



SOCIAL JOURNALISM AS STORYTELLING IN AFRICA

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One are the days when people need to invest a lot of money to acquire the means of mental production to mass self-communicate and circulate alternative discourses; with the aid of social media platforms, ordinary people have been ushered into the digital agora.

Nowadays, “journalism by the people and for the people” is freely available and circulating public spheres worldwide. Social journalism as a genre is based on the motto, “all news is social”, while questioning the hierarchical and authoritative mode of news production associated with traditional journalism. It signals a shift from a “focus on individual intelligence, where expertise and authority are located in individuals and institutions, to a focus on collective intelligence where expertise and authority are distributed and networked” (Hermida, 2012).

The art of storytelling which consists of sharing ideas, facts and persuading others is intricately linked to traditional journalism where journalists/producers want to reach their audience, persuade their readers, and connect with their followers.

What distinguishes traditional journalism as a form of storytelling from the mediated newer forms, known as social journalism, is the close affinity of social journalism to the African art forms such as oramedia and radio trottoir (pavement radio). In Africa, storytelling has always been at the heart of human communication. Ugboah (1985) defined oramedia as media that “are grounded on indigenous culture produced and consumed by members of a group” (Ugboajah, 1985: 32).

Radio trottoir is French for pavement radio, and was popularised by Stephen



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Ellis (1989) as rooted in African oral traditions. They are rumours of the masses, what the masses find both believable and interesting to them, aptly described by others as an attempt at collective conversation by people who wish to enter their wishes in the public sphere (Ellis & Ter Haar 2005). These stories reinforce the values of the group.

Radio trottoir is literally the popular and unofficial discussions of current affairs that take place in towns, on the streets, in bars, at taxi ranks and, while these are mistrusted sources, their existence is acknowledged by journalists and academics.

While these are unofficial stories circulating in oral exchanges as people go about their day to day activities, they may qualitatively not be likened to rumour per se, as they are often representative of issues which are unrepresented in most

news media, such as moral censorship of political figures, or unofficial reports on the whereabouts of the country’s president.

Those who tell the stories that comprise oramedia arrange their texts as they please, often adding new twists to a well-known plot. Storytelling was therefore an art, or a skill for which the storyteller was revered.

From the foregoing, it may be argued that social journalism, notions of radio trottoir and oramedia do indeed bear resonances in their manifestations. Social journalism therefore, is not a new phenomenon in Africa; *per se*. Rather it signals the migration of the human voice from offline to online spaces.

Through its encompassment of a number of oral arts including prose, poetry and drama, where the village conversed as collective community in the cool shade of the sacred baobab or mango trees, oramedia bears parallel traits with how social media brings together a community of like-minded people through live chats or wall postings in virtual communities. Virtual communities also serve as the sounding boards where notices are posted about new developments taking place back home for members of the diasporic community.

Aspects of “community” are evident in virtual communities mushrooming on social network sites where like-minded groups form online communities who share knowledge, companionship and advice in different aspects of life. For example, online groups may be formed around collective rallying points which include discussions and support on health issues, online relationships, diasporic communities attempting to reconnect with their ethnic communities, supporters’ football clubs as well as fundraising clubs, to name but a few.

A cursory view of some popular Zimbabwean virtual communities on Facebook include *Dangamvura Chete*, *True FC Barça Cules Only Zim Edition*, *Ndebele Mthwakazi*, *Wezhira paFacebook* and *Samanyika paFacebook*, where particular cultural features are strictly conventioned, by which social relationships and a world view are maintained and defined.

Of particular importance in these online communities is that storytelling is deeply rooted in shared values and interests of community members. They adopt languages and idioms which speak to the common person and bear association with their everyday life. Identities along ethnic, religious, geographical location, football fandom and political affiliations are reproduced in online communities and are vigorously policed through administrators and fellow group members.

Notions of identity, community and practice, and belonging, however, draw in the problematic concept of “citizenship”

and citizen journalism in Africa. Developments in Web 2.0 where “citizens” are now acclaimed to exercise their status by not only being recipients of news, but creators, has popularised the phrase, “citizen journalism”.

The complexity of citizenship in Africa relates to the dual legacy of colonialism: citizens and subjects. There is a difference between the status and practice of citizenship, where the former is a range of freedoms and rights guaranteed by the constitution and the latter involves active participation in political processes.

Given the insurmountable challenges facing most African countries, the voice of subaltern citizens remain muted in sporadic protests whether offline or online. Because of the lack of a bridging mechanism between the cyberspace and the political sphere, these sporadic protests often fail to bring qualitative change to the lives of ordinary Africans.

Citizenship identities are equally reinforced by race, class, age, gender and ethnicity, which create detours that must to be navigated to have a voice. Most Africans find themselves left behind, being more akin to observers than active participants.

Access, affordability and availability are key variables that explain the popularity of MXit, for example, in South Africa. Journalism has been caught in the media-democracy conundrum which explains why functionalist undertones, especially normative assumptions about its functions and dysfunctions tend to cloud the assessment of journalism as storytelling.

What stories are being told?

Our recent travels around Africa have enlightened us to the use of social media in different African contexts. Stories which are being circulated are varied, including political, economic, social issues and event-based content, and tend to circulate cyclically from the offline to the online and vice versa. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is rich debate circulating on social network sites especially amongst subaltern citizens. As a result the alternative public sphere is filled with a great outpouring of personal stories and experiences.

In Malawi, we learnt that journalists and activists are using social media to circulate alternative views on the country’s political and economic challenges. A case in point was the hype generated on social media platforms by the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika. Ordinary Malawians took to social network sites to vent their anger at the delayed announcement of the death of the head of state.

In Zimbabwe the prophecy of TB Joshua which coincided with the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika triggered massive speculation about the death of President Robert Mugabe at an unknown

hospital in Singapore. Questions such as “Where is the President?”, “Who is next?”, “Is TB Joshua a prophet of doom?” featured prominently on social network sites.

In South Africa, political stories regarding the expulsion of the ANC Youth League president Julius Malema have also generated significant debate on social network sites. Brett Murray’s infamous painting of President Jacob Zuma grabbed the headlines on most social media platforms with hundreds of individuals airing their views.

As far afield as Mali, ordinary people have been discussing the Tuareg and Islamist rebels’ insurgency and military coup orchestrated by Captain Amadou Sanogo.

In Swaziland, the gift of the DC-9 aircraft to King Mswati at a time when the country is on the brink of an economic catastrophe has generated huge debate online among activists and ordinary people.

All these stories are evidence of the productive capacity of erstwhile news consumers grappling with everyday political issues in their different localities across the African continent.

This emergent online storytelling has shaken the foundations of journalistic ethics. Real-time, networked technologies have unbundled the verification process. Although the stories are not told by professional storytellers, there is an activist dimension to them which highlights the desire to act as monitorial citizens in their respective communities.

In order to avoid falling into the trap of diagnosing structural problems with biographical solutions, there is need to ensure that voices articulated online translate into meaningful citizen participation processes.

Storytelling and social journalism can serve as a critical starting point for journalists to become aware of important but unreported issues and events within different communities, and thereby provide a voice to the many hundreds of thousands who struggle in this regard. Perhaps this will do something in facilitating meaningful citizenship within post-colonial Africa.

References	
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