

THE INTERNET AND REDISTRIBUTION OF NEWS GATEKEEPING POWER IN NIGERIA: WHAT HAS CHANGED?

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Page | 1

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Abstract: *The quest to redistribute news gatekeeping power has been an enduring subject in both scholarship and policy realms. This is arising especially from the realities of the capitalist society where economic cum political elite have enjoyed some hegemonic control over the mass media, aided by the institutionalized and centralised orientation of the traditional channels. Consequently, the advent of the Internet has been seen as a game changer that will redistribute gatekeeping power thereby ultimately inaugurating a new era of faultless media democracy. However, this optimism has been questioned by critical scholarship which has focused on the political, economic and cultural embeddedness of the Internet which tends to subject it to the influence of the same “old” forces. Against this backdrop, this study employed the theories of Technological Determinism and Technological Constructivism to evaluate how much the Internet may have helped democratize news gatekeeping in Nigeria by giving voice to independent, non-institutionalised news creators who disseminate their content online. Data were collected by interviewing five federal and five state civil servants in Anambra state, Southeast Nigeria, making a total of 10 interviewees. Findings showed that the Internet was surely having visible impact on the balance of gatekeeping power within the Nigerian news sphere as online channels emerged as a popular source of news among the populace. However, data indicated that traditional media organisation were are also making their weight felt in the online space where they had equally brought their businesses to. In addition, they enjoyed some advantage of credibility perception vis-à-vis their rival non-conventional counterparts (such as blogs), a situation that potentially positioned them to retain some of the dominant power they enjoyed before the advent of the Internet and citizen journalism. The study concluded that while the Internet has achieved a lot in terms of democratising news gatekeeping in Nigeria, there is still some ground to cover in this regard as certain societal and industry variables still tend to favour the traditional media organisations in terms of balance of power. It was recommended that the citizenry be enlightened on the risk of misinformation associated with online news sources which are increasing in number and gaining popularity among the audience.*

Keywords: Gatekeeping, power, redistribution, Internet, mass media

INTRODUCTION

The mass media have emerged as a formidable agency of power in contemporary society; in other words they are one of the institutions that exercise significant influences in the modern social space (Baran, 2010; Hall, 1997). Naturally, therefore, the media have become a site for endless ideological and power contestations with

various interests seeking to outdo each other in the rivalry to dominate the information space (Duru, 2019; McChesney, & Pickard, 2011; Lewis, 2005).

One of the key strategies in this struggle is effort to own and control media institutions; the politics of media ownership (Duru, 2019; McChesney, & Pickard, 2011; Meier, n.d.). Thus, despite all assumptions as to the liberalist character of the media within the context of the capitalist democratic system, it remains the truth that these supposed liberal ideals are in constant struggle against the dominant political, economic and cultural structures (McChesney, & Pickard, 2011; McChesney, 2004).

Critical media scholarship has generally agreed that what results from these contestations is ultimately a survival-of-the-fittest scenario where the dominant economic and political forces inevitably end up controlling the media process (McChesney & Pickard, 2011; McChesney, 2004; Gilens & Hertzman, 2000; Badgikian, 1983; Althusser, 1971). This is the situation the world over including among western democracies. For instance, with reference to the United States, Badgikian (1983) writes; “Each year it is more likely that the American citizen who turns to any medium... will receive information, ideas, or entertainment controlled by the same handful of corporations, whether it is daily news, a cable entertainment program, or a textbook.”

In Nigeria, the situation is not different. Ownership and control of traditional media organisations, both print and broadcast, has remained concentrated in the hands of the political and economic class (Abaji, 2019). This is in fact a reflection of the highly capital intensive nature of establishing and running such media outfits (Abaji, 2019). In the words of Abaji (2019), “Taking all our present circumstances into consideration and making allowances for all accidents and coincidences, we can today confidently say that the press in Nigeria is far from being democratized, we are in no way better off (than the West)... It is still a situation of their (the rich) press and the rest of us; the few with a voice and the majority without a voice.”

The above scenario is what has prompted the idea of media democracy and media democratisation, which refer to the quest to liberalise media control so as to degrade monopoly and ensure more access to media among hitherto excluded segments of society. Advocates of media democracy acknowledge that corporate ownership as well as commercial pressures influence media content, thus seriously limiting what emanates from the media as news, opinions, and entertainment. Therefore, they advocate for a more equitable distribution of economic, social, cultural, and information capital, which they believe would keep the citizens better informed as well as engender a more enlightened, representative political discourse (Exoo, 2010).

A most significant development in this quest to democratize (liberalise) the media is the advent of the Internet with its array of communication platforms including mass communication channels like newspaper, radio and television. As noted by Abaji (2019):

The Internet now ensures that individuals and institutions can, at minimal cost, become media gatekeepers. Any Internet-literate user can now set up personal sites for news publication as well as video and sound streaming. This is what is meant by independent or alternative journalism – a new movement coming as a challenge to the monopolistic domination of the traditional mass media platforms by few rich individuals and corporations (p.424).

Stated differently, the Internet has been acclaimed as democratising the information space by negating the traditional gatekeeping model with its inherent monopolistic and exclusionist tendencies, this way allowing hitherto suppressed voices to be heard (Šuljug, Loncar & Plepel, 2015). However, this idea of the Internet as the ultimate bringer of information democratisation has been challenged. Adopting the critical theory approach, some scholars have noted that the Internet cannot be severed from its social context, its rootedness in the political, economic and cultural matrix antecedent to and co-emerging with the technology (Auerbach & Clark, 2016; Petley, 2004; Sassen, 2002). Situating their criticism within the Marxist perspective, some of these scholars point to the fact that the Internet, in spite of its seeming liberalist configuration, is still entrapped within the capitalist political economy that gave birth to it (Narula, Saxena, Agarwal & Goyal, 2018; McChesney, 2013 as cited in Auerbach & Clark, 2016; Althusser, 1971). The implication of this is summed up in what Narula et al. (2018) describe as “digital monopolies” i.e. the various spheres of exclusionist influence as wielded by powerful political and economic interests within the cyberspace.

Added to this is the burden of credibility which the independent online news sites have got to face owing to their non-institutionalized (at times faceless) nature (Omenugha, 2020; Robinson, S. (2012). Okoro (2020) notes that many news sites, “for the reason of lacking a known address of operation and publicly identified staff, are practically faceless. The truth of this assertion is underlined by the fact that many of these sites function as guerilla news platforms geared towards giving the alternative and ‘forbidden’ perspectives on sensitive news issues.” While facelessness may serve the ‘good’ intentions of these platforms, it could unfortunately sacrifice credibility. Credibility is a key variable in the success of any communication process as it brings some level of trust between the communicator and the receiver. Absence of credibility brings about distrust and suspicion which undermine persuasion (Jackob, 2008). Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, used the word “ethos” to describe a communicator’s credibility which is crucial for achieving persuasion (Dunu, 2002). Needless to say, the accessibility of the communicator’s identity is crucial for securing the communicatee’s trust as anonymity can weaken confidence.

Most important is the fact that these online news sites do not have the monopoly of the Internet space. Indeed, the traditional institutionalized media have also taken their operations into the cyberspace. In the cyberspace, just as in the physical societal space, the odds could possibly be against the independent news sites as they contend with the mighty financial muscles and age-long audience fidelity and trust already enjoyed by these big establishments. Thus, the optimism about ultimate democratisation of communication space may just be exposed to doubts as the traditional media institutions may retain their larger pool of audience, and consequently their political and economic power.

Nonetheless, there is research evidence that these online news sites are becoming influential as sources of news among audience in Nigeria, especially young Internet-savvy people (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020; Habib & Akila, 2021). Today, many citizen journalists have established online news sites where NET surfers visit to access news of all sorts (Eze, 2017). However, the extent this trend may be succeeding in

democratising the information dissemination space long dominated by conventional, institutionalised media is a question begging for answer.

The Technological Determinism Theory is relevant for interrogating the potential role of the Internet in bringing about change in the information power relations in society. The theory views technology as the most important variable shaping social change; technological development, in other words, is seen as the ultimate determinant of social change (Turner, 2017; Leonard, 2012). Therefore, proponents of the theory would consider the advent of the Internet as an inevitable game changer as far as distribution of gatekeeping power is concerned. They would consider the Internet and its array of digital platforms as a very potent force that will bring about democratisation of news gatekeeping.

Conversely, the theory of Social Construction of Technology (also referred to as Technological Constructivism) provides an alternative perspective that argues “that technology does not determine human action, but that rather, human action shapes technology” (Turner, 2017). This is a challenge to the reductionist approach of Technological Determinism which “presumes that a society’s technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values.” Social Constructivism rather sees technology as being determined by the action of man and his society. Put differently, technology, rather than seen as conditioning man and society, is seen as conditioned by them. It asserts that in the first place technology has its origin in the society’s needs, aspirations and existing social structures (i.e. politics, culture, education, economy, etc.). Thus, it is the existing conditions in society that give birth to technological innovations; without society aspiring to achieve a particular objective and without the presence of relevant social elements like scientific knowledge, favourable government policy, and economic strength to support research, technology may not see the light of the day. In other words, technology is inevitably embedded in the social domain. Hence, the proponents of this theory “argue that the ways a technology is used cannot be understood without understanding how that technology is embedded in its social context” (Turner, 2017). Stated differently, technologies do not exist in isolation of the social matrix that produced them. Thus, the extent of impact of technologies is conditioned by these social contexts – a situation that explains why certain technologies end up being accepted by society while others end up being rejected, thus dying a premature death. For instance, from the Marxist perspective, a technology will be conditioned by the interest of the political cum economic class that lords it over society at a particular point in time; consequently, any technology that seeks to usurp or threaten their hold on society is likely not to successfully penetrate as this class will frustrate it by denying it the necessary political and economic support required for its maturation and sustenance (McChesney & Pickard, 2011.).

In the final analysis, both Technological Determinism and Technological Constructivism provides a theoretical prism through which to examine the role of the Internet as a democratising force in the contemporary news gatekeeping realm in Nigeria. Both theories provides alternate models within which the study evaluates the extent the news flow landscape may be getting liberalized due to the presence of online media in the country.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed at evaluating how much the Internet may have helped democratize news gatekeeping in Nigeria by giving voice to independent, non-institutionalised news creators who are disseminating their content online. The specific objectives were as follows:

- i. To evaluate the extent the Internet may have helped in redistributing the gatekeeping power in the Nigerian journalism sphere?
- ii. To find out possible factors contributing to Internet's ability to engender redistribution of gatekeeping power in the Nigerian journalism sphere.
- iii. To find out possible factors limiting Internet's ability to engender redistribution of gatekeeping power in the Nigerian journalism sphere.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Data were collected by interviewing five federal and five state civil servants in Anambra state, Southeast Nigeria, making a total of 10 interviewees. The respondents were asked questions aimed at finding out the extent they rely on independent news sites for news vis-a-vis the traditional media. The choice of civil servants was informed by the consideration that they are an educated group who therefore possess the capacity to not just watch and listen to news but also read same. Secondly, civil servants are an elite demographics (middle class) who are likely to have access to both traditional and online sources of news. The selection was purposively done to ensure evenness in gender and age demographics. Thus, five male and five female respondents as well as five respondents of 18 – 39 years and 40 years and above were selected. Data so collected were analysed using the thematic approach.

Data Analysis

The researcher critically read the transcripts of the interview responses to observe and isolate emerging themes. These themes formed the basis of the analysis as presented below.

The respondents stated that they had access both to traditional media and independent news sites. In other words, they were able to consume news through traditional media (both their online and offline versions) and independent news sites. Instructively, not a single respondent expressed a contrary view here.

For clarity purposes, the respondents were asked to indicate the sites through which they accessed news on the Internet. Their answers indicated that they relied on the webpages of established media organisations like *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, and, *The Nation* newspapers as well as on those of online-alone news platforms including popular blogs like Bellanaija and Linda Ikeji Blog.

The implication of the foregoing was that options accessible to the respondents in terms of sources of news spanned both conventional (traditional) media and non-conventional (independent) media. What is deducible from this is that the traditional

news media no longer have the gatekeeping monopoly they enjoyed before the advent of new media. This agrees with findings in previous studies such as Habib and Akila (2021), Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020), Eze (2017), Ganiyu (2014), and Chukwu (2014), which found that audience members are increasingly relying on online sources for news consumption such that traditional media channels consequently now have their monopoly being progressively challenged.

Regarding the actual channels preferred by the respondents for news consumption, most of them indicated that they relied more on online channels. This is also through when they accessed news through traditional news media as they went for the online version of the content of these traditional channels. Reasons given included cost and convenience. The respondents generally stated that accessing news from their mobile devices was more efficient and convenient than relying on sources like hardcopy newspapers or magazines. Respondent 1 stated: "I read news using my phone most times. Even though I also tune to radio and may watch television at home, it is my mobile phone that supplies me news at any moment no matter where I may be."

Respondent 3 averred:

I am someone who likes and enjoys news so much. I am really pleased to have my phone and Internet connection because I can read, listen to and watch news any time anywhere. I don't have to go to a newsstand or look for where to sit to watch television. So, on that account I would say I prefer Internet for news.

According to Respondent 6:

Everything you are looking for is online. Do you want to read newspaper? Do you want to listen to radio news or even watch it on TV? The Internet provides all. So with my tablet phone I have all the access I need. As someone who before now was in the habit of buying newspapers I now have something cheaper and much more convenient.

The above suggests that the respondents were finding online channels preferable for their news consumption vis-à-vis the non-Internet channels. Their reasons are exactly the same with those found by studies like Chukwu (2014), Eze (2017) Ganiyu (2014), Chukwu (2014) and Omenugha (2020). This tendency to prefer online sources to traditional channels is something that has been identified as leading to massive drop in circulation and consequently advert subscriptions among newspaper organisations globally (Omenugha, 2020; Pew Research Centre, 2018; Statistica, 2018; PwC, 2017; Mitchell & Matsa, 2015). This is irrespective of the fact that traditional news organisations have also brought their content online to compete with the alternative independent sources.

Further answers from the respondents showed that while they would prefer online sources for news consumption, they would, however, not be unselective about it. They still had their preferred Internet sources and would not just rely on any source just because it was found online. The reasons they gave mainly revolved around issues of credibility. In the words of Respondent 8: "I prefer to search for news in those newspapers and other media houses that I have known since and have been reading their stories. I don't just read from every site." Respondent 5 similarly stated:

I am more confident reading from *[The] Sun* and *Punch* because I trust them and I have been reading them even before this Internet thing. Some of these sites I cannot really trust them, so since I have *[The] Sun* and *Punch* online I just have to rely on them. I also read from Channels [TV] and AIT at times. Once in a while I read from Linda Ikeji blog especially when I want to be entertained.

Respondent 10 added:

I make sure that I get news from sources I can trust only. Many of my friends rely on me to get authentic news. Many times they call or message me on WhatsApp to confirm whether a particular news (sic) is genuine. So, I always feel compelled to ensure that I get news from trusted sites such as newspaper websites.

One significant fact emerging from the respondents' answers was that their experience with many independent news sites including blogs had made them more cautious about the online sources they relied on for news. Respondent 7, for instance, stated:

I used to read news from any site I bump into, but with time I started discovering that some of the sites often carry (sic) fake news. From that time I started being careful. Now I go to websites of *Vanguard*, *[The] Sun* and *Independent* mostly when I want news. I also watch Arise News because I have the app on my phone.

The above sentiment was equally expressed by some other participants including Respondent 2 who noted that he used to read from a particular blog and eventually noticed that it usually published inaccurate reports. Hence, he started relying on online newspapers only including *Premium Times*. What can be deduced from this is that the respondents' channel preference tended to tilt towards traditional news sites as they became aware of the risk of misinformation associated with relying on independent news sites.

It is pertinent to observe that majority of the respondents had downloaded mobile apps of traditional media organisations to aid their news consumption. Some of the news organisations whose apps were mentioned include *The Sun*, *Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *Vanguard*. Others include Arise News, Channels TV, and AIT. Three of the respondents also had mobile apps of foreign news channels on their devices. Respondent 3 had BBC News app, while Respondent 5 and Respondent 8 had both BBC News and CNN apps.

All this indicate that credibility was a crucial factor in the respondents' choice of news source. While their choice tended towards online news sources as against traditional sources, the quest for more reliable news tended to compel them to choose online content of established media organisations as against independent sources like blogs. This agrees with the trends observed by previous researchers such as Salaudeen and Onyechi, 2020, and Omenugha (2020).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis, one thing is clearly deducible: that the Internet is surely having visible impact on the balance of gatekeeping power within the Nigerian news sphere as online channels are becoming influential as a source of news among the populace. This trend certainly will be having some democratising impact on the information space as gatekeeping power becomes more redistributed. However, evidence shows that traditional media organisations, who had monopolized gatekeeping power in the old media era, are also making their weight felt in the online space where they have equally brought their businesses to. In addition, they enjoy some advantage of credibility perception vis-à-vis their rival non-conventional counterparts (such as blogs), a situation which potentially positions them to retain

some of the dominant power they enjoyed before the advent of the Internet and citizen journalism. Adding to this advantage will be their financial, infrastructural and human resource superiority which is a very decisive variable in the competition that exists among news platforms (Omenugha, 2020).

Thus, in conclusion, this study affirms that while the Internet has achieved a lot in terms of democratising news gatekeeping in Nigeria, there is still some ground to cover in this regard given that some prevailing societal and industry variables still tend to leave so much advantage with the traditional media organisations. Therefore, the quest to redistribute gatekeeping power would remain an ongoing struggle as the Internet-permeated news flow and news consumption culture of today continues to evolve.

Viewed from the perspective of the Technological Determinism Theory, it is seen that the Internet has indeed influenced (determined) the texture of power relations in the Nigerian gatekeeping realm. It has brought about a cultural shift wherein independent news creators (citizen journalists) and indeed all users of the NET have begun to share gatekeeping power with traditional media professionals who before now had enjoyed monopoly, as it were. On the other hand, the theory of Technological Constructivism helps to explain the fact that the professional gatekeepers tend to retain some of their old advantage as culture (in this case news credibility as well as industry realities) moderate the democratising effect of the Internet technology. Discussing this moderating effect of social variables on the influence of the Internet, Sassen (2002) observes that the Internet is embedded in the existing social structures; hence in spite of all the excitement about its potential for democratizing society, it is still conditioned by the existing social realities. For instance, the existing power and role structures in society are still reflected in the cyberspace where the rich and politically powerful still appear to dominate; where the big business conglomerates enjoy pre-eminent presence; and where male dominance still appears to prevail. Thus, the democratizing power of the Internet has not completely bypassed the prevailing social conditions.

This echoes the postulations of the critical media scholars who see the media as a reflection of the social space in which they exist and function. This social space, which conditions the operation and impact of media, is constituted by the political, economic and cultural structures and practices prevailing in a particular society (Adeniyi, Adeagbo & Omowale, 2022; Šuljug, Loncar & Plepel, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above findings and conclusions, the researcher hereby makes the following recommendations:

1. It is important that information literacy be enhanced among the citizenry by way of enlightening them on the risk of misinformation associated with online news sources. In other words, they should be equipped with the knowledge and skills for negotiating through the booby-traps of inaccuracy ubiquitous on the Internet which they increasingly rely on for news.
2. There is need to work towards growing Internet penetration in Nigeria which will in turn boost the culture of reliance on the Web for news among the citizenry. This will help enhance the democratizing impact of the Internet on

the news and information sphere in the country.

3. Future research may replicate this study using a quantitative design that will involve surveying a much larger sample. This will make for more empirical precision as well as allow for generalization.
4. Future studies may also focus on traditional media organisations with a view to measuring the rate of decline in circulation and advert subscriptions (as already established in literature, see for instance Omenugha, 2020) which would offer further insights into how much the Internet is bringing about redistribution of media power.

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Page | 12

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