Public Media Audiences in the Age of the Internet: Challenges and Opportunities

By

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Abstract

The rise of the internet and its applications have revolutionised not only the practice and profession of journalism but also how media texts are consumed by audiences. This article reports the results of a qualitative research that was undertaken to find out the opportunities and challenges brought by the internet to media audiences. This paper interrogates the contribution of the internet and its applications to the role of traditional public media using the case of Zimbabwean audiences. While the article reveals that the internet has brought both positive and negative changes to media audiences, it stresses that the way audiences receive and interpret media texts have been transformed by technological advancements. While some scholars have lauded the internet for ushering 24/7 journalism and interactive platforms, this article highlights that the internet has been embraced as a blessing to media audiences in Zimbabwe. The internet does not only offer alternative news sites to public media audiences but also operates alongside old media and competes with traditional media in breaking the news.

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What is Public media?

Rosen (1999) argues that the term ''public journalism'' emerged in the United States of America as part of a movement concerned about a double disconnect between journalists and audiences. Its early proponents suggested that the problem of declining news readership could be addressed if the American people were re-engaged in public life (Merritt, 1991; Rosen, 1999). For Fouhy (1995), early advocates of public journalism urged news organizations to cover the issues that people are concerned about in their communities. Fouhy (1995) goes further to state that journalists must frame stories that enable people to act as citizens. Also, Rosen et al (1997) assert that public journalism seeks to increase the capacity of the community to act on the news and to help the community deliberate its problems in search for solutions. Having said this, it is clear that public journalism is a complex term.

Voakes (2004) defines public journalism as a form of journalism that seeks to listen systematically to the stories and ideas of citizens even while protecting its freedom to choose what to cover and examine alternative ways to frame stories on important community issues. In the same vein, Charity (1995) argues that public journalism aims to engage the people as citizens both in the news-making process and the use of the news. Charity (1995) adds that the most common methods used to engage the media publics include, town hall meetings, citizen panels, and polls. These techniques provide journalists with audiences' views, feelings and concerns for inclusion in the media's agenda. In light of this, it can be deduced that public media should carry the content that fosters community engagement.

Cochran (2010:7) states that public media should bolster capacity through partnerships with other media outlets, including community and investigative websites. Cochran (2010) goes further to state that public media should make inclusiveness a priority. This means increasing diversity in the news coverage such that all groups of people are incorporated and audiences are exposed to various issues relevant to their society`s development. In addition to this,

Rumphorst (2003) alludes that all groups of people in a society need to be served by the nation`s public service broadcaster, the rich and poor, old and young (and in between), educated and less well educated, minorities, and people with special interests (be they cultural, religious, scientific, sporting, social, economic or anything else).

The Public Sphere Concept

Habermas (1989) defines the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community that does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. Habermas (1989) noted that the public sphere is made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of a society with the state. He idealized the liberal bourgeois public sphere as a place where citizens come together to engage in rational discussion on issues of common concern, and where differences of identity would be put on hold so that true equality might prevail in reaching a consensus (Macdonald, 2003). In light of Habermas' public sphere concept, the media should play a critical role in the public sphere. It should inform and educate the audiences thereby enabling them to contribute meaningfully in different public discourses. This article therefore explores the audience' feelings and perceptions towards public media's contribution to the public sphere.

The Role of Pubic media

According to Poynteronline (2003), the roles of public media include, giving ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs, motivating ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues; and pointing people towards possible solutions to society's problems. For Nip (2006), the role of public media includes, to connect to the community, to engage individuals as citizens, and to help public deliberation in search for solutions. In the same vein, Akoja (2016) highlights that the media in any society are known to perform three basic functions. These are, to enlighten, educate and to entertain. However, he notes that in recent times, these roles have been expanded to include national development and mass mobilization of citizens for developmental efforts. Central to this developmental aspect is the concept of communication. As Oso (2008) puts it, communication has become a

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major component in communities' existence. This calls for the interrogation of media audiences, their feelings, concerns and perceptions towards public media after the rise of internet.

Asante (1997) emphasized that in any developing country, the mass media has a crucial role to play in engendering development among the populace. He pinpoints that the media is expected to function as part of the national efforts in the arduous task of nation building and modernization. This calls for the inclusion of audiences in news gathering so that the content directly addresses the interests of stakeholders. It is the aim of this article to explore Zimbabwean public media with a view to understand whether it achieves its public service mandate or not. As noted by Akoja (2016), the media should check the activities of government, advocate for freedom of expression, prevent the abuse of power by cautioning the defaulting parties as well as contributing and supporting the society to become a truly democratic environment. Akoja (2016) adds that in developing countries, the media's sole role is that of a nation-builder and a development agent. In light of this, one would expect Zimbabwe as a developing country to have public media that responds to the needs of audiences so as to capacitate the needy communities.

Public media and the Rise of the Internet

Before the rise of the internet and its applications, media audiences had little or no chance of taking part in the news gathering, production and dissemination. According to Nip (2006) before the internet era, professional journalists used to be the gatekeepers who filter through the happenings of the world, selecting the significant events, and reporting them for their audience. During that period the audiences were not playing any meaningful part in the news process except government officials and those who bear titles. These had little chance of becoming news sources. Otherwise, the journalists performed the entire news process, from story idea generation, news gathering, writing, editing, to publishing, exercising their professional news values at every stage (Nip, 2006).

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Bentivegna (2002) argues that the internet is 'democratic' in the sense that, while each of its features are not intrinsically new, in combination, the internet introduces a qualitative shift in the potential for democratic communication. The features she identifies are: interactivity, enabling citizens to be senders as well as receivers of messages; co-presence of vertical and horizontal communication, facilitating not only communication between elites and citizens but also communication among citizens (Livingstone, 2005). The internet promotes disintermediation, by which the power of traditional gatekeepers is undermined in favour of more direct communication among interested parties. The internet has reduced communication costs, greatly reducing the entry barriers to participation for small groups, social movements and individuals (Livingstone, 2005).

Also, Gillmor (2004) asserts that the rise of internet has empowered the citizens. Citing the example of blogs, Gillmor (2004) pinpoints that the internet has given people a voice and therefore power. This indicates that the previously muted or side-lined voices are now able to participate in virtual communities, regardless of geographical locations. The internet has given rise to alternative media platforms that operate alongside traditional media. For Atton (2002) the alternative media aim to include those groups of people normally excluded from mainstream media coverage, whether by featuring them in news coverage as central actors or by producing content relevant to their everyday lives (Atton, 2002:11). This enables citizens to participate in the media as key stakeholders. Bowman and Willis (2003) argue that the people's participation itself and what they produce are regarded with the hope to contribute to an informed citizenry.

For Nip (2006) the rise of internet and its applications have given public journalism's tenets the best chance of being advanced by the stakeholders using weblogs and other electronic communication tools. Haas (2005) notes that interactivity of weblogs, and especially the practice of linking to and commenting on other internet-based materials, gives rise to a radically different kind of news discourse than the one found in mainstream news media. In

the same vein, Atton (2005) argues that the vast array of alternative news providers available on the internet could afford weblog writers the opportunity to cover a wide range of topics using an ideologically diverse range of sources, thereby facilitating what observers call a ''multiperspectival,'' ''multivocal,'' or ''intertextual'' form of news coverage.

Moyo (2006) argues that online media have created alternative spaces, arenas, texts and sites where marginalised groups negotiate and debate issues outside the control of government. He observes that in Zimbabwe, the restricted democratic space has spawned a multiplicity of alternative public spheres that enable groups and individuals to continue to participate and engage in the wider debate on the mutating crisis gripping the country. Furthermore, the diaspora is creatively exploiting new media to resist state propaganda churned out through the mainstream media (Moyo, 2006: 81). Similarly, Mpofu (2012) notes that new media platforms offer public spheres that are alternative to the one that is dominated by the government of Zimbabwe. He goes further to state that online media platforms offer audiences a chance to become both consumers and producers (prosumers) of content, something which lacked during the era of traditional media forms like radio, television and newspapers. While traditional public media in Zimbabwe offered biased coverage of events (Nyahunzwi 2001) and systematically barred voices critical of the ruling Zanu-Pf from being heard, new media applications offer those counter-hegemonic, excluded voices access to a platform to debate issues of common public interest (Mpofu, 2012). This goes in line with the dictates of the public sphere that was envisaged by Jurgen Habermas.

Methodological considerations

Qualitative research was used to gather data for this article. The choice of this approach was informed by scholars such as Domegan and Fleming (2007) who state that qualitative research aims to explore and discover issues about the problem on hand, because very little is known about the problem. Qualitative research was chosen in line with its advantages as stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) that it gives researchers an opportunity to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of

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the meanings people bring to them. The choice of qualitative research was also informed by Myers (2009) who states that qualitative research is designed to help researchers understand people, and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. In light of this, qualitative research was considered as the best approach for exploring the challenges and opportunities presented by the internet to media audiences. To identify the respondents for the study, simple random sampling technique was used. Data was collected using in-depth interviews. All the participants were sampled from the central business district of the city of Bulawayo, the second largest town in Zimbabwe. Only those above the age of 18 and willing to take part in this research were included.

Findings and Discussion

Opportunities ushered by the Internet to Public Media Audiences

In order to understand the positive changes brought by the internet to media audiences, I asked the respondents about the opportunities that have been ushered by the internet to them as public media audiences. It came out that audiences' interaction with public media journalists has improved. While the respondents indicated that before the internet era they used to play little or no role in the news, they now play an active role in content production, consumption and distribution. This finding validates Moyo (2006)'s argument that online media have created alternative spaces, arenas, texts and sites where marginalised groups negotiate and debate issues. Given that the rise of social media has enabled many people to become content creators, news gatherers and disseminators, the interviewed media stakeholders revealed that they now have access to various news sites as compared to the era of traditional media. The most common platforms named are, WhatsApp, Blogs, Twitter and Facebook. In this regard, it can be noted that accessing a variety of news sources broadens the audiences' understanding of issues. Thus, the internet has contributed to the establishment of an informed society.

More importantly, the internet has given audiences a chance to compliment public media journalists and act as both content publishers and news sources. This goes in line with the findings of Mpofu (2012) who noted that online media platforms offer audiences a chance to become both consumers and producers (prosumers) of content, something which lacked during the era of traditional media forms like radio, television and newspapers. Also, the respondents pointed out that they now have an opportunity to share stories from public media with their friends and loved ones outside the country through WhatsApp. While scholars like Moyo (2006) have argued that the diaspora is creatively exploiting new media to resist state propaganda, this paper emphasizes that the rise of social media platforms have broadened the

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audience base of public media. While some scholars have warned that the internet threatens the existence of public media, the findings of this research suggest that technological developments have not only challenged the relevance of public media but has also improved its content, and aided public media journalism to greater heights. To this end, the interviewed media audiences indicated that they have been capacitated by technology to capture pictures, record audios and videos and send to professional journalists via the internet applications.

The Internet and the Transformation of Traditional Public Media

On the impact of the internet on traditional media, the research unveiled that the speed of publishing news has improved. The respondents indicated that they used to wait for the next day to get the next copy of *The Chronicle* newspaper or the whole week for weekly papers such as *The Sunday Mail and Sunday News*. It came out that this is no longer the case as traditional media houses have taken advantage of the internet to establish online pages. It was observed that reporting of news is now instant and public media journalists now publish incidents as they happen. In some instances, major events are streamed live and audiences follow proceedings from the comfort of their homes. This implies that the internet has improved public media journalism. Further to that, citizens revealed that the internet has enabled them as audiences to capture newsworthy activities that happen in their areas and send to public media journalists. Given that professional journalists are few in number, they cannot be always present everywhere when incidents happen. To this end, the respondents revealed that they capture pictures and videos of incidents that occur in their areas of residence and send them to the media houses for consideration of publication.

The Changes Associated with Internet

While people used to depend on public media as their sole source of news, this article highlights that social media platforms have transformed the old public sphere. The findings of this research also concur with Mpofu (2012) who noted that new media platforms offer new public spheres that are alternative to the one that is dominated by the government. In this regard, respondents of this research indicated that they used to listen to Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) Radio 2 station and Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) as their regular sources of news before the internet age. This, however, changed following the rise of technological advancements. It came out that 88% of the interviewed respondents now rely on social media platforms to get news. This might be attributed to the popularity of social media platforms in urban areas. The respondents revealed that platforms like WhatsApp enable them to read news without buying newspapers or subscribing to television channels. In addition, cell phones are handy and have become a household property for almost every

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family in urban areas. In light of this, the internet platforms have made it possible for public media journalists to connect and engage audiences. Thus, validating Nip (2006)'s assertion that the role of public media includes, connecting the community, engaging individuals as citizens, and facilitating public deliberation in search for solutions.

The Effect of the Internet on the Quality of News

Another aim of this article was to explore the effects of internet and its applications on the quality of news. On this, 82% of the interviewed respondents indicated that internet has improved the quality of public media content. They stressed that they now receive detailed news, something which never happened before. The media content is now accompanied by clear pictures and videos, something which lacked before the rise of camera phones and internet. This implies that technological developments have not only equipped citizens to tell a story but also revolutionised old public media houses to offer high quality news. On the contrary 18% of the respondents revealed that some old public media houses such as Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) still lack creativity and better quality pictures in their news content. To this end, the audiences are still not satisfied with the status of public media content even during the internet age. This is attributed to several factors, among them, lack of state of the art modern equipment in some media houses.

Challenges Facing Media Audiences in the Internet era

While media audiences see it as blessing to have so many news sources, it came out that the internet has driven the majority of media audiences to an information dilemma. This dilemma is caused by that anyone with a camera phone can now tell a story. Especially with WhatsApp most of the audiences are not able to differentiate an authentic news story from a false one. All the interviewed respondents indicated that they have a major challenge with WhatsApp platform where they fail to identify features of an authentic story. Given the scenario that any person can just type a story on his/her cell phone and post it to the public, the onus is now left with audiences to verify the news. The article noted that the rise of online sites such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Blogs are responsible for the increase in the volume of news that audiences now consume. Respondents revealed that in so many occasions they are left with questions after reading different versions of the same story.

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Conclusions

This article went beyond the role of media in general but focused on feelings, comments, reactions and perceptions of old media audiences following the contribution of social media platforms. While scholars like Akoja (2016) have highlighted that the media in any society are known to perform three basic functions, which are to enlighten, to educate and to entertain, this article concludes that there is a dynamic symbiotic relationship between a society and the media with both shaping and reshaping each other. From the findings of this paper I can conclude that social media has the following capabilities;

- Social media extends the impact traditional media

- Social media has given a rise to new unregulated sources of information resulting in misinformation and disinformation of the public.

- Social media has put the media audiences in a dilemma, in which it is not easy for users verify stories especially in remote areas.

- Social media has improved the chances of establishing informed communities

Recommendations

- To educate communities about social media and its implications.

- To educate citizens for them to reduce circulating fake stories on social media.

- To give an informed comparison between traditional media and new media platforms.

- Public media need to be capacitated to compete with citizen journalists and ensure that public media audiences are always informed.

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