Gradual Collapse of Defined Proxemics of News Production and Consumption in Nigeria

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Abstract

News media are currently undergoing tremendous changes that, at the same time, are posing as threats as well as creating opportunities. One fundamental feature of the changes is the proliferation of user-generated platform, which is an offshoot of digitisation. Although, audiences have been part and parcel of the mainstream news production for decades, digitisation has increasingly empowered them to be more active in the news production and distribution process, thereby dismantling the defined proxemics of news production and distribution and eroding the very foundation upon which media business is built upon. This study is set to investigate the perception of media professionals and media users on the consequences of digital technologies on the defined proxemics of news production and consumption in Nigeria. In doing this, we employed qualitative method through in-depth interviews and review of relevant studies and reports. Through the extrapolation of both primary and secondary data, the study found that digitisation has dismantled the defined proxemics of news production and distribution, eroded the very foundation of media business. This does not, however, deflate the investment opportunities in the media industry, it has rather conferred greater competitive advantages on the traditional media, as it affords them the opportunity to reach wider audiences. The study, therefore, calls for greater investment by media entrepreneurs and merchants in digital platforms, as there lies the future of news media in Nigeria.

Keywords: News Media; User-Generated Contents; Media Competiveness; Media Credibility; Prosumer; Disruptive technologies

Introduction

The digitisation of the news media and the attendant evolution caused by web 2.0 has brought to the fore the gradual collapse of the hitherto known proxemics of

news production and consumption. “Proxemic research,” according to Angus (2012, p. 6) “is based on the concept of territoriality”, a behavioral tendency in which “organism lays claim to an area and defends it against members of its own and other species”. Before now, the relationship between the news producer and consumer was virtually characterised by such “territoriality”. The relationship was vertical due to the centralised nature of production, and with little or no opportunity for the audience to be involved in the narratives (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1981). In other words, the news producer had a territory which it, by default, defended stoutly against “invasion” by the supposed consumer. Even with the emergence of the Internet and its initial characteristics, it was still like a broadcast where users were able to download the previously generated contents, while the upload process was very slow. In that context, the Internet was similar to other broadcasting media like television. However, the dynamics changed with the emergence of Web 2.0 and its interactive features. The audience became creators of online contents through social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services or web applications (Cova & White, 2010; Lutz. 2011) and this gave rise to the concept, User-Generated Content.

In the words of Bruns (2016, p. 1), User-Generated Content is “a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially co-created by “users”—that is, by contributors working outside of conventional professional environments”. From this definition, it can be deduced that the evolution of web 2.0 seemed to have ensured the gradual disappearance of the hitherto known boundary between content producers and consumers, and in its place a diffused relationship between both ends of the divide. So, instead of the lone news hub, which characterised the old order, the new order is defined by multiple news hubs characterised by networks of information flow (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman & Toth, 2012). In other words, what we now have is the continuous grinding of the existing order of newsgathering, processing and distribution and a creation of a new order of equal partnership and role reversal on a regular basis.

Audience, whether in the old order of content monopoly or in the new order of content democratisation, have been part and parcel of the mainstream news production process. In the old order, even though they had no central role in the process as we have now, consideration was given as to how they were likely to respond to news content, even if passively. But digitisation has increasingly

empowered them to be more active in the news production and distribution process. Within the new digital context, audiences no longer occupy disparate realm but co-habit with the news media thereby breeding new forms of relationships defined by new rules. In essence, those who were formerly described as the "audience" have now been empowered to create and distribute their own contents thereby posing a new challenge and opportunity for the news media. As a consequence, in the new media era, media consumers now play a dual role; first as a producer of contents and secondly, as a consumer of content, hence the nomenclature "prosumer". Digitisation is, therefore, gradually dismantling the defined proxemics of news production and distribution, and perhaps eroding the very foundation upon which media business is built. It is, therefore, imperative to examine how such development is affecting news media's credibility and investment opportunities in a country with an estimated population of about 185 million people (The World Bank, 2017).

The Defined Proxemics: Understanding the 'distance' Between News Production

Proxemics in the words of its founder, Edward Hall, is "the study of measurable distances between people as they interact" (Hall, 1966). He submits that the spaces around human are basically broken into five, and with each of them connoting different meaning in the communication process. These areas include intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, public distance and long distance. The first two distances (intimate and personal) tend to explain more of intimate interpersonal interactions, and the last three (social, public and long) explain the relationship involved in the broader public communication process (See Ke & Lian, 2017). The social, public and long distances are, therefore, relevant in the understanding of the proxemics of the old order of news production and distribution. Conversely, the intimate and personal distances come into focus when we make reference to current news production and distribution dynamics.

We begin with the old order: in this order, the news producers (media houses) and consumers (audience) are figuratively considered as two separate persons (or entities) involved in news transactions. Here, the space of content production was exclusively reserved for media houses, while that of content consumption was the exclusive domain of the audience. In essence, both sides had clearly defined territories of operations, and with little or no opportunity for "invasion" by the other party. That order was best characterized by what Angus (2012) referred to

as “Sociofugal Space”, a phenomenon that pushes the bulk of the people to the fringe of the communication process.

Until the emergence of Web 2.0, this old order was the dominant feature of news production and consumption pattern in Nigeria. The news as a commodity was manufactured by the triumvirate of the prints, radio and television. These media houses were either owned by the government or private investors. While government at the state and federal levels see their involvement as a means of popularising their agenda, the private interests came into the industry to promote personal, political or economic objectives. Consequently, the prints, radio and television stations in the country pursued such interest to suit the taste of the owners. At the national level, the news hubs in the country, which were either privately or publicly controlled, were few and concentrated in the main urban centres of Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja and, to a lesser extent, Kaduna. At the state levels, the involvement of the state governments in media ownership and management meant that such hubs were also concentrated in the respective state capitals. For instance, while the news producers at the Radio Nigeria Headquarters in Abuja, or the Editor of the Nigeria Tribune in Ibadan or the Nigeria Television Authority production team in Lagos, were in the world of their own doing the gate-keeping job to the best of their professional abilities, there was minimal provision of platforms for connection with their audience in remote locations across the country. Under such arrangement, therefore, the content producer-consumer relationship was vertical, and with little or no room for robust interactivity. Hence, the “long distance” space identified by Hall (psycho-graphical in this case) best defined such proxemics as captured in the illustration **(Figure A)** below. The black dot in the illustration represents the nerve centre of news production while the white dots at the periphery shows the locations of the audience scattered across the country.

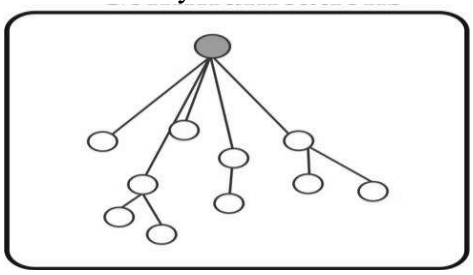

Figure A: *The media-audience relationship in the old order of the proxemics of news production and distribution in Nigeria (Adapted from Lattimore, D., Baskin, O. Heiman, S.T and Toth, E.L. (2012).*

In the news order, however, the Web 2.0 has, in the words of Metiboba and Amana (2012, p. 202) "collapsed the defined proxemics and break the boundaries of individual egos" that characterised the hitherto media-audience relationship. Instead, it instilled what Angus (2012) referred to as a Sociopetal Space, which connects bulk of people and stimulates involvement in the process of communication. Instead of the few content production centres, as was the case with old order, there are multiple and often fused content producers and consumers as reflected in the in-Figure **B** below.

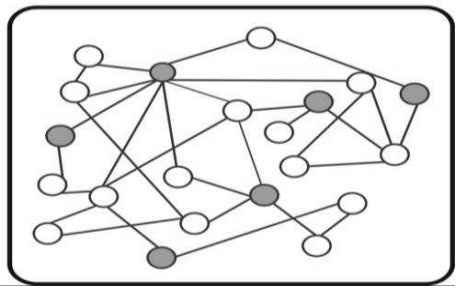

Figure B: *The media-audience relationship in the new order of the proxemics of news production and distribution in Nigeria (Adapted from: Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman and Toth. (2012.)*

From the figure, it can be inferred that both the production and consumption centres (represented by the black and white dots respectively) are fused, indicating a diminishing value of the Long Space that characterised the old order of proxemics. The implication of this new order is that media contents, which usually got to the public "after undergoing professional scrutiny and careful gatekeeping" now, reach the public within seconds of happening. In addition, since they are armed with Internet-connected devices, ordinary citizens who were predominantly media consumers have become active creators of media contents (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020, p. 1). With the production-consumption role undergoing fusion as a consequence, this paper argues that the hitherto defined proxemics is gradually collapsing in the country. In Nigeria, the gradual collapse of the proxemics of the news production and distribution or the rise of "prosumer" has its manifestation in the desire of individuals and corporate establishments to make use of the opportunities offered by the digital platforms to connect with their respective publics or customers. For instance, in a survey involving 22,000 respondents in 2010, the Media Planning Services reported that Google, Yahoo!, and Facebook have been the most popular digital platforms among Nigerians (Akoh & Jagun, 2012).

Furthermore, a social media poll report (NOI Poll, 2019) revealed that 61 percent of Nigerians (roughly 120 million of the Nigerian estimated population of 198) had access to the Internet. In terms of awareness, the Poll showed that Facebook (95 percent) and WhatsApp (94 percent) were the most widely known social networking sites in the country; followed by Instagram (50 percent), and Twitter (42 percent), etc. On the critical issue of the proportion of respondents using each social networking platform, the Poll showed that Facebook (86 percent), WhatsApp (84 percent), Instagram (19 percent), Twitter (11 percent) and Snapchat (2 percent) were the most dominant. With regards to preference, however, WhatsApp (51 percent) was the most preferred social networking site/application, followed by Facebook (45 percent), Twitter (2 percent), and Instagram (2 percent) (NOI Poll, 2019). According to the Poll, Nigerians surveyed cited simplicity and speed, ease of connectivity with people, instant feedback from government on policy issues and credibility as the reason for their choice of WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter respectively (NOI Poll, 2019).

Regarding the average number of hours spent in a day on social media sites/applications, the Poll reported that Twitter captured the largest daily cumulative value, as 19 percent of its users disclosed that they spend 10 hours and more hooked on to the platform. This was followed by WhatsApp, with 8 percent of its users revealing that they spend upwards of 10 hours daily on the average. Furthermore, the Poll results reflected that respondents considered Facebook (98 percent), Instagram (88 percent), WhatsApp (77 percent), and Snapchat (74 percent) as the most effective for advertising, while Twitter (98 percent) was considered the most effective for gaining attention on topical issues and trending subjects (NOI Poll, 2019).While all the aforementioned User-Generated Content (UGC) platforms are of international origin but adopted by Nigerians, there are also some homemade user-generated platforms considered popular among Nigerians, especially in the area of blogging. Among them is *Nairaland.com*, a social networking site that is quite popular with Nigerians residing within and outside the country. Others are *Bellanaija.com, Lindaikeji.com, and YNaija*, *Sahara Reporters, i-Reports* (Ireports-ng.com), *PointBlankNews* (Pointblanknews.com), and *Elendu Reports* (Elendureports.com), naij.com

Interestingly also, most news outlets in Nigeria have joined their global media counterparts, by registering their presence on social media platforms, especially on Facebook and Twitter. All news media in Nigeria, be it print or electronic, have web and social media presence. Also, the mainstream media are integrating

audiences into their newsgathering and distribution efforts. As such, in addition to their social media engagements, the news media equally have segments in their contents that are primarily user-generated. *Channels Television*, one of the leading television stations in Nigeria "has a segment called *i-witness*, which enables members of the public to report events around their immediate environments through pictures, videos and sound bites. The *Punch* newspaper also has in its segment *i-Punch* otherwise known as "Your Daily Internet Monitory" because it depends on information from social media platforms (Emmanuel, 2017, p. 24). That these traditional (mass media) now key into the adoption of user-generated content to support their news dissemination is a stronger pointer to how indispensable they have become in the emerging order. A recent study by Emmanuel, Okoro and Ukonu (2021) argues that the collapse of the old order is shrinking newsroom jobs and redefining the relationship between news media and news consumers. As more media organisation are migrating to online platforms, deploying social media to drive their readership and viewership and engaging their audiences through timely and, sometimes, instantaneous feedback, digital platforms now compete with the traditional news media as we used to know. As a matter of fact, Okoro and Emmanuel (2019, p. 2) assert that the "new media platforms such as social media, blogs, and online news sites have stripped the near omnipotent functions of traditional media." The collapse of the old order has, undoubtedly, raised some credibility and investment concerns within the realms of news production and the media industry in general.

Methodology and Design of Study

This study employed a qualitative research method through the extrapolation of primary data generated through in-depth interviews and secondary data from reviews of relevant literature, periodicals and reports. This method of drawing data from different sources at different points is known as data-source triangulation (Hall & Rist, 1999). Since the study was aimed at finding the perception of media professionals and media users on how user-generated contents impact media business in terms of credibility and investment, samples were drawn from two separate communities: community of media practitioners and community of media users. In all, sixteen people were interviewed, with eight drawn from each of the two communities. According to Patton (1987, p. 184), in qualitative inquiry "[t]here are no rules for sample size"; it only "depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources." Based on this, for the community of media professionals, samples

were drawn from newspaper, magazine, radio, television and online media organisations. For the community of media users, samples were drawn from amongst mass communication lecturers in four different universities, including the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, National Open University of Nigeria, Jabi-Abuja and Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba (formerly known as Kogi State University). Furthermore, in order to allow convergence and corroboration, and to limit potential biases, data from the in-depth interviews were triangulated with those generated through documentary research method. The documentary research method involves a systematic review of both printed and electronic materials (Bowen 2009), which requires the interpretation of the documents in order to elicit meaning and gain understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Although, this research method is often marginalised, it can be used as a good supplement to other research methods (Mogalakwe 2006). Finally, the interpretation, analysis and discussion of the research findings were done by integrating both the primary and the secondary data.

Findings/Discussion

This study examined views of media and communication practitioners and media users on how user-generated contents affect the credibility of news media and investment opportunities in the media industry in Nigeria. The data gathered were analyzed, taking into consideration their manifest and latent meanings, while secondary data were used to support the thematic framework predicated on the research objectives.

Credibility of User-Generated Content and Media Contents in Nigeria

Findings from the study reveals that media professionals in Nigeria consider user-generated platforms as alternative or additional means through which the traditional news outlets can connect with their audiences. Although, questions have been asked about whether or not the burgeoning user-generated contents have the capacity to diminish the reputation of media generated contents. Specifically, the findings show that 7 out of the 8 media professionals, representing 87.5 percent, integrate user-generated contents into their core journalistic functions. In fact, a journalist admitted that the best way to sniff stories is through user-generated contents, mainly through social media, as most news makers have one or more social media accounts where they inform members of the public about their plans and activities. “Roving, invitation to events and information about happenings used to be the major sources of news for media

houses. I can comfortably say that the social accounts of prominent personalities give us clue about what is happening around us", a female broadcast journalist admitted. However, 8 out of 8 journalists, representing 100 per cent, were of the view that journalists should always subject every user-generated content to journalistic scrutiny before use.

According to a female broadcast journalist, "if you do not want to lose your credibility, or have the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) constantly knocking on your door, you have to verify such information before going public". While findings from the in-depth interviews reveal that 6 out of 8 journalists, representing 75 per cent, were of the view that the traditional media platforms were more credible than the new media platforms, 2 out of 8, representing 25 percent, were of the view that whether new media or mainstream is insignificant as far as credibility is concerned, as there are many online news media that are way more credible than the mainstream news media outlets. According to an online news editor, "media organisations in Nigeria are very selective in terms of credibility. They all have their biases and interests buried in stories. Some news outlets may provide credible contents on a particular issue due to the interest of the owner or the reporter or the editor. The same media outlets may deliberately generate highly outrageous contents that cannot stand journalistic standards in terms of credibility because of same reasons".

Furthermore, the advent of user-generated content has significantly affected the credibility of the traditional media "whose gate-keeping function has managed the flow and presentation of news to the general public for centuries. Newsworthy content to consumers that used to be in neat, topically arranged packages is now challenged by biased, poor researched and unprofessional contents by the new media users. Instant advert spots have replaced advertising contents that used to be under the strict scrutiny of the relevant advertising bodies, as no regulations exist on the user-generated platforms' (Print media journalist, Personal Communication 2019). This implies that the explosion of user-generated platforms can adversely affect the reputation of the mainstream media, as the audience sometimes, finds it difficult to isolate media generated contents from the user-generated contents, suggesting a troubled future for online news.

When respondents from the community of media users were asked to rank the credibility of media according to industry type, 7 out of 8, representing 87.5 percent, rated television as the most credible, followed by radio, newspaper and

online, in that order. In addition, findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that privately owned television and radio stations were more credible than government-owned stations as the latter were perceived and seen as the propaganda arms of the government.

It was not surprising that the traditional media were rated above the online in terms of credibility. "While the legacy news media undergo bureaucratic process to ensure that their contents are accurate, reliable, user generated contents do not follow such measures", a print journalist argued. The stunted stature of credibility of user-generated platforms compared to the media generated contents suggests a promising future for the media industry. For instance, the reputational value of an existing print or television outlets will likely be transferred to their online equivalents (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll & Casey, 2002). For instance, while random tweet from a belligerent and enthusiastic citizen could create a storm, the information in that tweet or Facebook posts refurbished and embellished by the mainstream news outlet, will create a maelstrom. "So, traditional new journalists will still hold sway – if they use the opportunities presented by these technologies" (Emmanuel, 2017, p. 23).

Media Investment in Nigeria: A Declining Industry?

Is the media business in Nigeria a declining industry? Results from the in-depth interviews reveal that 14 out of 16 respondents, representing 87.5 percent, were of the view that the Nigerian media industry, despite the decimation of traditional media by the new media, still provides huge investment opportunities for those whose minds and ideas about media business is flexible, radical; those who are willing to embrace and recreate new business models. According to a newspaper publisher, "investors should understand that although media business is an old enterprise, it currently operates within a new environment where only those who are willing and able to adapt to the new challenges can tap into the potential it provides" (Publisher of a National Newspaper, Personal Communication, 2019).

Although, a study has shown that media in Nigeria, especially the print, have a short lifespan as many of them live between two to nine years (Owolabi & O'neill 2013), Internet has the capacity to elongate this rather short lifespan, as it provides a cheaper alternative of media practice. Findings from Owolabi and O'neill's (2013) study revealed that between 1937 and 1960, 39 newspaper titles were established in Nigeria but among these titles, only *Tribune* survives till date. Also, of all the 168 newspaper and 48 magazine titles that were founded between

1960 and 2008, only 43 and 15 newspaper and magazine titles were still operating. Painfully, the study found that only 13 surviving newspaper and magazine were regarded as having a national outlook, as the rest were restricted to a particular state or region. Although, the above study concludes that the life expectancy of most print media outlets was between two and nine years, majority of the journalists interviewed were of the opinion that with the intervention of user-generated platforms, the life expectancy of media outlets can be elongated tremendously. According to a media entrepreneur, a digital technology "provides the flexibility to deliver unique and stimulating contents to niche markets", suggesting that user-generated contents or platforms are only threats to those traditional media outlets that are unable to adapt to digital realities.

Findings from a study by Jimoh and Ahmad (2015) revealed that Internet provides a formidable survival aid to the print media outlets in Nigeria. The study, which examined the survival of two nationally circulated newspapers in Nigeria, the *Punch* and *Daily Trust,* vis-à-vis their circulation figures and advertising revenue from year 2000 to 2014, found that despite the plummeting circulation figures of the two newspapers within the period, the media outlets recorded a steady rise in advertising revenue, and in few instances, a little decline. The steady rise of advertising revenue generated by the news media outlets were attributed to the strategic engagement with their online users, suggesting a complementarity or synergy between the traditional media and digital media platforms. Internet, therefore, remains "the last hope" for ailing media organisations (Emmanuel, 2017, p. 26) and the continuous proliferation of digital contents in the Nigerian media space means that digital production and distribution of media contents in Nigeria will even occupy a more advantageous position in the nearest future.

Reports from different sources show that digital media have huge investment opportunities in Nigeria. With an estimated population of about 185 million (The World Bank, 2017), an annual population growth rate of 2.61 per cent (World Meters, 2017), and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of over $502 billion (PWC, 2017), Nigeria is considered as an economic heavyweight in Africa. In addition, the digital profile of Nigeria indicates that there is a promising future for media investment. With the total number of 91 million Internet users (Internet World Stats 2017), 17 million active mobile social users and 22 million active social media users (Terragon Group, 2018), the country continues to grow tremendously in digital media adaptation. The proliferation of Smart-phones will even increase access to the Internet and user-generated platforms in the nearest future. All these

figures portend positive signals for media investments in Nigeria, as the industries will continue to admit exponential entrant of new users into the digital space.

The growth of Internet users in the country may suggest the waning influence and consumption of media contents in their traditional formats as we used to know it. At the same time, it is an indication of investment opportunities for those media outlets and investors that will focus on developing robust digital contents for digital audience within the digitalised environment. Global figures indicate that the Internet has significantly decimated the revenue traditional media generate from advertising as technology giants such as Google and Facebook have cannibalised advertising revenue that ought to have gone to the legacy or traditional media (Guttman, 2020). In Nigeria, a recent report indicates that online advertising revenue has recorded an unprecedented growth between 2015 and 2018, as revenue growth ranged between 39% and 25% during that period (Guttman, 2020). The report also reveals that even though growth rate is projected to slow down in the coming years, by 2023, online advertising in Nigeria is forecast to generate 133 million U.S. dollars in revenue (Guttman, 2020), indicating a promising future for digital media investment in years ahead. It can therefore be projected that for media investors, investment opportunities in digital media will be a better option than the traditional news gathering and distribution formats in the coming years.

Understanding the investment opportunities requires greater understanding of the contemporary news consumers. The digital audiences are radical, impatient, and always yearn for news in their own terms. They are no longer interested in consuming news contents in its entirety without interrogating producer's narratives. They are always anxious to challenge whatever is provided to them by the traditional media. Findings from a study (Okusaga, 2018) reveal that digital consumers no longer wait for news media, rather, they produce their own contents and commune with their audiences through constant and strategic engagement. Any media platform that is able and capable of meeting this audacious yearning of this new generation of audience, will likely be a king in the digital environment.

Conclusion

Since the advent of the Internet, the media space has been severely altered with huge consequences for investors, practitioners and consumers. One fundamental feature of media digitisation is the proliferation of User-Generated Platforms, a

development that has empowered the audience to produce their own contents. Although, this study has revealed that digitisation has dismantled the defined proxemics of news production and distribution, eroded the very foundation of media business, this does not however deflate the investment opportunities in the media industry. It has rather conferred greater competitive advantages on the traditional media, as it affords them the opportunity to reach wider audiences. The study also found that the explosion of user-generated platforms adversely affects the reputation of the mainstream media, but such power will pale in significance in terms of investment opportunities as a result of the stunted credibility status of the user-generated contents. The strengths of the user generated platforms will, therefore, compensate the weaknesses of the legacy media outlets. The study, therefore, calls for greater investment by media entrepreneurs and merchants in digital platforms, as there lies the future of news media in Nigeria.

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