

## **Citizen Journalism and Expanding Public Sphere: What Fate for Journalistic Ethics and Professionalism?**

Anthony Chinedu Ekwueme  
Paul Martins Obayi  
Chidiebere Nwachukwu

### **Abstract**

The coming of citizen journalism has had tremendous impact on the field of journalism. It has, for instance, effectively removed publication of news from the stranglehold of few powerful media moguls and gave it to any literate adult armed with a gadget as simple as a cell-phone. All the hitherto unreported areas and issues in the western-dominated media are given expression by citizen journalists. In doing all these however, there have been abuses chief among them being absence of journalistic ethics and professionalism in news management and writing. This has often led to embarrassing gaffes and worrisome developments. This study appraises the entire conflicting and somehow, confusing scenario and makes recommendations.

### **1. Introduction**

The explosion in digital communication technologies has had far-reaching implications for the journalism profession. This deregulation of gathering, writing and distribution of news has in reality put journalism practice into the hands of any literate in possession of a tool as small as a cell-phone and as big as a desktop computer and thus tremendously expanded the scope of the public sphere. With the preponderance of social media, anyone with an opinion, a smart phone and a Facebook account can present their views to an audience potentially as large as any major political campaign can attract. This has raised citizen journalism to a level of influence unknown previously (BBC, Focus on Africa, Oct-Dec, 2011). Brady (2005:66) also confirms that, “the rise of easy-to-use software has put a printing press in the hand of every citizen. No longer can anyone be denied a seat at the table, and those of us in the mainstream press deny that at our own peril. This development has effectively removed the monopoly of determining what, who, where, when and how news was dished out to the world from the stranglehold of just few powerful media moguls.

Today, the venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. And it's doing just that on the Internet, (Bowman & Willis; 2003)

As a result, information of different kinds on virtually all issues, (especially those that would have previously not seen the light of the day) often laced with pictures and accompanying retinue of readers' comments are not just abundant in the Internet; they provide immediate feedback and updates as events unfold. Bulkley (2012) correctly remarks that in a digital world with a whole host of different ways to communicate a factual message, it is increasingly hard to judge the value of amateur eyewitness film shot on a mobile phone and posted on the internet against a considered, observational documentary broadcast on a traditional television channel.

On the flip side however, not only has this changing world of the online medium been buffeting the traditional media with the force of a tornado; it may have dealt fatal blows to journalistic ethics and professionalism. It is also worthy to note that, "journalism practice wields such enormous powers and calls for the highest standards of ethics and commitment to truth," (Omenugha and Oji, 2008) to be left in the hands of amateurs. Ekwueme (2011:3) laments that, "the process of news gathering and reporting has taken an unorthodox dimension with the infiltration of citizen journalists. The attendant implication of this development on quality of news, professionalism and ethics of the profession is obvious." Though the practice is growing in leaps and bounds by the day, Marshall (2005:16) insists that, "news reported by citizen journalists... without going through any editorial process that validates the information, it isn't true journalism." What's more, the much-touted power of the social media in checking the excesses of despotic governments seems, at best, to be yielding dubious results. This communication revolution, according to the BBC, "has also resulted in despotic governments smearing not just human rights advocates, but also individuals with blogs as well as twitter, YouTube and Facebook accounts. This undermines the power and integrity of social media."

In view of the above conflicting and confusing scenario, this study therefore, critically examines the whole situation and its implications for journalistic ethics and professionalism and makes recommendations.

## 2. The Framework

The idea that public concern and expression can and should influence government's decision and actions is at the heart of public sphere theory. The theory probably started with the ancient Greek *agora*, a place where male citizens would gather, discuss and exchange opinions, just like in a marketplace where people trade and merchandize. It was in the *agora* that public opinion would be formed and be expressed, influencing the decisions of city state leaders. The deliberation that took place in the Agora enabled the then exclusively male citizens to become direct participants in governance (Nisbet, 2011). He states further that:

In its contemporary form the *agora* has shifted from a physical space to a communication network; from local deliberation to global conversation. Now it is called the *public sphere*, or precisely, the 'global public sphere' with the mass media as its chief institution.

The ground work for this theory was laid by a German scholar, Jurgen Habermas in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. According to Habermas cited in Nisbet (2011), the public sphere is an abiding part of a democratic polity, which provides oxygen to the system for its functioning and growth. The structure and mode of operation of the public sphere defines the structure of a polity. Castells (2008) agrees that, how the public sphere is constituted and how it operates largely defines the structure and dynamics of any given polity. Public sphere, in his contention, is an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through such discussions influence political action. Gerard (1998) opines that it is a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment. The public sphere according to Fraser (1990:86) is, “a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” and “a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed” (Asen, 1999).

This theory identifies three broad spheres in the society: the public sphere, the private sphere and the sphere of public authority. In the exact words of Habermas (1989:30):

The public sphere mediates between the Private Sphere and the Sphere of Public Authority. The private sphere comprises civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labour. Whereas the ‘Sphere of Public Authority’ dealt with the State, or realm of the police, and the ruling class, the public sphere crossed over both these realms and through the vehicle of public opinion it puts the state in touch with the needs of society.

Hauser (1998) interprets the above assertion to mean that democratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate. It is in reality an avenue for debates and articulation and circulation of opinions that can be critical of the government of the day. These are seen as hallmarks of modern democracy. By performing this function, the public sphere constitutes itself into another estate that can regulate the government on critical social issues.

In this era of information superhighway occasioned by uncontrolled use of the Internet, the public sphere is gaining more and more prominence and relevance as expression of opinions are no longer the exclusive property of the privileged few in the society. Armed with a gadget as small as a cell phone, anybody could today, articulate an opinion and upload it to the Internet where the people of the entire world can access and avail themselves of the information and opinion articulated therein.

### **3. Empirical Review**

#### **3.1: Citizen Journalism:**

News gathering, writing and distribution have been the exclusive duty of journalists since Acta Diurnal. Though initially, the news men did not receive any formal

training for their craft, they were practically professionals for they virtually had no other job outside the journalism profession. Today the hallowed chambers of journalism have been invaded and infiltrated by untrained and unprofessional journalists.

Many terms have been coined to describe these contributions to online newspaper content from those whom media critic Jay Rosen (2006) cited in Bruns (2008) describes as “the people formerly known as the audience.” Some call it ‘user-generated content’. Others prefer ‘citizen journalism.’ One scholar likes the term ‘produsage’ to highlight the blending of producing and consuming information. Yet many others prefer to call it participatory, collaborative and civic journalism (Singer et al 2011).

Over the years, as the power of the media grew, people became better trained and more professional. But since the past one and a half decades, this exclusive duty of journalists has become more and more challenged and decentralized as communication technologies not only simplified the whole art of journalism but also opened other new vistas to the trade. Singer et al (2011:1) agree that, “content (for instance) comes in a steadily expanding volume and variety of forms and formats – words, images and sounds, alone or in combination, turning the online newspaper into an open, ongoing social experiment.”

There can be no doubt that these social media networks have greatly increased the contribution of the public sphere in the society particularly in times of crisis. Making this point in respect of the still simmering Arab crisis, Beaumont (*The Guardian*, 25/02/2011) had this to say:

Precisely how we communicate in these moments of historic crisis and transformation is important. The medium that carries the message shapes and defines as well as the message itself. The instantaneous nature of how social media communicate self-broadcast ideas, unlimited by publication deadlines and broadcast news slots, explains in part the speed at which these revolutions have unraveled, their almost viral spread across a region. It explains, too, the often loose and non-hierarchical organisation of the protest movements unconsciously modeled on the networks of the web.

Similarly, Singer et al (2011:2) add that, “ordinary people have captured and published, in words and images, stories of global impact, including the results of terrorist attacks on the commuters of Madrid and London, the abuse of prisoners at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, the lethal chaos surrounding elections in Iran, and the devastation caused by tsunamis, floods and earthquakes. They also have provided intimate looks within the smallest of communities, sharing local and even personal information and ideas in depth and detail. They have carried on millions of topical conversations through discussion forums, comment threads and blog posts. In all of these online activities and many more, they have taken on roles and carried out functions that sound quite a bit like, well ... journalism.”

In many African countries, the social networks have been most remarkable and useful in times of crisis and or human rights abuses. The fuel subsidy removal by Nigerian government in early 2012 resulted in massive protests organized by the trade unions but spread across the cross the country by the power of the social media networks. It was the same in Kenya in the aftermath of the 2007 election protests. Goldstein and Rotich (2008) cited in Mutsvauro et al (n.d.) remark that, “during the violent election aftermath of 2007, while social media were also used to incite riots, bloggers documented human rights abuses and created ‘Ushahidi’, a crisis mapping software.”

Besides crisis reporting, citizen journalism has helped in providing a strong counter-weight to the often-censored and often-intimidated traditional media in most countries of the world. Two good examples readily call to mind in this respect. First was the case of the late Yugoslavian strongman, Slobodan Milosevic. According to Isaac cited in Ekwueme (2011), when he (Milosevic) discovered that his opponent was winning him in the 1996 election, ordered the disconnection of a local radio station, B92 that was courageously airing the results. The station simply attached their sound clips to their site and sent them to the British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC. BBC then downloaded them and re-broadcast them to Yugoslavia again.

The second was the case of ex-Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 Egyptian crisis that led to his eventual downfall. According to Shyama Menon (*The Guardian*, 01/02/2011): “When the Egypt crisis escalated and perhaps reached a crescendo with a million people protesting in Tahrir Square in Cairo taking momentum via the viral nature of Twitter, Facebook and Blackberry messages... social networking sites were blocked by the Mubarak government, **Google got together with Twitter** with a service that allows people to leave voicemail using a telephone, which is machine translated into an audio file and posted to the hashtag #egypt. People without Internet could have their say, thanks to such ingenious ideas.”

Citizen journalism has also contributed immensely in riveting the attention of the world to tiny places hitherto unknown or covered by the traditional media. It has indeed, given new life to community reporting as many rural dwellers can force attention to issues in their communities by uploading vital issues or events on the Internet. By granting access to anyone to cover the news, citizen journalism presents a more personal, nuanced view of events and has the potential to cultivate communities of people with a common interest. Through blogs, citizen journalists have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, and other issues of concern to local and national communities, (Educause, 2007).

### **3.1: Professional Issues**

Though Benkler (2006) has hailed what he called the emergence of a ‘networked public sphere’ as occasioned by the rise of citizen journalism, it is not without its share of complications and shortcomings. The question to ask as hitherto audience take over reporting is: what does this development portend for journalistic ethics and professionalism?

Journalism prides itself in the production and distribution of accurate and factual information checked and crossed-checked by the mechanisms of news production. Not a few writers are worried about the authenticity, factuality, accuracy, objectivity and

credibility of news produced and distributed by citizen journalists. Though there are sometimes gaffes in traditional news reportage, they are few and seriously frowned at in the newsroom. But this lax is common place, sometimes, even intentional, in citizen reportage, to create unhealthy incidents or avenge personal wrong. The case of Steve Jobs (the late CEO) of Apple computer is a classic example.

On October 3, 2008, a false story by an anonymous citizen journalist entitled ‘Steve Jobs rushed to ER following severe heart attack’ was posted on CNN’s *iReport*. This unverified and eventually false report negatively affected Apple’s share price in the stock exchange market causing extensive losses. This story and several others like it put a serious question mark on the credibility and usefulness of citizen reporting and the extent to which it can be trusted. The attendant implications of these on public order, societal stability and the economy can only be imagined. It therefore produces what could be rightly called *news of questionable authenticity*. This is a very difficult problem everywhere, (Ekwueme, 2011).

In an article entitled: Citizen Journalism: A primer on the definition, risks and benefits and main debates in media communications research ([www.opennewsroom.com](http://www.opennewsroom.com)), it was correctly observed that:

Potential false news reports are just one of the many possible ramifications of sourcing news from anonymous sources. The news could be factually correct, but have flaws like blatant disregard of ethics, lack of objectivity, impartiality and balance. It could also be a hidden agenda or opinion sugarcoated as fact or a libelous or defamatory statement that puts subjects in the story in bad light. In mainstream media, a process of verification and checks called gate-keeping can weed out any such inaccuracies and biases. Gate keeping, so it’s called, is done by experienced and trained journalists and editors, using tools and skills like knowledge of the law and in house or commercial stylebooks such as the Associated Press Stylebook.

Many professional journalistic traits are badly wounded by the citizen journalism but good writing seems to be worst hit. The language of citizen journalism is often, one is sad to note, embarrassingly gutter, pallid, gibberish and in very bad taste. There is virtually no respect for good language and good taste among citizen reporters. Colloquialism, slang, jargons, clichés and unknown abbreviations run riot in most citizen reports. It does not matter to them that Confucius had warned that:

“If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant;  
If what is said is not what is meant, what ought to be done remains undone  
If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate;  
If morals and art deteriorate, justice will go astray;  
If justice does go astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion;

Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said;  
This matters above every thing.”

Indeed, Agbese (1996:6) may have had citizen reporters in mind when he lamented that, “despite the gallant efforts of people like Newman, the murderers of the language are still roaming our newsrooms, their hands dripping with the blood of decapitated information and disemboweled language. Armed with clichés, jargon, foreign words and phrases and confused thinking, they go on driving the stake through the heart of the English language.”

### **3.3: Ethical Issues**

Ward (2005) defines journalism ethics as a species of applied ethics that examines what journalists and news organizations should do, given their responsible role in any given society. Journalistic ethics of truth and objectivity have fared no better among citizen reporters. Ward as well as other scholars (Severin and Tankard, 2010; Fischer & Verrecchia, 2000) believes that objectivity is a strong and indispensable pillar good and credible journalism. Ward personally is strongly convinced that truth and objectivity are the main pillars of good journalism since the need to present two sides of the story remains apparently universal (Ward, 2009). Similarly, Kaplan (2002) agrees that good journalism involves the abolishment and potential influence of own ideas and values when researching and publishing a story.

Citizen reporters are, at best, leery of objectivity in reporting. This is not helped by the fact that some main stream journalists themselves have, in recent times, openly questioned the usefulness of objectivity in modern media reportage preferring such principles as balance, transparency, fairness and others. Mutsvauro et al (n.d.) opine that, “this inherent need for objectivity is one area considered outdated and incomprehensible by the disciples of the web. For others, objectivity is indeed slowly becoming a thing of the past largely due to the rise of online journalism, (Taflinger, 1996).” Chris Shaw (editorial director of ITN Productions) cited in Bulkley (2011), “thinks that there is a sense that objective journalism is not the same as trawling social networks for citizen reportage and imagery, but there are two problems with that view. First there are places like Syria where journalists haven't been able to go and second there is an extraordinary resource on social networks for current affairs, even though we have to take extraordinary caution to verify what we use.”

But regardless of the activities of citizen and some mainstream journalists, objectivity remains as useful a principle of reporting as ever even though we concede that it is not always advised. In absence of objectivity, how do we, for instance, determine when a reporter is motivated by factors other than public interest: when he has an axe to grind; score to settle; image to tarnish or malice in his mind?

### **3.4: Public Sphere and Social Responsibility**

In media parlance, there is a saying that the right to publish carries with it the duty not to subvert. The social responsibility theory of the press gives the media professionals the duty to ensure stability of the polity; to hold government to account among others. The Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press of 1947 had noted



that, the press has an important role to play in the development and stability of modern society and, as such, it is imperative that a commitment to social responsibility be imposed on mass media. To do this effectively, the media should write on those issues they deem important for the good of the society, expose corruption in high and low place, condemn official high-handedness among others.

They (the media) should however, desist to write on issues that could expose the government to public contempt or excite civil disobedience leading to breakdown of law and order. Peterson and Schramm (1963) had pointed out that “freedom of expression under the social responsibility theory is not an absolute right, as under pure libertarian theory....One’s right to free expression must be balanced against the private rights of others and against vital social interests.” On the other words, it is not just enough to be able to write and publish but also being able to ensure the survival and sustainability of the society, maintenance of decency, public order, respect for people’s as well as government’s laws and interests among others.

Now that the public sphere wields enormous influence on what is published as news, to what extent can they responsibly use this new power at their disposal especially the Internet, with its anarchic nature, feedback loops, and comment sections (Thornton, 2001:139) and its potential to reach unimaginable audience at supersonic speed? With its capacity for varied contents, speed, all-inclusive public access and discourse, and power to incite, can the public sphere as represented by citizen journalists, handle the massive responsibility associated with journalism without mortally wounding the society? The much hailed Arab Spring which consumed many Arab leaders in matters of months is a clear eye-opener to the potential dangers of the social media to national stability. Though the social media and citizen journalists may not have started or single-handedly overthrown those repressive regimes, they contributed immeasurably in bringing it to the attention of the world, in spreading it to other nations and in sustaining the momentum and the resolve of the protesters.

With no ethics and media laws to worry about, unlike journalists in the mainstream media, citizen journalists can offer unmediated and anonymous debate and analysis of issues. According to some debates, this is the fundamental problem of citizen journalism; the ability to hide behind anonymity and potentially feed opinion or false information as fact into the media ([www.theopennewsroom.com](http://www.theopennewsroom.com)). Is it possible, in view of the above scenario, that the various governments the world over would fold their hands and allow the negative use of the Internet cause such massive damage in view of the assertion of Poll (1973) cited in Umechukwu (1997) that “no nation will indefinitely tolerate a freedom of the press that serves to divide the country and to open the floodgate of criticism against the freely chosen government that leads it.” Is it not also true, as observed by Umechukwu (1997), “that the protection of reputation, property, privacy and moral development of individuals in the society, groups especially, the minorities, and the security or even dignity of the state have often taken precedence over the absolute value of freedom to publish?” So what are the implications of these for citizen journalism? And what can be done about them?

#### **4. Towards Possible Solution**



As has been clearly stated, citizen journalism has very positive impact in the society especially in the area of information dissemination and coverage of hitherto neglected areas. It has also created room for variegated opinions on topical societal issues besides creating jobs for countless number of people the world over. However, it has also been seen that the practice is fraught with many problems especially the spread of false information that could cause extensive damage to individuals and groups. So the problem that needs to be solved now is how to ensure the continued existence citizen journalism and at the same time, eliminate or at least reduce its inherent shortcomings.

The very first step in this direction is close collaboration between the mainstream media houses and news agencies on one side and citizen journalists and citizen journalism websites on the other. Some very important and well-established media houses and news agencies can link up and collaborate with known citizen journalists and strike some kind of partnership deal with them. In this way, the mainstream media houses will have access to the stories done by the citizen journalists and still be in a position to verify its authenticity, factuality and accuracy before using them. In this way, some of the problems ax-grinding, objectivity and others associated with citizen journalism will be reduce to a remarkable level if not totally eliminated.

Luckily, some news organizations are already thinking and acting in this direction. For instance, on February 8, 2012, a United Kingdom-based news agency Press Association Images (PA) announced a deal with the citizen journalism site Demotix. The site claims that that it has licensed stories to literally 100s of sites and news organisations around the globe including AP and Reuters. Speaking on its linkage with Deomtix, Martin Stephens (Managing Director of Press Association Images) said:

Press Association Images is delighted to be working with Demotix, who share our passion for delivering quality news photography. We pride ourselves on providing customers with the very best photography from around the world, using our own staff photographers and partners which include many major news organisations. We are excited to be working with user-generated photographs for the first time, and believe these images will not only add a unique and personal perspective to our 100 year old archive, but provide our customers with a new angle on world news, ([www. digitaljournal.com](http://www.digitaljournal.com))

The second step is to get organizations to act as brokers for the citizen journalists. The use of the broker is to ensure that the news generated by citizen journalists is vouched for before usage. This will not reduce the incidences of damaging costs incurred by news organizations when they care false news generated by citizen journalist, it will also force the citizen journalist carry only truthful stories. In this regard, Demotix seeks to become the interface between news makers and publishers the world over and already it brokers the work of its citizen journalists (over 17,000 of them) to over 200 news organisations including the *New York Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and the final fee is split equally with the contributor.

The third step is stricter control of the Internet contents in this respect. It may be difficult to control but not impossible. The Internet and all the social networks were established to help the society grow and generally make life better and not the other way round. Hence, there should be an international convention and regulation with clearly specified sanctions for such willful abuses.

Finally, all the citizen journalism sites should conduct yearly orientation and or refresher courses (at least online) for all their contributors. The objective is to educate these citizen journalists on the rudiments of good reporting, journalistic ethics and professionalism. On the interim, each citizen journalism websites should print and publish clear directives on news reporting to all its contributors and ensure that they obtain promise of compliance from them before accepting their stories. It should also specify the punishment in a case where non-compliance leads to some unpleasant developments. This will help keep the citizen reporters in check and on their toes.

## 5. Conclusion

It is true that citizen journalism can sometimes lead to serious embarrassments, sometimes, in very large proportions, there is no doubt that it has come to stay. Its contribution to information is incalculable and its ability to expose evil, infinite. To say that it gives voice to the voiceless is to put it mildly. The truth is that because of citizen journalism occasioned by the discovery of the social networks, there are no more voiceless people and it has helped put irresponsible governments in check more than the traditional media can ever hope to. What is just needed is better control of their contents in terms of truth, objectivity, good taste and fairness. With close collaborations among all the key stakeholders namely the citizen journalists, citizen journalism websites, mainstream media organizations and the government, most of the complications will definitely be taken care of.

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