

WRONG PLACE, RIGHT TIME

BY SUNDAY DARE

As I worked on my research at Oxford University in 2011 investigating the impact of citizen journalism in expanding freedom of speech, advancing citizenship rights and generally engendering participatory democracy, I discovered that virtually anyone with a mobile phone and access to the internet, and who is at the ‘wrong’ place at the ‘right’ time, is a journalist. I began to realise that no longer can legacy journalism and those that practice it lay claim to being *the* only journalist; not in an era where anyone aided by Web 2.0 technologies can upload or post content of their choice on to the worldwide web, and engage in a technologically-facilitated online communicative experience.

An analysis of citizen journalism in Nigeria suggests that the uptake of this genre, as witnessed in the last five years, is largely due to advancements in technology, mobile phones, affordable mobile internet devices and a growing demand for a more conversational media. Increases in user-generated content and an increasingly active audience have emerged to fill the vacuum of progressive and investigative content which was prevalent during military rule.

Nigerians in their thousands are increasingly migrating to the virtual public sphere,¹ to social networking sites Facebook and Twitter, and anti-corruption and social justice online platforms Sahara Reporters, Nigeria Village Square, Huhu online, Pointblank News and Nairaland, in order to engage in conversations about politics, economics, social justice, culture and social life. Sahara Reporters is at the forefront of online citizen journalism in Nigeria, encouraging citizen journalists to report ongoing corruption and nepotism on the continent. These discursive platforms range in genre from online news sites, discussion forums, blogs, citizen journalism sites and various forms of wholly user generated websites. Their prominence has been on the increase in the past four years, with over 35 such sites operating today. The online editions of major Nigerian newspapers from the traditional news media sector have also joined the changing trends to scramble for a share of the audience by incorporating features of social media and citizen journalism both in their print and online editions.

Aside from the strides made in this regard, there are genuine concerns about the quality of journalism emerging from the plethora of online platforms. Adebayo Onanuga, editor in chief of one of Nigeria’s leading weekly magazines, *The News*, describes citizen journalism as having been popularised by Sahara Reporters: “Sahara Reporters is like Wikileaks; all the news fit and unfit to print.

No inhibitions at all. No consideration for the ethics of the profession, the subtleties expected from the practitioners, the sense of social responsibility and the restraints that trained journalists normally exhibit”.² This position is reinforced by the argument that citizen journalists are not trained to subscribe to the traditional journalistic standards of objectivity, fairness and accuracy found in news organizations.³

Professor Adebayo Williams, of *The Nation* editorial board has welcomed citizen journalism in Nigeria but cautions against reckless journalism. For him, bloggers have stepped up to the plate in areas where the traditional media fell short due to what he describes as “internal contradictions as well as historical developments”⁴ within the journalistic profession and the Nigerian state. Williams celebrates bloggers’ contribution to fighting corruption: “It is not the blogger who will put an end to this elaborate charade, this sustained chicanery and macabre musical chairs, but blogging will help. The defenestration of some important sectors of the Nigerian press as a result of corporate corruption and individual greed has assured the blogger of a great historical platform. Yet if he is to fulfill this historic mission, the blogger must conduct a constant reality check and come up with a profound intellectual interrogation of his own vulnerability in a web of elite deceit and mischief. It is only after this that the blogger can reconnect with the endangered forces of genuine change in the home country.”⁵

Social media is abuzz in Nigeria and around the continent more broadly; direct participation in news gathering and dissemination has brought with it the feeling of greater freedom of speech, with individuals contributing to debates regarding ongoing issues that concern them. They are able to speak to their governments. However, the uncensored nature of content is problematic and risky, and the new form of journalism may ultimately find its demise in the freedom that is responsible for its fame.

Endnotes

1. Farooq Kperogi in “What Virtual Nigeria Says About Real Nigeria”. USA Africa Dialogue Series. October 30, 2010.
2. Author Interview. Lagos. February 2010.
3. Serena Carpenter, “News Quality Differences”. In *Public Journalism 2.0* et al p70-71
4. Ibid
5. Ibid

