

Bureaucracy and Citizen Journalism: Issues and Challenges Imperative for Media Practice in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Using the in-depth interview research method, this study examines bureaucracy and citizen journalism by giving a cursory attention to the issues and challenges of the practice in Nigeria. A sample of 30 respondents who cut across the six geo-political zones of the country was interviewed via online medium to give answers to the research objectives. Among the questions posed was to ascertain the influence of citizen journalism on professional media practice. Findings showed that bureaucracy is a constraint to efficient administration in media practice as well as altering the news content which has a damning effect on public interest. The study also discovered that adherence to bureaucracy in media practice can save the hot and exuberant reporter. Citizen journalism was also found to be unprocessed material, hence, unfit for public consumption. The study recommended the use of gate-keeping in the practice of citizen journalism as well as adherence to rules and regulations.

KEYWORDS: Gate-Keeping, Check Points, Participatory Journalism, Co- Production. I- reporting

Background of the Study

Globally, the absence of bureaucracy, otherwise called gate-keeping in media parlance, in the practice of citizen journalism has generated many criticisms about the influence of citizen journalism on professional journalism and media governance in general. Citizen Journalism (CJ) “refers to the participation of ordinary citizens in news gathering and reporting” (Oberiri, 2016, p. 2). In essence, it means that the practice of citizen journalism is not professional journalism. Citizen journalism is the media practice that beats check points; a fast growing trend in media practice where the preponderance of news gathered is from eye witness or people who send in reports regarding issues springing up around their locality (Ekwunife, 2019). Nevertheless, its functions in the society are undeniable. In the view of AdilahRamli in Ellie (2018), “instead of rivaling social media, news outlets are leveraging off the platform to reach a wider audience online”. In many countries of the world, the mainstream media source

news stories from citizen journalists and many of the news items in citizen journalism are direct accounts of events from eye witnesses. This lends credibility to the reportage but has highly been criticized for its unchecked freedom that results in the presence of reports that are mindless of language, target audience, morality, fairness, fact, objectivity and accuracy. In many occasions, there are different versions of the same story (Ekwunife, Ukeje, Kalu and Eguavoen, 2020).

All over the world, citizen journalism has deeply been involved in participatory governance. In the United States of America, citizen journalism has engaged in whistle blowing leading to the impeachment of President Donald Trump by the Lower House. In Nigeria, the impact of citizen journalism has been felt in the report of official corruption, religious and socio-political crises, among others. The implications of these due to the absence of bureaucratic checks are

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hydra-headed. Bureaucracy is seen as an idea that is both functional and dysfunctional (Ukeje, Ogbulu, Eze, Ekwunife, Obi and Obasi, 2019). The focus here therefore bothers on the influence of bureaucracy on citizen journalism, examining the implication on professional media practice.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives guided the study:

1. To discover the influence of citizen journalism on professional media practice
2. To ascertain the functions of citizen journalism
3. To find out the challenges posed by citizen journalism to media practice
4. To determine the possible remedies to the issues inherent in the practice of citizen journalism.

Citizen Journalism, Key Concepts and Issues

The history of citizen journalism is new. The growth and development of citizen journalism has hugely been facilitated by the emergence of the new media. The new media technology has miniaturized the globe in what Marshal McLuhan in MacQuail (2006) refers to as the global village. This has aided immensely the gathering and dissemination of information from anywhere to everywhere. In all parts of the world, news thrives on events. In many occasions, events that border on conflicts, disasters and sentiments carry newsworthy elements that command attention. The report of such events are very crucial to the development of citizen journalism as they are hastily gathered and disseminated through blogs, twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and many other new media powered by the internet. The development of citizen journalism cannot be discussed without making mention of the internet which powers these media of information gathering and dissemination. It is also called Web 2.0 journalism since its capability in shaping journalism cannot be underestimated. In the United States, debates about the history of citizen journalism are traceable to alternative media and the role of media in community development. In this sense, citizen journalism is also referred to as civic or participatory journalism. It is however observed that the history of citizen journalism vary in different contexts of its invocation. In nations of great political upheavals, citizen journalism can be linked to the struggle by individuals to disrupt the political and media landscape by news sharing or getting involved in intense public debate while another thought sees it as the claim made by individuals about the legitimacy of the media they produce. The belief that change in the media industry is slow has also necessitated citizen journalism in some climes (Mathson, 2017). Shifting from this paradigm, RonRoss (2011) argues that the history of citizen journalism is as old as

journalism itself, predating professional journalism by about 200 years. This is predicated on the background that two hundred years after the introduction of the first newspaper in America in 1690, none of the news writers were professional journalists because the profession had not been created. The press men of the day were just citizens who had the passion or facilities for journalism.

Bureaucracy; a Discourse

Bureaucracy is a system of controlling or managing a country, company or organization that is operated by a large number of officials employed to follow rules carefully. It is also an administrative system designed to accomplish large-scale administrative tasks by systematically coordinating the work of many individuals. It can be said that bureaucracy is a system of governance of offices and impersonal administration. It is a system of administration which a government can adopt to perform its systematic duties (Ekwunife, Ukeje, Kalu and Robinson, 2020).

In spite of the benevolence of bureaucracy to any government in maintaining order and competence, researchers are of the view that it can cause a surge at work due to the much restrictions, protocols and red-tapism (Idike, Ukeje, Iwuala, Onele, Ekwunife, Nwachukwu, and Ogbulu, 2019). It is also proven that bureaucrats hardly consent to new method of doing things, thereby becoming an abstraction to innovation and change. Although following protocols or obedience to laid down rules and regulations is appropriate, sometimes due to the urgency of some administration problems, some of these protocols may need to be skipped. One problem with the bureaucratic government is that the rigidity and long protocols in its administrative system hinders the achievement of certain objectives on time. In journalism, it is believed that bureaucracy is the greatest challenge to beating deadlines. Illustratively, in a situation where a student of a university needs to apply or inform the vice chancellor about an issue in the university hostel, he has to write a letter, send to the Head of the Department who in turn passes to the dean for response who has to approve the letter before it is sent to the Registry department, then to the secretary of the Vice Chancellor before it is finally delivered to be read by the Vice Chancellor. This process sometimes could take days or weeks before conclusion, and by that time, the harm that would have been prevented might be irreversible. It could also happen that one of the officials or gatekeepers could be harshly affected by the outcome of the letter thereby refusing to approve it to pass his/her table. Many instances like this cause either a slow pace or complete failure in the achievement of tasks.

“Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past the time when the quo has lost its status” (Peter, 2012). This statement is not alarming since bureaucracy is an embodiment of rigidity which hinders flexibility in meeting the fast moving challenges of modern governance. But in spite of the delay in accomplishment of goals, bureaucracy also bears some advantages. It is an obstruction to fraud, corruption and embezzlement.

Citizen Journalism and Media Practice; Challenges Imperative

Citizen journalism is that journalism conducted by the people who are not professional journalists but who disseminate information using web sites, blogs and social media. It is the performing of journalistic functions by non-journalistic professionals through the use of the internet. Citizen journalism has the philosophy of “you see it, you report it”. In this way, everyone becomes a journalist thereby making the journalism profession unprofessional.

An online entrepreneur in South Korea- Oh Yean-Ho declared in the year 2000 that “every citizen is a reporter”. Going by this assertion, there is no need for specific people to ascribe themselves as those qualified to report news. If this assertion becomes generally accepted, it could lead to a season or age when there would be no profession like journalism since everyone is now a Journalist. It should however be noted that doing something is different from doing something well. Citizen Journalism is the traditional journalism model turned upside down. Rather than being the gatekeeper, it is just opening up the gates and letting people come in without checks. Citizen journalism is therefore very unconventional as it does not submit itself to having every news story filtered through the views of a small group of editors. By this, citizens become their own reporters and editors, nobody comes in between to edit whatever they feel like publishing. This is a distortion of the original practices of journalism.

When there is no gate-keeper to stand at the gate, thieves and other criminals or unwanted visitors can easily enter the house. So it is with journalism when there is no check on what goes out as news. Harmful elements or information could be spread out (Ekwunife et al, 2020). Individuals could seize such an opportunity to break media laws like laws of libel and slander, sedition, publishing of obscene materials and even invasion of privacy. And since there is no check on what goes out as news, such contents could be published to the endangering of the society.

A recent trend in citizen journalism has been the emergence of what blogger Jeff Jeruis terms “Hyper Local Journalism” as online news sites invite

contributors from local residents of their subscription areas, who often report on topics that conventional newspapers tend to ignore. This advancement without bureaucracy could be very harmful to the traditional media because it means that these online sites could get the news first. It also implies that they could lose their audience who may be interested in the reports of citizen journalists who bring news from the local areas. The implication is that the traditional media would not be able to successfully compete with the online media since they have abundant reporters in different strategic areas where they see the event first hand.

Individuals in disaster zones often provide instant text and video reports from the scenes which the professional journalists may not be close enough to do. A typical show of the roles of citizen journalism is in regards to one of its ancestors- Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy with a lone – movie camera. In spite of this, it is recognized that citizen journalism has a lot of flaws when it comes to objectivity and quality. Some of the citizen journalists could be activists within the communities they write about. And due to the fact that they are not trained in the art of reporting, their write ups could be lacking in quality.

Though professional journalists do report news as quickly as possible, they often initially source the news from citizen journalists who have reported it via social media. In fact, 51.8% of journalists according to Cision in Ellie (2018) use social media to find and build stories.

Citizen journalism via social media could therefore be seen as the rawest and unprocessed form of journalism. It provides eye witness and first-hand account. It is the fastest channel for breaking news and gives real-time information, which is what the public wants. “Instead of rivaling social media, news outlets are leveraging off the platform to reach a wider audience online (AdilahRamli in Ellie, 2018). This presupposes that social media or online media does not necessarily challenge or threaten professional journalism. An attempt at reconciling the two however, shows that citizen journalism could be complementary to traditional media (Ellie, 2018).

Professional journalism can benefit from citizen journalism because it provides a wider range or horizon directly and builds personal relationships. Citizen journalism can provide the immediate news that professional journalists can curate into stories and spread far and wide, or professional journalists can provide the news stories which social media can trend on its media.

The two media, thus, can complement each other's weaknesses. Social media provides immediacy and directness while professional media provide objectivity, quality and accuracy. The working together of these two media can bring about a better and faster news gathering and dissemination process to a wider audience. Hence, Sarah Hartley of the Guardian Newspaper observes that "New technology enables normal people to do reporting. But new technology also improves the monitoring quality of journalism as well".

Conclusion

Having seen citizen journalism as the collection and analysis of news and information by the general public, especially by means of the internet, bureaucracy is a system of administration distinguished by its clear hierarchy of authority, rigid division of labour, written and inflexible rules, regulations, procedure and impersonal relationship. Following the entry here, citizen journalism is seen as the opposite of Bureaucracy. Citizen journalism dwells on the concept of every man's right and ability to do as he likes but bureaucracy brings in hierarchy, regulations and procedures to be followed which citizen journalism does not subscribe to as it seeks to break the boundaries set by bureaucracy.

Media institutions that rigidly adopt the bureaucratic system of administration would surely experience conflicts in their governance, particularly in meeting up with deadline. Also, a bureaucratic government would operate a media which will be under serious censorship and control. This was the case in the 16th century England where the authoritarian theory of the press placed a visible hitch on press freedom (Ekwunife, Agbo, Nwachukwu and Agha, 2021; Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). Limitation to what would be published based on security of government actions or official secrets may be beneficial to the public but too revealing about government (Nwodu, 2006; Ndolo, 2011). In such a system, the government may hinder the publication of news items because it reveals evil deeds of a high ranking official. However, this is something citizen journalism has no regard for. It would simply publish as it receives the information without any colouring or editing. This also has far reaching implications on governance as a society devoid of order and due process is heading for chaos and anarchy.

The bureaucratic government would prefer that the media be under its full control. But since citizen journalism is not submissive, there would be a clash of interest between the two. In countries affected by political upheavals and countries in which the media is being controlled by government, people have used

several technological tools like the internet and social media to share information about vital events which may not be reported in the traditional media. This would seriously benefit the public but anger the government (Ekwunife, Robinson, Ukeje, and Kalu, 2020).

Bureaucracy, Citizen Journalism & Sound Governance; a Thematic Analysis

Influence of Bureaucracy on Media Practice

Bureaucracy means different things to different people. People's perceptions of bureaucracy as a concept also come with their perceived encumbrance posed by the concept. In every organization, bureaucracy is seen as a phenomenon that conveys a sense of procedural deliberations over decision making. In media practice, Respondent A observes that in keeping with bureaucracy, decisions *'that bother on on-air content or publication are made by certain group of persons who pay undue attention to administrative policies and organizational structures without any sense of pragmatism'*. Respondent D sees bureaucracy as a constraint to efficient administration; a bottleneck. It is simply the red tape system that aims at protecting the state or organizational interest through adherence to secrecy so as to eschew any form of subterfuge that can be harmful to administration's security architecture. A major challenge posed by bureaucracy in media bureaucracy stems from the effect it has on news content. The original news may be altered as it passes through editors. This agrees with the thought of Ekwunife, Ukeje, Kalu and Robinson (2020) which posits that decisions that are not palatable to superiors in an organization are suppressed in the practice of bureaucracy irrespective of their truthfulness and importance to the public. Respondent C however, sees bureaucracy as a phenomenon that performs both functional and dysfunctional roles. While the practice of bureaucracy in journalism is perceived to come with lots of hitches for the job, Respondent I opines that adherence to bureaucracy points to the checkpoints which a news story must pass through in order to receive approval for dissemination for audience' consumption. These checkpoints bring an air of professionalism into media practice by ensuring adherence to ethical soundness. Respondent C is specific about the fact that adherence to bureaucracy in media practice can *'save the hot and exuberant reporter'*. This points to the idea that editors who man the gates of information dissemination can alter the content of news stories submitted to them for so many reasons which may relate to offensiveness to laws and regulations. Even when the stories filed in to the gate keepers are true, the house-style of the medium could require that the stories be checked or the language

trimmed. Pictures may be removed or edited when the reality offends public interest, value and conscience such as the videos of the gruesome murder of vulnerable women and children in southern Cameroon which were circulated in the social media. Likewise, publishing the naked pictures of accident victims or showing the videos of the brutal and gruesome murder of persons may be very injurious to the bereaved family. Bureaucracy therefore saves both the hot reporter and media station from facing legal actions. Respondent B is particular about the influence of bureaucracy on timeliness which is a primary newsworthy element. In his opinion, *“Bureaucracy, or any such thing that affects timeliness should be seen as an enemy. Therefore, the greatest challenge resulting from bureaucracy is that timeliness, being the life blood of the media is adversely affected. In a competitive environment, bureaucracy is avoided like a plague”*. Respondent A clarifies *“Professional gate keeping sometimes snowballs into bureaucracy that ends up putting your outfit behind competition, which in turn affects your financial results. Oberiri (2016) has also decried the influence of gate keeping on the timely delivery of news but still maintains that news stories without the gate keeping process is void of professional touch and is disposed as fake news. Supporting this view, Ekwunife et al (2020, 3) write:*

When there is no gate-keeper to stand at the gate, thieves and other criminals or unwanted visitors can easily enter the house. So it is with journalism when there is no check on what goes out as news. Harmful elements or information could be spread out. Individuals could seize such an opportunity to break media laws like laws of libel and slander, sedition, publishing of obscene materials and even invasion of privacy. And since there is no check on what goes out as news, such contents could be published to the endangering of the society.

Looking at the intricacies involved in bureaucracy, it could be argued that the influence of bureaucracy, otherwise called checkpoints on professionalism in media practice is both functional and dysfunctional. While it can enhance professionalism by giving a professional touch to news content, it can as well impede professionalism by altering the real news as a result of certain interest.

Functions of Citizen Journalism in Media Practice

Despite differing opinions, empiricism has not held in doubt the functions of citizen journalism to both individuals, groups and the society at large (Ekwunife et al, 2020; Ekwunife et al, 2021; Oberiri, 2016, Kalu and Ekwunife, 2020). Respondents D and J are very assertive about the functions of citizen journalism, to

the society and even to the mainstream media. Being eye witnesses to events, Respondent D observed that *“Some of the most authentic versions of a story could be found here because some of them are eye witness accounts”*. This is the idea behind citizen journalism as i-reporting. Lending credence to this view, Respondent G noted that citizen journalism is a form of media practice where the preponderance of news gathered is from eye witness. Here, ordinary citizens who are not trained gather and send out reports regarding issues springing up in their localities (Kalu et al, 2020). This is powered by the internet which enables them to send out messages from any part of the world. Since the report is coming directly from observers, the story is assumed unadulterated, having transcended the treat or doctoring by bureaucracy. Explaining this, Respondent J noted that there is truth in the news content of citizen journalists. Respondent E is particular about the vibrancy of citizen journalism in the report of official corruption. This view purports that the mainstream media are under the control of the government through legal and extra legal measures of press control, hence, cannot play effectively the role of the watchdog. By implication, citizen journalism is complimentary journalism in the role of surveillance by the media. This is elucidated by the view of Respondent E that even the *“mainstream media often times source their content from citizen journalism”*. Emphasizing timeliness’ which is central as newsworthy element, Respondent B speaks *“Believe me! Citizen journalism has the speed required as newsworthy element. This is because the disseminators of these pieces of information do not undergo any check and with smart phones, for example, stories are gathered and sent out at ease”*.

Challenges Posed by Citizen Journalism to Media Practice

Speaking unequivocally, Respondent F observed:

The greatest challenge this could pose to media practice is, for the most part, the media space is choked with different versions of same story. There's little room for censorship, which could be a bad thing and a good thing. The downside of it is that a lot is sacrificed on the slab of timeliness, topmost of which is professionalism

Scholars (Kalu et al, 2020) have described citizen journalism as fake news. This boils down to the fact that many of the contents are not verified, facts are not cross checked and there are often discrepancies in the report of the same story coming from different reporters. Since there is little or no censorship, this has a far reaching implication on professional media practice. Researchers (Ekwunife et al, 2021), hence

have described citizen journalism as pseudo journalism since it lacks the professional touch. In a bid to be the first to send out the information, these disseminators of information pay no attention to professionalism. Their emphasis is on speed.

Respondent C laments that CJ has unedited contents. This means that the public consumes information which is toxic. This invariably defaces the image of the professional media because in many occasions, the masses may not distinguish between the mainstream media and citizen journalists. Professionally, attention is not paid to diction which is a hallmark of professional media practice. This is described as arm-chair journalism, characterized by rumour, fake news and quackery. Corroborating this, Respondent H fumes: “No professionalism. No morality. No target audience. Diction isn’t given attention. It has very serious damning consequences. Fine-tuning the report makes it easier and better”. The consequences of unedited media content cannot be over-flogged. Oberiri (2016) explains that this is the primary factor that disposes CJ as unprofessional. Language management has been seen as a factor that makes the practice of CJ unreliable. The idea is that while one has something to say, the principles of effective communication entail that words are carefully selected and orchestrated to achieve set objectives. The language of citizen journalists is seen as abusive, not considering emotions and how consumers of information receive them. Explaining this, some respondents have alluded to the disheartening videos of brutal killings of vulnerable women and children in southern Cameroon, the tortuous killings of members of the Nigerian Army in the net of Boko Haram terrorists, the dismantling and dismembering of Boko Haram captives by the Army, among others, all which are circulated on social media. Some who storm into these videos on social media suddenly fall sick while others are emotionally battered. All this is as a result of not giving consideration to the language of contents disseminated by citizen journalists who freely send out any content they deem fit.

Respondents are of the view that the contents of posts by citizen journalists are unprocessed, hence, an unprocessed material is not a finished product; unfit for consumption. Respondent G captures it this way: “Raw information triggers curiosity. There is truth in them but the handling is wrong which makes it achieve the negative instead of the positive”. Ekwunife et al (2020) support this view when they observe that such contents do not pass through any checkpoints, no gate-keeping and anything goes, that citizen journalism thrives with crises related news and the management of these news stories ends up fueling

crises and heightening tension, example, the news of the recent xenophobia in south Africa and the farmers-herders clash in Nigeria.

Remedies to the Effect of Citizen Journalism on Professional Journalism

Respondent A maintains that information should be verified before dissemination. Hence, “*Information should be tailored. Raw materials must be processed into finished products. Checkpoints are necessary*”. Analytically, information disseminated by citizen journalists are rather seen as raw materials which have not been processed into finished products, hence not fit for consumption. The importance of gate-keeping in journalism has been emphasized as it ensures that what needs to be removed is removed while what needs to be added is added (Ferreira, 2018). This is the idea of professionalism which bureaucracy pursues. Aside having a gate-keeping process, Respondent G puts more emphasis on laws and regulations while Respondent K is concerned about sensitizing the masses to cross check facts for misleading contents instead of accepting all contents on face value. The idea of using laws and regulations to checkmate media practice is supported by Ndolo (2011), Ndolo (2015), Udeze (2012) and Bittner (1989). Hence, an institution that does not operate within the ambience of specified rules of conduct will be given to anarchy, chaos and dirty practice.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Researchers with similar interest are encouraged to research on the opinion of professional journalists on the influence of gate-keeping on professional media practice.

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