—The Evolution and Challenges of Online Journalism in Nigeria.

Farooq A Kperogi, Kennesaw State University

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By Farooq A. Kperogi, Ph.D.¹

Abstract:
The last seven years have seen the phenomenal growth and expansion of not only traditional online journalism but also social media online journalism in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation. In this chapter, I trace the evolution and idiosyncratic features of online journalism in Nigeria, explore its variegated manifestations, capture the relational and professional tensions that have erupted between Web-only, mostly diasporan, citizen journalists and more traditional homeland journalists, and show how all this has altered journalistic practice in Nigeria. I also discuss the tensile relationship between citizen online journalists and the Nigerian government, a relationship that has led to the high-profile arrests of diasporan citizen journalists who traveled to Nigeria from their base in the West for routine business. Finally, I explore how the emergent genre of citizen social journalism helped shape the 2011 general elections in Nigeria and enriched homeland traditional journalistic practice.

Keywords: Nigerian journalism, Online journalism, Social media journalism, Citizen social journalism, Diaspora citizen journalists

Introduction

Two momentous developments have defined the Nigerian journalistic landscape in the last ten years. The first is the migration of all major Nigerian newspapers to the Internet (while actively sustaining their print editions) in hopes of reaching the highly educated Nigerian migratory elite in the diaspora (Youngstedt 2004; Reynolds and Younstedt 2004; Reynolds 2002; Stoller 1999). The second development is the robust growth and flowering of transnational, diasporan citizen online news media that have vigorously sought and captured the attention of Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora (Kperogi 2011; Kperogi 2008). On the surface, these developments seem contradictory, even counter-intuitive: the migration of news content from homeland legacy newspapers to the Internet should have functioned to satisfy the thirst for domestic news by geographically displaced diasporan Nigerians and therefore obviated the need for diasporan-run citizen news outlets. This is more so because the Nigerian diaspora in the West, though highly educated and savvy, had never before now been a vector of informational flows to the homeland (Bastian 1999). So what dynamics actuated this process?

In this chapter, I trace the evolution and idiosyncratic features of online journalism in Nigeria, explore its variegated manifestations, capture the relational and professional tensions that have erupted between Web-only, mostly diasporan, citizen journalists and more traditional homeland journalists, and show how all this has altered journalistic practice in Nigeria. I also discuss the tensile relationship between citizen online journalists and the Nigerian government, a relationship that has led to the high-profile arrest of diasporan citizen journalists who traveled to Nigeria from their base in the West for routine business. Finally, I explore how the emergent genre of citizen social journalism (i.e., microblogging on Facebook and Twitter by ordinary

¹ Dr. Kperogi is an Assistant Professor of Journalism and Citizen Media at Kennesaw State University, USA.
citizens about news events) helped shape the 2011 general elections in Nigeria and enriched homeland traditional journalistic practice. This contribution is important because the extant literature on the consequences of the Internet on traditional journalistic practices is almost exclusively preoccupied with the experiences of the more advanced parts of the world; it does not capture the singularities of peripheral, transitional nations like Nigeria where the tension between traditional and online journalists is assuming unique forms, where citizen online journalism imposes on itself the simultaneous task of fighting corrupt governments and serving as a counterfoil to an equally corrupt mainstream media formation.

The Past and Present of Online Journalism in Nigeria

The defunct Post Express, under the direction of the late Dr. Stanley Macebuh, is widely acknowledged as the first Nigerian newspaper to migrate its content to the Internet in 1996 (Kperogi 2011). Like many newspapers at the time, the Post Express merely recycled its print content to the Web. By the close of the 1990s, a few other newspapers, notably the (Nigerian) Guardian, Punch, Vanguard, and ThisDay, had websites where they episodically republished selected contents from their print editions. By the early 2000s, almost all the legacy newspapers in Nigeria had some Web presence, aided in part by the aggregation and distribution of their content, along with those of other African newspapers, by the AllAfrica.com, the Washington DC-based multimedia content service provider widely recognized as the world’s largest Africa-centered site. The site signed content agreements with over 130 African news organizations, which “generate steady revenues for the content partners and give them, in turn, access to the prize-winning reporting of the AllAfrica team” (All Africa.c.com, accessed May 14, 2011, http://allafrica.com/whoweare.html) By the mid 2000s, newspapers without their own websites became the exception rather than the rule.

It was precisely the period during which the Web presence of Nigerian newspapers became entrenched and normalized that citizen online news sites owned and operated by Nigerians in the diaspora sprouted and grew rapidly. The most notable of these online diasporan newspapers are Elendu Reports,1 Sahara Reporters,2 the Times of Nigeria,3 the Nigerian Village Square,4 HuhuOnline,5 and PointBlankNews.6 There are many others, such as Empowered Newswire7 (which operates like a wire service agency), USAfricaonline.com (which prides itself on being the “first African-owned U.S.-based professional newspaper to be published on the Internet”)8 and IReports-NG.com9 but, in the main, their influence in the Nigerian domestic public sphere has been peripheral at best and nonexistent at worst. By far the most influential Nigerian diasporic electronic newspapers are the first six identified above. Since their emergence in 2005, they have continued to break sensitive news stories that have radically altered the journalistic practices and politics of Nigeria (Kperogi 2011; Kperogi 2008).

ElenduReports.com, the first notable diasporan citizen news site which came on board in 2003, is published from Lansing, Michigan, and is associated with Jonathan Elendu, a former newspaper journalist with the Nigerian Daily Times, who is a legal permanent resident in the United States. SaharaReporters.com is owned and edited by Sowore Omoyele, a New York-based activist and permanent U.S. resident who had no previous mainstream journalistic training or experience. The site, which broke away from ElenduReports.com in 2006, is far and away the most popular Nigeria-centered citizen media site. The TimesofNigeria.com was started in 2005 by a Maryland-based Nigerian journalist called Sunny Ofili, who is a former reporter with the defunct African Guardian. He immigrated to the United States in 1993. The Nigeriavilagesquare.com was founded in 2003 by a group of immigrant Nigerians based in the
United States. The main person associated with it is Philip Adekunle, a Chicago-based computer information systems specialist. Pointblanknews.com was launched on January 20, 2007 by a Nigerian immigrant in the United States by the name of Jackson Ude. Other people associated with the site, which is published in New York, are Oladimeji Abitogun and Churchill Umoren, who are also legal permanent residents in the United States.

These diaspora news outlets have gone beyond being instruments for the construction of subjectivities in the migratory settings of their owners and consumers to being active participants in the domestic and international politics of the homeland. They not only compete with but vigorously undermine the credibility of homeland newspapers, and have been growing in popularity and acceptance by leaps and bounds (Kperogi 2011). Their popularity is a consequence of the originality of their news reporting (although they also offer platforms for critical commentary on news published in the homeland news media), their detachment from and non-affiliation with political parties and politicians (unlike many homeland newspapers), and the willingness of whistle blowers to trust them with sensitive, and sometimes classified, government information. Diasporan citizen journalists also take advantage of the Freedom of Information Act in the United States to access the records of Nigeria’s elite who have investments in the country. They have, for instance published PDF files of court documents that have indicted prominent Nigerian government officials when they lived in the West (which should disqualify them from holding public office), and pictures and costs of the choice property of corrupt Nigerian elites in Western capitals. Thus, they have tremendous access to information that is not available to their counterparts in the homeland.

**Other Reasons for the Popularity of Diasporan Online Sites**

Two other fundamental factors account for the rising centrality of diasporan online citizen media sites in the Nigerian media landscape. The first is the death— in fact, the death— of the brand of investigative, adversarial, and advocacy journalism that characterized the performance of the Nigerian press during the military era from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, which found an especially concentrated expression in the guerilla press of the 1990s (Olorunyomi, 1996; Dare 2007). The absence of a virile, uncompromised domestic watchdog media system that is committed to comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable in the face of the enormous venality that has accompanied Nigeria’s return to democratic rule since 1999 needed to be corrected. Homeland newspapers have proved either unwilling or unable to rise up to this challenge.

Another reason for the rise in popularity of Nigerian diasporan online media is the technical deficiency of the websites of homeland newspapers. Their websites are, for the most part, neither updated in real-time nor sufficiently interactive and multi-platform in the fashion of contemporary legacy media websites in the West with which diasporan Nigerians have become familiar. So, in an interesting reversal, while the mainstream media in the West ventured into online journalism out of anxieties about the potentially disruptive effects that the emergent citizen online journalism might have on their professional authority (see Kperogi 2011; Singer 1997; and Singer 1997), the Nigerian mainstream media’s lack of sophisticated Web presence partly inspired the emergence of Nigerian citizen online journalism, which now potentially disrupts the authority and dominant journalistic practices of the homeland mainstream media, as I will show in subsequent sections of this chapter.
Features of Online Journalism

In order to appreciate the idiosyncratic features of online journalism in Nigeria in a global context, it is appropriate to review the form and history of online journalism in general. Mark Deuze (2003) has isolated three dominant features that are fundamental to the possibility and vitality of online journalism. The first feature he identifies is interactivity, which he defines as the ability for readers or audiences of online content to react to or interact with and even adapt news content presented to them. The comment section of online content is a key element of this attribute. The second feature is multimediality, which is the technical capability for news content to be delivered in multiple platforms—text, video, audio, and animated graphics. Solely static textual content would be regarded as deficient in multimediality. The third feature that defines the exceptionality of online journalism is hypertextuality, which Deuze describes as the ability of news sites “to connect the story to other stories, archives, resources and so forth through hyperlinks” (Deuze 2003: 206). Here, the presence of links that connect readers to related material within the same websites and/or that lead readers to external sites relevant to the content being presented constitutes the core of hypertextuality.

Deuze explores these three broad characteristics in terms of four types of online journalism: “mainstream” news sites, “index and category” sites, “meta and comment” sites and “share and discussion” sites. “Mainstream” and “index and category” sites, he points out, are characterized by “moderated participatory communication” while “meta and comment” and “share and discussion” sites are characterized by an “unmoderated participatory communication” (Deuze, 2003: 205). In other words, while mainstream-and-index and category sites, such as legacy media news sites, are mediated by an elaborate, clearly defined gatekeeper structure, the meta-and-comment and share-and-discussion sites are not encumbered by the kind of discursive policing that defines the operations of mainstream news organizations. In reality, though, most online content sites are hybridized; they have a bit of all of these dimensions of online journalism.

Pavlik (1997), for his part, identifies three stages in the evolution of online journalism. In the first stage, he points out, mainstream newspapers merely recycled their print content to the new online platform. This is often derisively called “shovelware” in industry vernacular (Deuze, 1999; Boczkowski, 2002). The second stage in online journalism, he says, improved on the first and involved some measure of interactivity with the news content posted on news Web sites. At this point, content ceased to be dull and static; it became periodically updated as news broke. So news appeared on news Web sites first before it appeared in the print editions. The third, and in his reckoning current, stage is the convergent phase. This phase features dynamic content that is not necessarily the same as the print content and that has a lot of multimediality and hypertextuality. This stage of online journalism makes it possible for lengthy interviews that cannot be published in whole due to the traditional constraints of newspaper space to be posted online. It also makes it possible for the audio and video files of interviews published in print to be uploaded onto news sites and for exclusively video- and audio-based or photographic reports that cannot possibly be captured by the print medium to be featured on websites.

It is anybody’s guess what the next stage will be. However, it seems appealing to prognosticate that the next stage, which is already unfolding in many fascinating ways, will be networked social journalism, or what Flew and Wilson (2010) have called “journalism as social networking.” So, online journalism evolved from textuality to hypertextuality and then to multimediality and is now inching toward an amorphous, citizen-led, networked, social-media phase. While some people prognosticate that the next stage might witness the death of the
traditional media as we know it, others caution against such gloomy, apocalyptic projections, insisting instead that “newspapers can coexist with the Internet while surrendering some tasks, such as archiving factual background, becoming instead more analytical advocates” (Nerone and Barhurt 2001: 467).  

**Stage 1**  
**Stage 2**  
**Stage 3**  
**Next Stages**  

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Print on Web Content; not dynamic or updated</th>
<th>Text Picture Hyperlink Content regularly updated</th>
<th>Audio Video Animation Content regularly updated User feedback</th>
<th>The future: Networked social journalism</th>
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Shovelware Hypertextuality Multimediality Future Coverage

**Table 1: Stages of Online Journalism**

**Features of Nigerian Online Journalism**

The websites of Nigerian homeland newspapers fail the requirements of Deuze’s multimediality and hypertextuality and seem to be stuck in Pavlik’s first stage in the evolution of online journalism. However, as I will show shortly, they seem to be leapfrogging to the networked social journalism phase. Since Post Express first migrated its content to the Internet in 1996, subsequent Nigerian newspapers that appeared on the Web, for the most part, also merely repurposed static shovelware from their print versions. There were exceptions, though. The Nigerian *Guardian*, which prides itself on being “the flagship of Nigerian journalism,” (Ette 2000) used to be fairly interactive, although it was always lacking in multimediality and hypertextuality. The online forums and chat rooms it created for discussing its news content (which qualifies as interactivity in a limited sense of the term) were so popular between the late 1990s and the early 2000s that they were the first port of call for homesick Nigerians living in the West. A participant in the chat-room discussions who lived in the UK at the time called it the “rallying point for Nigerians at home and abroad to meet and discuss common issues of national importance” (Nworah 2010: np). However, realizing that its forums had become wildly popular, the paper decided to commercialize participation. It required people to pay upfront before being allowed to participate in online discussions on its platforms. The paper lost nearly all of its participants. Nobody was prepared to pay a fee to discuss across spatial and temporal boundaries. Instead, this move to commercialize participation in the Guardian’s chat rooms inspired diasporan Nigerians to set up their own free discussion groups.  

To require people to pay a fee before interacting with a newspaper’s content was a thoughtless and unimaginative business strategy. The Guardian could have used one of the many strategies that the DailyMail.co.uk, for example, deployed to monetize its boards: it could have used advertising overlays and sponsorship and “intelligent hyperlinks” within postings, etc. (Thurman 2008: 139). At the time of writing this chapter, the Nigerian *Guardian*’s website does
not even provide any kind of platform to interact with or comment on its stories. It has reverted to posting shovelware versions of its print edition and does not even have a functional, intuitive search feature, nor does it have an online archive of all its content—all features that are basic and integral to the architecture of the websites of almost all mainstream Western news media and that Deuze (2003) identifies as central features of online journalism.

A recent notable case of a Nigerian newspaper that could be said to have graduated to the second stage of Pavlik’s periodization of online journalism is the Abuja-based Leadership newspaper. The paper’s website provided a robust platform for readers to react to and interact with its stories. Reader comments were uncensored and unfiltered. However, in time, it attracted Internet trolls who turned the forum into avenues for throwing caustic vitriol not only at the writers, editors, and reporters of the paper but also at other Nigerian ethnic groups. The site was also hacked through its message boards. The paper took a decision, after about one year of uncensored comments, to require that readers be registered first before they could have the right to post comments on the site. The policy drove most readers away.

Other Nigerian newspapers that currently experiment with some form of interactivity on their websites are Daily Trust (based in Abuja, Nigeria’s federal capital), P.M. News, Vanguard, Punch, and the Nation (all based in Lagos, Nigeria’s media headquarters and former federal capital) and the up-and-coming multi-media news platform called NEXT, which is led by Dele Olojede, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Nigerian journalist who served as the foreign editor for Newsday. At the time of writing this, NEXT is the only mainstream Nigeria-based daily newspaper that streams video and audio on its site on a sustained basis, that is updated in real time, and that is truly hypertextual and fully searchable. Most of the other Nigerian papers with an online presence are stuck in the first stage of online journalism.

In many ways, the majority of Nigeria’s mainstream newspapers are guilty of the criticisms that media critic Jon Katz leveled against the U.S. media in the late 1990s. He criticized U.S. newspapers for remaining “insanely stagnant in an interactive age” (cited in Matheson, 2004: 444). Matheson (2004: 446) attributes this to the mainstream media’s tendency to have a “rather static core set of news practices” and to place “other journalistic practices at its margins” (Matheson 2004: 446). Business and technology columnist Dan Gillmor, for his part, attributed the slow adoption of the blog by the mainstream media to their “innate conservatism” and asserted further that “when big media companies consider having a conversation with their audience, they tend not to push many boundaries” (Gillmor 2004: 112). These criticisms now seem dated in reference to the mainstream media in the West, but they are still apt in reference to the mainstream media in Nigeria. In the case of Nigeria, however, it seems more plausible to implicate low technological development and Nigerian print journalists’ unease with Internet technology for this state of affairs than the “static core of news practices” or an “innate conservatism.” As Olukotun (2000: 35) notes, “Most [Nigerian] journalists are not computer literate, much less own personal computers, in spite of the arrival on the Internet of The Post Express, The Guardian and The Vanguard.” He cites a survey in the Nigerian Media Review, an authoritative industry newsletter, as having lamented the technological backwardness of the Guardian, Nigeria’s leading newspaper, in its March/April 2000 issue in the following words: A visit to The Guardian newsroom does little credit to its place and influence in journalism. Besides being a long clutter of tables and chairs, reporters still go through long-hand production. Very little information technology presence is felt here (Olukotun, 2000: 35).
Thus, although by the year 2000 many Nigerian newspapers had their own websites, they were still stuck in the mindset and production practices of pre-Internet newspapers. This attitude has changed only marginally. And it is precisely this structural and functional deficiency of traditional homeland newspapers that provided the fillip for the emergence, popularity, and acceptance of online citizen media by Nigerians who reside outside the shores of their native country; diasporan citizen online newspapers merely took advantage of the weak online presence of Nigerian newspapers to establish their relevance. Most of the Nigerian diasporan citizen media sites referenced earlier in this chapter clearly belong in the third stage of Pavlik’s mapping of online journalism. Their content is active and updated in real time. They are hypertextual, interactive, and multi-media. Because of these qualities, they have beaten homeland newspapers, except perhaps NEXT, in breaking regular, routine news stories. Typically, in moments of political crisis, the most popular diasporan websites, such as Sahara Reporters, almost always shut down because of high volume of traffic (Kperogi 2011). Unlike the websites of homeland newspapers, the diasporan online media outlets also provide video and audio clips of newsworthy events, such as the video tape of a Muslim governor caught dancing with Arab prostitutes and spraying money with reckless abandon at a Dubai night club while criminalizing similar indulgences in the state he governed (SaharaTV 2010) and an audio tape of a serving Nigerian governor detailing plans on how he intended to rig elections using thugs dressed in fake military attire who would intimidate voters. This quality—that is, accompanying stories with multimedia corroborations—redounds to the popularity and credibility of diasporan online news sites. Most mainstream Nigerian newspapers have no technical capability or expertise, for now at least, to report on the kinds of news stories that involve video and audio components and animated graphics even if they so desired, and this is precisely why the institutional media in the homeland are such poor competitors to their diasporan online counterparts.

**Government’s and traditional media’s response to diasporan citizen media**

The reaction of the Nigerian governments and corrupt politicians to the piercing scrutiny of their activities by diasporan citizen media organizations has ranged from blackmail, arrest and detention of bloggers, attempts to block diasporan citizen media sites from being viewed in Nigeria, Web counteroffensives, hacking of the diasporan citizen media, and cooptation of oppositional bloggers, to the initiation of expensive libel suits against the particularly radical online media like Sahara Reporters and Elendu Reports (before it lost its credibility due to its infiltration by the same corrupt politicians it had exposed in its earlier form).

The Nigerian government first responded by making several attempts to hack radical citizen media sites like SaharaReporters “but [it] survived owing to the foresight of its managers.” Not done, the government mandated its lawyers to threaten the US Webhost of SaharaReporters with a lawsuit if they did not shut down the site. In a letter to the Webhost, written in all caps, the government agents claiming to be “solicitors and advocates” with Reardenilson and Associates wrote:

We are aware that Domains by Proxy is a reputable company. We are worried that a Web site http://www.saharareporters.com/ hosted with Domains by Proxy is being used for subversive dissemination of information against the president and people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. We have read the terms of registration of Websites which say that any Website used for illegal purposes, morally objectionable/defamatory and libelous articles will be closed down. Please note that http://saharareporters.com/> has violated the laws by writing articles that are treasonable offence [sic] in Nigeria. We therefore
request that as a responsible company that you are to shut down http://saharareporters.com/ immediately to avoid any legal proceedings which may affect your company and affect your business (Ochonu 2008).

Although the law firm was apparently based in Nigeria, it nonetheless scared the US-based Webhosting company enough to warn SaharaReporters to desist from publishing libelous materials. It subsequently shut the site down. In a widely distributed press release, Sahara Reporters said ‘our Webhosting company complained to us that our Website was ‘abusing their server and using their cpu at 100%' and as such had to shut down SAHARAREPORTERS because it was rendering others sites on their server ‘inoperable’” (Againstbabangida.com 2010: np). It however dismissed this technical explanation for shutting the site as mere obfuscation, saying “There is a conspiracy to put our site out of existence. However, this will not happen, as such we will be working round the clock to resume our activities online ASAP” (NigeriansinAmerica.com 2010: np). It also asked for suggestions on how Sahara Reporters could get its own server and avoid having to go through third parties. The response was overwhelming: readers contributed funds to buy an independent server for the site.

In 2008, Dr. Paul Orhii, the director-general of a government agency called the National Food and Drug Law Administration, sued Sahara Reporters in a Texas court and asked for $25 million in punitive damages. The Media Legal Defense Initiative, the London-based NGO that provides “legal support to journalists and media outlets who seek to protect their right to freedom of expression” said Dr. Orhii’s case was being handled by “the high-powered Cook law firm in Houston” (Media Legal Defence Initiative 2010: np). The NGO linked up with US-based Media Law Resource Center, which asked Julie Ford, an experienced Texas-based media lawyer, to defend SaharaReporters for free. “She defended Mr Omoyele on grounds of personal jurisdiction, arguing that since the publication was clearly aimed at a Nigerian readership and the defendant had no links with Texas, the Houston courts had no jurisdiction” (Media Legal Defence Initiative 2010: np). The judge was persuaded and the case was dismissed on March 31, 2009. But this was not the end of the legal challenges that Sahara Reporters has had to contend with. The same month that the Texas judge dismissed the suit against the site, another U.S.-based lawyer for the Nigerian federal government sued Sahara Reporters in a Maryland court for libel (SaharaReporters 2010). Again in April 2010, Nigeria’s ambassador to the United Nations, Mrs. Joy Ogwu, notified SaharaReporters that she would begin a multi-million-dollar law suit against the Web site over “exposure of improper contracts awarded by her at the nation’s Permanent Mission” (SaharaReporters 2010: np).

Olumhense, a respected Nigerian journalist who now lives in New York, sums up the strategies of the Nigerian government against SaharaReporters in the following manner: “So that is the line-up: technological warfare designed to make SR unpublishable; a scorched-earth campaign to discredit Mr. Sowore personally; a gigantic lawsuit by an interested party; and a political appeal to Internet hosts to take the site off the air” (Olumhense 2008: np). These actions are scripts created out of an elaborate $5 million budget by the Nigerian government to dilute the growing influence of diasporan online citizen media and to “ensure that Websites like Saharareporters.com and others are stopped from taking root in Nigeria” (Elombah 2009: np). Part of the plan included sponsoring rival diasporan citizen media sites and unleashing an army of pro-government commenters on the discussion boards of the radical and popular sites like SaharaReporters.com to subvert the growth of “critical blogging culture that is taking the
Nigerian nation by storm and effectively replacing the mainstream local media” (SaharaReporters, 2009: np). But this has not worked.

So the government experimented with a more desperate measure: the arrest of diasporan citizen journalists who traveled to Nigeria. The first diasporan citizen reporter to be arrested by Nigeria’s security forces was Jonathan Elendu, the owner of Elendureports.com. He was arrested when he traveled to Nigeria from his base in the US. He was accused of being the sponsor of a “guerilla news agency” (Macha 2008: np). The charge against him was later amended to include “money laundering and sedition” (Ekine 2008: np). It later emerged that the Nigerian government thought he was aligned with Sahara Reporters. Curiously, the arrest of Elendu generated more buzz among Western media NGOs than it did in Nigeria. It was virtually blacked out in the Nigerian domestic media. A Nigerian writer wrote: “Although the incident took place within their vicinity at the Nnamdi Azikiwe airport Abuja, it was the online publications - Pointblanknews and Saharareporters that broke the news.” He added: “Even when the publisher was charged with sedition by the State Security Service (SSS), only Punch gave it wide coverage” Babalola 2008: np). He attributed the indifference to, or inadequate coverage of, Elendu’s arrest by Nigerian traditional journalists to the fact that journalists in Nigeria do not regard online journalists as colleagues.

Again in 2009, HuhuOnline’s editor-in-chief, Emmanuel Asiwe, was arrested and detained by Nigerian security forces when he traveled to Nigeria from his base in the United States. Nigeria’s national security agency said he was being “questioned over matters of national security” (Committee to Protect Journalists 2008: np). After pressure from human rights groups worldwide and from the United States government (Asiwe is a dual citizen of Nigeria and the United States), Nigerian courts declared his arrest illegal (SaharaReporters 2009). Whatever the case is, the Nigerian diasporic Internet-based media are transforming both the form and content of Nigerian journalism in ways that at once enrich and complicate the dynamics of informational flow from the core—in this case, a privileged diasporic “peripheral core”— to the periphery where the ancestral roots of the migratory elite that are now spatially situated at the core are located. The Internet-based diaspora news outfits have become so influential that, in many cases, opposition politicians fed up with the domestic media’s double standards and timidity— and even government officials hoping to fly kites or expose government secrets for personal gain—bypass the mainstream domestic Nigerian media and get across to territorially displaced citizen journalists in the diaspora. Once a story gets prominence in the diaspora online press, it almost always eventually becomes the editorial staple of the traditional domestic press at some point, even if there is initial reluctance from the domestic media to give such stories prominence.

Traditional journalists are predictably jealous of the diasporan citizen journalists and have sought for creative ways to undercut their growing influence. One of the rhetorical strategies they use to undermine the credibility of diasporan citizen journalists is to suggestively hint at their geographical distance from the scene of the events they report on. Whenever they are mentioned in the mainstream homeland media, their individuality is often erased; they are hardly identified by their names and instead get called by such amorphous names as “online news agency,” “offshore news sites,” “guerilla sites,” and so on. Although they provide a wealth of information to the mainstream media, they are often either completely ignored or grudgingly acknowledged when government officials or politicians react to diasporan citizen media reports through the local press. And as was pointed out earlier, when some of the citizen journalists were arrested and detained when they traveled to Nigeria, the domestic media blacked out the news. The animosity of traditional journalists to diasporan citizen reporters is not only because
traditional journalists are leery of the transgression of nonprofessionals into their craft but also because the citizen media of the Nigerian diaspora have exposed many embarrassing corruption scandals in the media (Kperogi, 2011). However, as diasporan citizen media become normalized as parts and parcels of the media landscape in Nigeria, it would be interesting to watch how relational tension between homeland traditional journalists and diasporan citizen journalists develops.

Social Media and the 2011 General Elections

Perhaps no event has dramatized the diminishing importance of the industrial homeland media formation in Nigeria more than the epochal role that microbloggers (Facebookers and Twitterers) and citizen journalists played in the 2011 Nigerian general elections. Following the renewed enthusiasm and faith in electoral politics that the appointment of respected academic Attahiru Jega as chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission generated in the country, scores of citizen media initiatives were set up to monitor and safeguard the integrity of the electoral process. Many young people and civil society activists chose to deploy the instrumentality of the Internet and mobile technology to influence the course of the election. They resolved to share with the world textual updates of the election on Twitter and Facebook, and to also video-blog about it on YouTube and Facebook with their phone cameras. The Nigerian power structure was alarmed at this prospect, and so Nigeria’s Inspector General of Police issued a directive forbidding voters from taking cameras to the polling units. As would be expected, the directive outraged the sensibilities of many people. It met with so much stiff resistance from civil society groups, media pundits, and citizen reporters that the authorities were compelled to withdraw it forthwith (Ogala and Bamidele 2011). The Independent National Electoral Commission, the agency that conducts elections in Nigeria, also dissociated itself from the directive. “INEC has said anyone can bring their phone or camera to the polling unit. Anything to the contrary is not the position of INEC,” the agency said in a widely publicized press statement (Iyang, 2011).

This set the stage for robust citizen participation in the election. Dozens of Web-based citizen initiatives quickly sprouted. At least eight such initiatives had widespread following and popularity across Nigeria. Perhaps the most popular such initiative was “ReclaimNaija: Election Incident Report System (www.reclaimnaija.net),” an activist citizen initiative that was formed to ensure transparency in the conduct of the 2011 general elections through citizen reporting. Its membership was drawn from a vast array of grassroots, peasant, working-class, and civil society organizations across the country. It provided phone lines for election observers to reach it, an open-source mapping software known as Ushahindi for people to report their observations in real time, and it encouraged its members and non-members alike to send tweets about the election with the hashtags #reclaiinningja and #NigeriaDecides. “Project 2011 Swift Count” (http://www.pscnigeria.org/aboutus.php) was another hugely successful project that stood out not only because of the efficacy of the reportage of its citizen reporters but also because of its capacity to unite many elements in Nigeria’s traditional primordial fissures. It brought together the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN); Justice, Development and Peace/Caritas Nigeria (JDPC); Nigerian Bar Association (NBA); and the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG). It persuaded members of the public to announce results of voting in their polling units as soon as they were available so as to subvert the possibility of official manipulation of results. The Police Service Commission (http://www.pscnigeria.org/aboutus.php) was set up to monitor the conduct of police officers...
who were posted to polling units to monitor the conduct of elections. In the past, the police were often accused of colluding with politicians to intimidate voters and to change election results in favor of their patrons. This group encouraged citizen reporters to chronicle, if possible through phone cameras, instances where police officers were complicit in electoral fraud. It provided dedicated numbers to which citizen could report the conduct of the police in real time. “Vote or Quench” (Nigerian Pidgin English for “Vote or be damned”) was also very active in monitoring the conduct of the election through its pack of youthful citizen journalists who shared updates on its site, http://www.voteorquench.org/. So were many Facebook groups, such as the Nigeria 2011 Election Center (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Nigeria-2011-Election-Centre/169819256402639?ref=ts), which saw vigorous debates and status updates on the election. There was also many “video-your-vote” channels on YouTube such as http://www.youtube.com/embed/aH8dAdZhB7k. These initiatives complemented the efforts of such well-known diasporan citizen media sites as SaharaReporters, which gets millions of hits every week, the Nigerian Village Square, The Will, the African Examiner, Eagle Eye Report, and so on.

In more ways than one, although citizen reporters did not influence the outcome of the election, they shaped its processes and conduct and guided its discourse. For instance, the first set of the three-tier election that was scheduled to hold on April 2, 2011 was postponed by a week partly as a consequence of the irregularities reporters by citizen reporters at the ClaimNaija project. As a Slate.com reporter observes:

I saw dozens of voters transformed into informal election monitors—snapping photos on their mobile phones and alerting friends when the lines were shortest. A local newspaper took note: ‘The tweets, Facebook updates, Skype messages, text messages and pictures that voters exchanged via email and mobile phones gave the addresses of the polling booths, the locations, the number of people accredited, those who voted and the votes that each party got.’ Within 12 hours of the polls closing, a charming YouTube video documented the group count at one polling unit. If thugs tried to snatch that ballot box, they might have seen their face on the evening news (Olopade 2011: np).

But the consequences of citizen media reports of the elections would certainly extend beyond the conduct of the elections. Many citizen reporters captured video evidence of election rigging in many parts of the country, and aggrieved politicians who were at the receiving end of electoral fraud have vowed to use these videos as testimonial evidence to ask for the invalidation of the electoral victories of their opponents. The unprecedentedly enthusiastic participation of citizen reporters in the electoral process eclipsed the traditional role of the Nigerian mass media as the first source of information. Alarmed by their diminishing role, the mainstream media were forced to invest more effort in their online delivery. The Daily Trust, for instance, started live, real-time updates of the elections from all parts of the country. For the first time also, it started uploading on its website videos of the election that were recorded by its reporters. The Vanguard, Guardian, Punch and many other legacy newspapers not only started live updates on the election but also formed online communities and invited citizen journalist participation. In addition, they had Twitter and Facebook accounts and utilized them to disseminate updates. But it was too little too late. The efforts did not gain much traction, first, because they were not sufficiently robust and, second, because they could not rival the sheer infectious ebullience of citizen bloggers on Twitter, Facebook, diasporan media sites, and the many lively discursive arenas created by sundry citizen initiatives.
Although the media in Nigeria seem to be immune from the financial hemorrhaging and uncertain future that the Western media are confronted by, going forward, they would need to justify their existence by living up to the demands of twenty-first century journalism, which is increasingly networked, multimedia, interactive, archival, interactive, and driven by social media trends. The only saving grace for Nigeria’s corporatized media, for now, is that advertisers are still leery of the efficacy of advertising in online citizen media platforms. But this reluctance is unlikely to last forever. The decoupling of the traditional media from advertising that we have witnessed in the past five years in the United States and other industrialized democracies could sooner or later creep into Nigeria, especially as Internet penetration deepens and becomes demotic. For instance, the World Bank estimates more than 44 million Nigerians had access to the Internet as of 2009, up from fewer than one million seven years earlier (Spiegel, 2011). Similarly, according to the International Telecommunications Union’s 2010 report, forty percent of all Internet traffic from the whole of Africa now comes from Nigeria. The report also says Nigeria has at least forty-three million active Internet users (Malakata 2010). It is conceivable that by the close of 2011 the number of Nigerians with Internet access had doubled, especially with the proliferation of Internet-capable cell phones in the country, which has made Nigeria the country with fastest-growing Facebook users in sub-Saharan Africa. As of early 2011, the country had more than 4 million active Facebook users, making it the country with the 35th most active Facebook users in the world 35, outrivaled only by Egypt in the entire African continent (http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/). Advertisers whose patronage sustains newspapers are taking notice. The crisis of the Nigerian domestic newspaper market will deepen once advertisers migrate in large numbers to the online Nigerian citizen media.

Conclusion

It is obvious that geographically displaced online citizen news sites are radically altering the journalistic landscape in Nigeria. But what lessons can global journalism learn from this? Well, these newfangled Nigerian diaspora media might very well be the prototype of an evolving, Internet-enabled, trans-local, and mutual informational and cultural exchange between the educated deterritorialized ethnoscapes of peripheral nations whose exile in the West invests them with symbolic and cultural capital and the private media institutions and governments of their homelands. It is important to note, too, that although the Internet is not as widely accessible in the developing world as it is in the West, thus potentially limiting the power and reach of online citizen media, Internet access and literacy have been growing by leaps and bounds lately, especially with the wild popularity of mobile Internet service. In Nigeria, as in most developing countries, most people get access to the Internet through their cell phones. But, more importantly, as the two-step flow theory of communication (sometimes called the multiple-step-flow theory of communication) suggests, the effects of mass communication are not often measured primarily through the number of people who have had first contact with the content of the mass media. News often percolates to the general populace through a network of interpersonal relationships led by “opinion leaders” (Lazersfield, Berleson, and Gaudet 1944). The theory states that news from the mass media usually first gets to opinion leaders—who are usually well-educated, media-savvy, and have access to modern communication facilities—who then relay it to the lower strata of the society through informal channels. This theory captures the reality of the effect of citizen online media in Nigeria, and it can potentially be replicated in other developing nations of the world.
Bibliography


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End Notes

1 The homepage of this online paper can be found at http://www.elendureports.com/

2 Check the site at http://www.saharareporters.com/

3 www.timesofnigeria.com

4 www.nigeriavillagesquare.com

5 www.huhuonline.com

6 www.pointblanknews.com

7 www.empowerednewswire.com/

8 See http://www.usafricaonline.com/news.html

9 This up-and-coming, muckraking outlet (which can be found at http://ireports-ng.com) is published from Noblesville, Indiana. It has existed since 2008 but only began to attract attention when it exposed massive corruption scandals in the Punch newspaper, one of Nigeria’s most notable daily newspapers.

10 The Chicago journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne pointed out, at the turn of the century, that “the job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel explain that the essence of this quip, which has now metamorphosed into a journalistic maxim, is its dramatization of the role the press is expected to play in “watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.” See Kovach and Rosentiel (2001). For other interpretations of this phrase, see Benjaminson and Anderson (1990) and Teel and Taylor (1988). For a somewhat similar death of watchdog journalism in a developing country, see Pinto (2008).

11 For other lively debates about the future of the newspaper in the age of the Internet, see Franklin (2008), Conboy and Steele (2008), Picard (2008), and Schultz and Voakes (1999).

12 Table adapted from Dimitrova and Neznanski, (2006).

13 Many Nigerian newspapers, because of their rudimentary technical capacities, get hacked through the feedback mechanisms they provide on their sites. That is why many of them have backed out of providing interactive features to their site. A recent example is the case of the up-and-coming Abuja-based People’s Daily newspaper, which was shut down for more than a week because it was hacked through the reader comments section. After getting back up, it banned reader comments entirely for months.

14 The homepage of NEXT, which came on board in 2009, can be found at www.234next.com. It is bankrolled by former minister of the Nigerian Federal Capital Territory Nasiru el-Rufai who found himself outside the orbit of power and became a virulent critic of the government of the day. He was on self-exile in the United States and the United Arab Emirates. With the death of President Umar Musa Yar’adua on May 5, 2010, he returned to Nigeria and is back in the political mainstream.

15 The case is in progress at the time of writing this chapter.