

Citizen Journalism Off-line: The (Nigerian) Punch's Model

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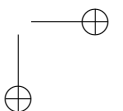
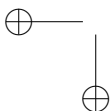
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CITIZEN JOURNALISM is journalism of the people, by the people, and for the people. It is the kind of journalism that demystifies the practice of journalism, and makes it an all-comers affair. It is that kind of journalism that tends to make everybody the Source and the Receiver; the Encoder and the Decoder at the same time. It is that kind of journalism practice that purports to include everybody. No wonder Bowman and Willis (2003) call it *We Media*.

Citizen Journalism is We Media because according to Bowman and Willis (2003: 10), it is “the act of a citizen or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information”. It is journalism that makes fluid the transformation between being the creator and the consumer of messages. The new communication technologies make this possible. The new technologies facilitate the process of creating, disseminating and receiving messages. The new technologies empower the people to have expression and information. The people are definitely involved in creating and disseminating messages about their own realities.

The communication model is interactional and at the same time transactional. The model of Citizen Journalism is interactional because it emphasises the two-way communication process between communicators. In other words, communication goes in two directions: from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This circular process suggests that communication is ongoing (West and Turner, 2004: 11). The model is equally transactional because the process is cooperative; the sender and the receiver are mutually responsible for the effect and the effectiveness of communication. In the transactional model, people build shared meaning (West and Turner, 2004: 13).

What is essential in all this is that Citizen Journalism is participatory. The audience is no longer passive. Bowman and Willis (2003) note that the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging



and relevant information that democracy requires. Really, for democracy to flourish, people must be empowered. And to be empowered, people must be informed and must have expression.

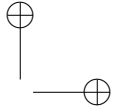
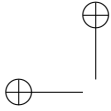
In this paper, we shall be looking at the principles and mechanism of Citizen Journalism, its theoretical framework, *The Punch* (Nigeria) newspaper model of it, and the implications of it.

Principles and Mechanism of Citizen Journalism

Citizen Journalism has been tagged variously. It has been labelled Participatory Journalism, Public Journalism, Open Source Journalism, Networked Journalism, and Citizen Media. Citizen Journalism has been greatly facilitated with the advent of the Internet. The Internet has enabled citizens to contribute to journalism, without professional training. Specifically, this kind of journalism has been enabled by networking technologies, such as weblogs, chat rooms, message boards, wikis and mobile computing. Lasica (2003) classifies media for citizen journalism into the following types: 1) Audience participation (such as user comments attached to news stories, personal blogs, photos or video footage captured from personal mobile cameras, or local news written by residents of a community), 2) Independent news and information Websites (Consumer Reports, the Drudge Report), 3) Full-fledged participatory news sites (OhmyNews), 4) Collaborative and contributory media sites (Slashdot, Kuro5hin), 5) Other kinds of “thin media”. (mailing lists, email newsletters), and 6) Personal broadcasting sites (video broadcast sites such as (KenRadio).

Still speaking on the principle of Citizen Journalism, Mark Glasser, a longtime freelance journalist who frequently writes on new media issues, notes:

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a



newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site ...¹

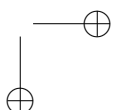
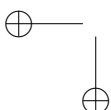
Williams, Gillmor, and Mackay² identified four basic features of the on-line community sites development by news organisations:

1. User Generated Content (UGC): This is the most common approach where the news organisation's website is open to allow participants post stories, photos, and event listings. Individual users don't have their own unique presence on the site but are contributing content to the site bearing the news organisation's brand.
2. Blog hub: Like the UGC strategy, participants are able to submit stories, photos, and event listings, but they get their own weblog with a unique URL on the site that displays all the materials posted by the participant.
3. Community hub: These sites emphasise social networking. Generally, they allow many of the same things that the UGC and the blog hub sites do, but the sharing of content is treated as a means to an end, namely connecting participants to one another.
4. Newsroom Transparency: While UGC, blog hub, and community hubs can be seen as part of a continuum, the newspaper transparency strategy is actually quite different. Here, the news organisation opens up its editorial meetings and procedure to the public and webcast over the internet so the public can be part of the editorial decision-making process

Theoretical Framework: Democratic Participant Media Theory

The emphasis of Democratic-Participant Media Theory is on the 'basis' of society and on the value of horizontal rather than vertical (top-down) communication (McQuail, 1987: 122). The main thrust of the theory lies in its insistence that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers (Folarin, 2005: 43).

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizen_journalism
2. <http://citmedia.org/frontiers>



McQuail (1983) proposed this theory to take account of many ideas expressed and looked after the needs of citizens. The theory found expression in the 1960s and 1970s in pressure for local and community radio and television. It challenged the dominance of centralised, commercialised, state-controlled and even professionalised media (McQuail 2000: 160). Making a reference to Ezensberger (1970), McQuail notes that the key to applying this theory was seen to lie in the new technology of the times. It favoured media that would be small in scale, non-commercial and often committed to a cause. Participation and interaction were key concepts.

The theory has been against the system of parliamentary democracy which has seemed to become detached from its grassroots origins, to impede rather than facilitate movement in political and social life. It also takes exception to a 'mass society' which is over-organised, over-centralised and fails to offer realistic opportunities for individual and minority expression. McQuail (1987: 122) says "the central point of a democratic-participant theory lies with the needs, interests and aspirations of the active 'receiver' in a political society. It has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in small-scale settings of community, interest group, sub-culture".

Essentially, the theory cautions that communication should not be left in the hands of professionals alone.

Public Sphere

The public sphere is a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. The public sphere is an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action³. In its ideal form, the public sphere is "made up of people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas, 1991:176). Habermas's work actually relies on a description of a historical moment during the 17th and 18th centuries when coffee houses, societies and salons became the centres of debate, and extends this to an ideal of participation in the public sphere today. Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere gen-

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_sphere

erates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge - therefore, to guide - the affairs of state. In ideal terms, the public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to "legitimate authority in any functioning democracy" (Rutherford, 2000:18).

The public sphere mediates between the "private sphere" and the "Sphere of Public Authority" (Habermas, 1991). The private sphere comprises civil society in the narrow sense whereas the Sphere of Public Authority deals with the State, or realm of the police, and the ruling class. The public sphere crosses over both these realms and through the vehicle of public opinion, it puts the state in touch with the needs of society. This area is conceptually distinct from the state: it [is] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state (Habermas, 1991). The people themselves came to see the public sphere as a regulatory institution against the authority of the state. The basic belief in public sphere theory is that political action is steered by the public sphere, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere.

***The Punch* (Nigeria) Newspaper Model**

The Punch is a leading newspaper in Nigeria. It is privately-owned and has been in existence since 1970. The newspaper prides itself as the most widely read (in Nigeria). In its own attempt to create a channel for Citizen Journalism, the newspaper used none of the four features of online community sites developed by news organisations, as identified by Williams *et al*⁴. Rather, the newspaper (hard copy) created a special page "for readers to create their own news". The page tagged, 'My News.Com' calls on readers:

Do you want to have a byline, make your own headlines and publish your own pictures? This page is for readers like you! In not more than 100 words, send what you consider to be the main news for the day to **08058098538** or **mynews@punchontheweb.com** before 5pm today. You can also send pictures of striking public events (with captions) to the same number or email with your full names and address. Note, however, that Punch does not pay for stories and pictures published. It's not a **WAR TURF** please, just news that others can use. **It's that easy...!**

4. <http://citmedia.org/frontiers>

From this *Punch* invitation, we can see that the new communication technologies are quite essential in this open source journalism. The stories and pictures are to be sent through mobile phones and e-mail.

According to *The Punch* staff in charge of the page, the page started about two years ago; and the idea behind it was to give readers the opportunity of getting their stories and photographs published with their by-lines. Initially, response of readers to the page was very overwhelming. It is however now difficult to get publishable stories for the page. Noting that the page is only for stories, the staff who this author interviewed, however, regretted that “most people do not seem to understand the concept”. Decision on publishing a story or picture will depend on whether such will benefit other readers. The newspaper does get feedback from readers as according to the staff, there are always follow-up stories or reactions to already published stories. The staff added that government officials and agencies do not waste time to respond to stories that adversely affect them. Some government officials have also had to confess that their jobs were on the line unless they found a way to get their reactions published.

The culture of expressing oneself through writing is yet to fully permeate into the culture of Nigerian people. Not many people yet have the culture. This is why I think response to the ‘My News.Com’ has nose-dived from what it used to be initially. The fact of the low response is evident in that the page which initially used to be a full page and daily (at least Monday to Friday) has been reduced to half and appears sporadically. The explanation for this is that the page appears when there are stories and photographs, at least enough to publish.

Even though, the staff in charge of the page does not understand the concept of Citizen Journalism/Blogging, the page, to some extent, serves the purpose of getting readers to create their news. It is also possible that readers may have misconstrued the page for another ‘Letters to the Editor’ because the staff complained that while the page is only for news stories, most people seem not to understand the concept. This indicates that rather than sending news stories of happenings in their localities and where they go to, most readers seem to be sending opinion and advocacy pieces in form of letters to the editor. Most of the stories written by members of the public are actual attempts to expose the rot in the system. We shall look at some of the stories. A story on ‘My News.Com’ of Monday, November 26, 2007 has the headline, ‘Immigration

Service extorts money for e-passports'. The story written by Alade Ojuolape of 30, Toyin Street, Ikeja, Lagos reads:

The Nigeria Immigration Service has been accused of extorting money from Nigerians who applied for e-passports. According to a cross-section of applicants who craved anonymity at the Ikoyi passport office on Friday, Immigration web site officers at the office extort N5,000 from each applicant before their images were scanned. Besides, they said they were made to pay another N3,000 for printing from the data computer before they could get their passports. Describing the rigour they went through coupled with the extortion as "most difficult task", they urged the appropriate authority to correct this sharp practice among immigration officers at the passport office.

Then, this one from Olatunde Tolulope of 10, Gbogi Street, Oba Adesida Road, Akure, Ondo State. It is headlined 'Resident decries state of roads in Akure' and appeared in the newspaper issue of Thursday, November 29, 2007. It reads:

A resident of Akure, the Ondo State capital, has lamented the state of some roads in the state capital, describing them as death traps. The resident, who spoke on Tuesday, said that the poor state of some roads in the area had become a source of complaints to road users. He said a good example of such deplorable roads is the Federal University of Technology, Akure's South Gate Road. He said the road had made life unbearable for the university community. According to him, if not for the sake of the university environment, the road ought to have been dualised because of other road users who use it every moment of the day. That, he said, included the staff, students of the university and their visitors.

From the two excerpts, we can see that the contributors were not just writing, they reported. They did not just express their own opinion, they reported the views of the people they interviewed or spoke with. It is actually journalism of the people, by the people and for the people. It is journalism deregulated, taken out of the strictness of professionalism and means of livelihood. It is journalism that gives people the opportunity to say it as it occurs to them. It is journalism that gives people the opportunity to play surveillance or watchdog role over their environment and make the happenings there known to the public and the relevant authorities.

'My News.Com' also affords governments and their agencies the opportunity to state their own positions. An example of this is found in the story

headlined, 'FRSC denies scooping fuel', written by Uakheme Ojeamirene, Corps Commander, federal Roads Safety Commission, Mowe, Ogun State. It appeared in the newspaper issue of November 29, 2007. It reads:

The Federal Road Safety Commission has denied a report that its men took part in scooping fuel from a vandalised pipeline along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. The Corps Commander of the FRSC, Mowe, Ogun State, Mr. Uakhemen Ojeamirene, said on Wednesday that the clarification became necessary in view of a story published on My News.Com page on November 21, 2007 that some FRSC men aided some vandals to scoop fuel from a vandalised pipeline along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. He said that on Sunday, November 18, 2007, a tanker carrying diesel fell on the road and had its content poured on the road. Ojeamirene added that it had become the habit of some youths in Mowe to scoop fuel whenever a tanker fell on the road. He said his men were on the ground on the said day to prevent the youths from scooping fuel from the tanker and to ensure free flow of traffic. Maintaining that there was no iota of truth in the said publication sent in by a reader, the corps commander added that his men were always on the expressway as part of their routine duty. Ojeamirene recalled that his men had "taken part in fuel tanker rescue operations on several occasions along the expressway and we do not in any way cover those who scoop fuel or take part in it", he said.

Meanwhile, despite the newspaper's claim of creating an opportunity for readers to create their own news, *The Punch's* model of citizen journalism is still with some limitations. Compared with online citizen journalism, especially one that is done through blogs, *The Punch* model is with inadequacies. In the model, the professionals in charge of the page would still play the role of gatekeepers. They would determine what stories to go public, and which should not go. Even, for those that would go public, some editing would have been done on the stories, thereby robbing them of their originality, and in a way distorting the actual reports of the contributors. Unlike in the case of blogs, the contributors to 'My News.Com' do not have absolute control over their reports. Another limitation is that if confronted with an avalanche of reports, all of which cannot go on the page, the page gatekeeper may have to sacrifice some of the reports to the waste bins.

However, a question we may need to pose here is this: do people create blogs in Nigeria? From my own observation, blogging is not a common practice. Most people have not even heard about the concept before. The problem

may be due to relatively limited internet access, low computer literacy, and poor electricity supply (See PIWA, 2005). It is in this sense that we would appreciate the initiative of *The Punch* in giving its readers the opportunity of creating their own news through its 'My News.Com' page. The challenge now is for the Nigerian media to facilitate the creation of interactive community with their readers/audience via the web.

Implications of Citizen Journalism

Bowman and Willis (2003: 54 - 58) listed and discussed the benefits of We Media. These are: increased trust in media, shared responsibility in informing democracy, memorable experiences created, the next generation of news consumers, better stories – and better journalism, a scalable virtual staff, fostering community, and network identity.

This paper appreciates all these benefits to the media and journalism, and the need for news media to swim in this tide of time. This paper would however want to take a look at the implication of this phenomenon on the journalism profession, and perhaps journalism education. I am more concerned with the fact that everyone can be made to be a 'journalist' - searching for information, writing and posting stories and photographs. If that is the case, it makes little or no sense being tagged a professional journalist, and it may have some adverse effect on the means of livelihood of the 'professional journalist'. The phenomenon also makes little or no sense of formal journalism education. McQuail (2000) notes that there has been a continued uncertainty about what is actually the central professional skill of the journalist.

There really have been questions about the professionalism of journalism. The question of whether journalism should be considered as a profession remains in dispute, both within and without the media world (McQuail, 2000: 257). Max Weber (1948) referred to the journalist as belonging to 'a sort of pariah caste' and, like the artist, lacking a fixed social classification. Schudson (1978) characterised journalism as an 'uninsulated profession' because of lack of clear boundaries. Windhal (1992) et al. contend that the knowledge base of journalists does not command the same respect as that of occupational groups that are acknowledged to be professions. This paper is of the view that as lofty as the idea of citizen journalism is, it further attacks the 'professional'

basis of journalism as it makes the ‘profession’ porous quite contrary to what happens in other professions where practice and training are exclusive. And, really without mincing words, Olen (1988) declares that journalism *should not* (emphasis supplied, cf. McQuail, 2000: 257) become a profession, since it involves the exercise of a right to freedom of expression that cannot be monopolised by an institution (that of journalism).

Essentially, Citizen Journalism has profound implications for the flowering of democracy. But do we consider the question of ethics in this open source journalism, and how to regulate activities of the great army of participants, just to ensure the health of the society? No doubt, Citizen Journalism, especially through the Internet, has brought forth an unprecedented flowering of news and information. But, it has also destabilised the old business models that have supported quality journalism for decades⁵. We have to consider the increasing impact of bloggers who make their livings by blasting opinions (as opposed to facts) across cyberspace. They are the technology age’s equivalent of reporters and columnists, but without the degree of separation that used to protect readers and consumers from being targeted for commercial or political purposes. The problem is veracity has been guillotined and thrown into thrash bin⁶.

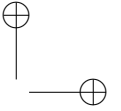
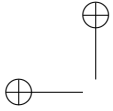
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5. <http://www.niemanlab.org/about/>

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Interview

Interview with Waheed Bakare of *The Punch*, December 3, 2007.

