information, in order to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires". They added that "credibility, thus, would be an almost natural attribute of a citizen-journalist, since eyewitness reporting comes in large part from people's desire to share their stories and publish the truth".

Educause Learning Initiative (2007, p. 1), in their opinion of citizen journalism avers that "citizen journalism refers to a wide range of activities in which everyday people contribute information or commentary about news events". Furthermore, "the concept of citizen journalism has been applied to wide variety of practices, underpinned by the idea that active participation in media production by non-professional actors in potentially a mode of political engagement" (Markham, 2009, p. 1).

However, a true picture of citizen journalism practice can be gotten from the account of Educause Learning Initiative (2007, p. 1) as they record that:

When the G8 Summit came to town, a local university sponsored a citizen journalism project to cover the event. For three days, the G8 leaders gathered to discuss issues including trade, the environment, international security, and social welfare. The summit also drew protesters from a number of countries, and the project addressed not only the summit itself but also the issues raised by critics. Students from disciplines including journalism, economics, political science, sociology, and environmental science were recruited to participate. They would write stories dealing with their areas of study, posted on a web site along with photos and video of the event. Before the meeting began, the students researched the G8, its positions, and the agenda for the summit. The sociology students interviewed members of some of the groups protesting the meeting and posted stories on the site about efforts to raise awareness of what the groups saw as shortcomings in the G8's approaches to a range of environmental and economic issues. Two groups of protesters were from the university, and this connection gave the sociology students greater access to, and understanding of, those protesters than the throngs of mainstream media could obtain. In some cases, individual protesters submitted angry, even hostile comments to the site. As long as they did not violate the site's prohibitions against obscenity or libel, however, the comments were allowed to stand as part of the broad picture painted of the summit. As bloggers picked up some of the stories, readership increase sharply, as did the comments submitted. In the end, the students made important contributions to the news while developing a keen sense of how not only to make insightful observations based on discipline-specific knowledge but also to communicate those ideas in a balanced way to a general audience.

Explaining the concept of citizen journalism, Glaser (2006) avers that "the idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the internet to create augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others". Supporting this statement, Bowman and Willis (2003) avers that the essence of citizen journalism is to "provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires". It is important to note that a lot of citizen journalism happens on sites and forums where citizen journalism is not the main focus. It just crops up as warranted. Therefore, any venue might occasionally offer some citizen journalism (Contentious, 2010, p. 4).

Considering the rich nature of the subject under investigation, the researcher intend to find out the major benefits, challenges and prospects of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria. This study helped to determine the stance of citizen journalism practice in the country and what the future holds for it.

Statement of the Problem

As media houses concentrate in making money in order to keep the organization running, the citizens are some worth ignored in the process. Most of the contents of the news covered do not really reflect the interest of the people. Hence, the people, not being satisfied by the development, resort to citizen journalism. However, most Nigerians are computer illiterates and the country lacks some basic infrastructural facilities that will make manifest the concept of citizen journalism practice. This situation informed the need for the investigation into the benefits, challenges and prospects of citizen journalism in Nigeria. Specifically, this study aimed at; (1) examining the benefits of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria, (2) finding out the challenges confronting citizen journalism practice in country and (3) examining the prospects of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria. The study therefore, raised the following questions: (1) What are the benefits of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria? (2) What are the challenges confronting citizen journalism practice in Nigeria? And (3) What are the prospects of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Brief History of Citizen Journalism Practice

Right from the time of the modern man, people have long to exercise their right to communicate their personal views and opinions over issues of public importance. In one way or the other, citizens' participation in communication has existed. However, Educause Learning Initiative (2007, p. 1) gave inkling into the history of citizen journalism when it opined that "over the years, citizen journalism has benefited from the development of various technologies, including the printing press – which provided a medium for the pamphleteers of the 17th and 18th centuries – the telegraph, tape recorders, and television, each of which offered new opportunities for people to participate in sharing news and commentary. With the birth of digital technologies, people now have unprecedented access to the tools and production and dissemination".

Citizen Journalism Practice: The Nigerian Situation

With the advent of citizen journalism practice, journalism is no longer restricted to the trained professionals. The Internet and its associated multimedia technology such as cell phones, ipods and video cameras have expanded the frontiers of journalism practices to include practically everybody that has access to these technologies.

In Nigeria, citizen journalism has not really had strong footing due to the numerous challenges therein. Adelabu (2008, p. 369) notes that "the challenges facing Nigerian journalism is how to redefine the old model of journalism which sees the audience as an empty receptacles waiting to be filled with information selected by omniscience editorial and sees the consumers as those whose only interaction with the media is to buy what is sold or not (except on few occasions when the audience had the privilege of writing a letter, or opinion article which must be at the mercy of the editor to publish or dump in the refuse basket)". Though, most of the media houses in Nigeria are already going online, some still find it too difficult to managed online publications. It is important to state at this point that online journalism practice has been a problem to many media

organisations in Nigeria and they are not doing much to brace up with the challenges posed by the Internet and the multimedia technology.

However, since the media finds it difficult to meet up with the current challenges of using the internet, most citizens who are computer literates are beginning to make judicious use of the net. Some have gone as far as opening their own websites while some others have open blogs for themselves. To make sure that these sites and blogs are functioning effectively, some of the owners are posting materials online for others to read. Some net users unconsciously post materials that are news worthy. Gradually, citizen journalism will become the other of the day. Again, Adelabu (2008, p. 369) avers that:

As more and more people embrace the internet and other multimedia technology, they will no longer depend on traditional mass media to supply them with information. Rather, they will source and create their own news to meet their taste.

The above quotation is an indication that citizen journalism practice would one day become a household name in Nigeria and that it would become an alternative and reliable source of news for the citizens.

Citizen Journalism Practice: “Publish, then Filter” vs “Filter, then Publish”

Publish, then filter is actually the conjecture of “open source journalism”, in which engaged citizens collaborate in gathering information, and complementing or correcting it according to the “wiki method” (Moretzsohn, 2006, p. 33). In a situation like this, the citizen journalist would have to write his/her story and have it corrected with the aid of a software located in the web page where the material is been published. As Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 35) indicate: we are talking about a type of journalism that is more feasible for “specialized niche markets”. It would certainly be the case of substituting one adverb for another by stating, instead, that this kind of journalism would be feasible only under these conditions. But, in this case, the participatory target audience’s level of qualification and outreach would limit the performance of this modality.

The issue of ‘publish and then filter’ is an approach which offers the opportunity to break the hegemony of the “venerable profession of journalism” as gatekeeper, with the audiences taking on a new role, by being able to create and disseminate news and information. (Moretzsohn, 2006, p. 31).

The first example illustrating this point as noted by Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 8) involves the events in the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attack: Many of the largest news sites buckled under the huge demand, so users searched for alternate sources of information (e-mails, blogs and virtual forums), which, according to the authors, would stimulate the propagation of “do-it-yourself journalism”. Blogs, therefore, would represent the most structured form of this “phenomenon that shows the markings of a revolution – giving anyone with the right talent and energy the ability to be heard far and wide on the Web.

On the other hand, professionals have argued that “the theory of publish, then filter” is not, and could never be, adopted by those who are aware of the responsibilities of journalism” (Moretzsohn, 2006, p. 34). To these professionals, the job of a real journalist is not a child’s play. It transcends the issue of just covering events and reporting it.

Rather, it involves the proper scrutiny of materials, analyses, gate-keeping and presentation of information to the public in an understandable manner.

Filter, then publish, is the belief of “real journalist”. To those who hold this opinion, as recorded by Moretzsohn, (2006, p. 35):

“Real journalism” points out that “it’s not enough that you tell a good story or capture beautiful images”, because what makes that journalism different is “the standards”, like “honesty, accuracy, fairness and integrity”. Those standards are summarized in the “code of ethics”, which includes, among other requirements, rules for verifying the source of stories sent in by the audience.

It should be self-evident that journalists are professionals who are authorized to have access to information and to places unavailable to the general public, and therefore should have the right to access sources from which they can gather relevant information for society at large, (Moretzsohn, 2006, p. 34). This is nothing more than the status given to journalists by the old concept of the “fourth estate of the realm”.

The BBC’s position on the concept of citizen journalism is obvious. The organization has opined that it will not use material that has been gathered through illegal means and does not support the use of micro cameras and micro tape recorders – regardless of their dissemination – as it insists on respecting the right to privacy, (Moretzsohn, 2006, p. 34).

The conclusion here is very significant. This is because it is only professional journalists that can attend to news stories professionally. However, citizen journalism serves as an alternative source for freelance journalists, considering the payment scale for “pods” (short videos from one to eight minutes). It also represents a good alternative for the audience, even if this alternative is still wrapped in the myth of news credibility.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on a mass communication theory known as Democratic – Participant Media Theory. It was actually developed by Dennis McQuail during the 80’s. This theory, according to Folarin (1998, pp. 29-30), “lies in its insistence that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers”.

Explanatorily, Ojobor (2002, p. 15) avers that “there is in this theory a desire for horizontal rather than vertical (top down) communication”. The stimulus for democratic – participant theory has been the reaction against commercialisation and monopolisation of public broadcasting institutions, (Okunna, 1999 as cited in Ojobor, 2002, p. 15).

Supporting the above statement, McQuail (1987, p. 123) as quoted by Ojobor (2002, p. 16) opined that one of the basic principles of the theory is that “individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media (rights to communicate) and the rights to be served by media according to their own determination of need.

This theory advocates for the liberalization of the media for the common good of the people it is meant to serve. It believes that the people should have free access to the means of communication in order to better their lot. In a way, the theory vehemently opposes the monopolistic and rigid structure of traditional mass media.

This theory is relevant to the work under investigation because it anchors itself on individual citizen's right of access to the media. On the other hand, this work focuses on the citizen's participation in information gathering and dissemination. Therefore, this theory provides a forum where citizens can have access to information gathering and dissemination. This analysis, no doubt, shows the relationship between the theory and the study under investigation.

Methodology

The research design for this study is survey method. This is more so because survey allows for the study of a sample of a given population. Speaking on the importance of survey to this study, Osuala (2005, p. 254) opines that the focus of survey is "on people, the vital facts of people, and their beliefs, opinions, attitudes, motivations, and behaviour". The population of this study focused on 18 lecturers and graduate students (PGD and MA students) of the department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka which was 125 students as at when this study was carried out. This made the total population to be 143. A census of the population was consulted. This means that the researcher sampled opinion of 143 respondents. Questionnaire was adopted as the instrument for data collection and used close and open ended questions to elicit ideas and feelings from respondents.

Presentation of Data and Discussion of Findings

In this study, 143 copies of questionnaire were distributed and retrieved. As such, all were returned usable, yielding a 100% response rate, which are represented in the tables below.

Table 1: Sex of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Males	95	66.4
Females	48	33.6
Total	143	100

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents' sex. The sample illustrates that 95 (66.4%) and 48 (33.6%) respondents were male and female respectively.

Table 2: Respondents' Occupation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Civil servants	24	16.8
Self-employed	51	35.7
Private sector workers	32	22.4
Applicants	-	-

Any other	36	25.2
Total	143	100

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents' occupation. Twenty-four respondents accounting for 16.8% were civil servants, 51 Two respondents accounting for 35.7% were self-employed, 32 respondents accounting for 22.4% were private sector workers, while 36 respondents accounting for 25.2% fell under any other.

Answering Research Questions

This section of the questionnaire dealt with information collected from respondents and analyzed in consonant with the research questions.

Table 3: Analysis on those who 'surf' the net

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	143	100
No	-	-
Can't say	-	-
Total	143	100

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of those who 'surf' the net, and it indicated that 143 respondents accounting for 100% said they have 'surf' the net.

Table 4: Analysis of those who have posted materials online

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	58	40.6
No	85	59.4
Can't say	-	-
Total	143	100

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of those who have posted materials online. From the table, it is obvious that 58 respondents representing 40.6% of the distribution have posted materials online, while 85 respondents representing 59.4% have not posted materials online.

Table 5: Analysis of those who support citizen journalism practice

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	91	64.6
No	29	20.3
Can't say	23	16.1
Total	143	100

The table above shows that 91 respondents representing 64.6% of the distribution support citizen journalism practice in Nigeria, while 29 respondents representing 20.3% do not support citizen journalism practice in the country. However, 23 of the respondents

representing 16.1% of the distribution are indifferent as to whether citizen journalism should be encouraged in the country or not.

Table 6: Research Question 1

What are the benefits of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria?

Number of Respondents = 143

S/N	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1.	It makes known the happenings around society.	24	16.8
2.	It tackles news urgently (speed flow of information).	53	37.1
3.	Wider coverage of events	28	19.6
4.	It will expose those things that journalists would want to ignore	42	29.4
5.	It will prevent feeding the masses with stale news.	22	15.4
6.	It would aid ICT consciousness and integrate people into its usage.	58	40.6

Table 6 shows that 24 respondents representing 16.8% of the sample believe part of the benefits of citizen journalism practice is that it makes known the happenings around society, 53 respondents representing 37.1% opine that it tackles news urgently, 28 respondents representing 19.6% said it creates a wider coverage of events, 42 respondents representing 29.4% said it exposes the things journalists would ordinarily want to ignore, 22 respondents accounting for 15.4% said it prevents feeding of the masses with stale news, while 58 respondents representing 40.6% are of the opinion that it would create in ICT conscious society.

Table 7: Research Question 2: What are the challenges confronting citizen journalism practice in Nigeria?

This table describes the type of challenges faced by most citizens in the practice of citizen journalism.

Number of Respondents = 143

S/N	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Most citizens are not computer literates.	88	61.3
2.	Difficulty in accessing the internet	42	29.4
3.	The cost of using the net is high	92	64.3
4.	Prevalence of defamatory statements	76	53.1
5.	Professionalism would be discouraged	71	49.7

Table 7 above shows that 88 respondents representing 61.3% of the sample believe part of the challenges of citizen journalism practice is that most citizens are not computer literate, 42 respondents representing 29.4% opined the challenges to be difficulty in accessing the internet, 92 respondents representing 64.3% said the cost of using the net is high, 76 respondents representing 53.1% said another challenge is the prevalence of

defamatory statements, while 71 respondents accounting for 49.7% of the distribution said the question of professionalism would be another great issue.

Table 8: Research Question 3: What are the prospects of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria?

This table describes the future of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria.

Number of Respondents = 143

S/N	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1.	A future where beneficial information would be posted online.	86	60.1
2.	It could be a future where people invade the privacy of others	32	22.4
3.	A future where one can get anything from the net (electronic age)	126	88.1
4.	A future of information society (increase in information)	82	57.3
5.	A future of increase in the number of internet users.	76	53.1

Table 8 above shows that 86 respondents representing 60.1% of the sample believe that the future of citizen journalism practice would be one where there will be beneficial information posted online. On the other hand, 32 respondents representing 22.4% opined that it could be a future where people will invade the privacy of others. 126 respondents representing 88.1% said the future of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria will be that of information age. 82 respondents representing 57.3% said it would be an information society while 76 respondents accounting for 53.1% of the distribution said the future of citizen journalism practice will engineer increase in the number of internet users in the country.

Discussion of Findings

From the analysis presented in this work, it was revealed that the entire sample studied have made use of the Internet in one way or the other. It was also revealed that 64.6% of the population was in support of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria. In responding to the research questions; all the respondents agreed that there were tremendous benefits in the practice of citizen journalism practice which include; the coverage of important issues that would have otherwise been ignored by professional journalists, urgent coverage of news thereby preventing stale news, exposure of happenings within the society, and the encouragement of ICT conscious society, with 40.6% of the respondents which is the highest in the distribution indicating that citizen journalism would foster ICT consciousness and usage in the country.

Furthermore, it was revealed that the challenges of citizen journalism practice in Nigeria include difficulty in access to the internet, computer illiteracy, high cost of 'surfing' and internet, prevalence of defamatory statements and the discouragement of professionalism, with 64.3% of the respondents noting that the high cost of surfing the net constituted one

of the greatest challenges of citizen journalism practice in the country. This was followed by computer illiteracy which constituted 61.3%. The study further revealed that the future of citizen journalism in the country is promising, considering the fact that respondents observed that the future would be one with more beneficial information posted online, where one can get more information from the internet (information society), and a future of increase in internet users; with 88.1% of the respondents affirming that citizen journalism would engineer increase in the flow of information in the society (information society).

Summary

Citizen journalism describes a situation where members of the public play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. By the virtue of this definition, everyone is a potential citizen journalist. Most citizen journalists own their own blog where they publish news stories. Other do submit their stories to websites designed for the purpose of citizen journalists or to well known media houses that do accept stories from citizen reporters.

However, since most citizen journalist are not well informed in the rudiments of journalism, they publish their news stories before thinking of editing it properly or gate-keeping some words. This process has been called “publish and then filter”. But professional journalists strongly oppose this process, stating that media materials have to be checked properly before it is published. This school of thought beliefs in “filter and then publish”.

Furthermore, the researcher employed survey method and questionnaire instrument in eliciting information from the population. The result of the study shows that the prospect of citizen journalism is bright.

Conclusion

With the growth of citizen journalism, it should be noted that the big problem with the concept is the question of credibility of news sources and content. Therefore, consumers of citizen journalism should understand that however well-intentioned a citizen journalist might be, reading the news with a skeptical eye is a good practice.

Recommendation

Considering the nature of research questions raised in the cause of this work, the researcher is forced to recommend that:

- Citizen journalism practice should be encouraged by the government and private establishments as a way of encouraging ICT development in the country. This can be done by subsidising the cost of accessing the internet and making it more available to the citizens. Also, government should make sure that computers and all its accessories are made available to the public at cheaper rates.
- Web publishing and reporting should be inculcated in the normal school curriculum in order to equip the citizens with the rudiments of online management, operations and usage.

- Government should make sure that owners of website and blogs within the country abide to the laws of defamation, obscenity, and invasion of privacy. This can be done by setting up a body whose sole responsibility is squarely on monitoring the manifest content of internet materials.
- This research work is highly recommended as a resource material for those who will like to carry out further studies in this area and other related area(s).

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