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Social Media: An Emerging Conundrum?

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Abstract

The advent of citizen journalism in the terrain of traditional journalism practice has certainly raised some pertinent issues worth examining scholarly. Citizen journalism is a way of making everyone a reporter even without training and being given access to push out anything to the public arena all in the name of informing others about latest events around. Of

course, that is a bit of reporting in its loose sense. Citizen journalism, through the use of blogging, is a fall-out of the social media innovations that have revolutionised the information industry just like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc are used as search engines for social interaction. This leads to the concept of social networking discussed in this paper. However, the concerns that these innovations have sprung up –better termed challenges – in the field of journalism and social life generally are what this paper focuses on. The paper observes that social networking is like a two-edged sword which gives impetus to media democratization and liberalization, as in citizen journalism, but at the same time, tends to erode ethical values of journalism. In other spheres of its application, the challenges posed by social networking are enormous just as the prospects are alluring. It is here that the society needs to be careful in finding ways to bring the new media under regulation because they evidently have the potential of being counter-productive to the interest and wellbeing of the society.

Introduction

History tells us that never a time was the human society bereft of defined channels of passing information around its members. Even in the animal world, scientists have proved convincingly that animals have mechanisms of disseminating information in any defined territory. In some glaring surprising cases in recent history, animals of the same breed inhabiting a particular place and prompted by warning signals which they obviously picked up possibly by the use of extra sensory perceptive abilities they possess, have been seen to migrate en masse from danger zones before the occurrence of a natural disaster. For instance, it is on record that prior to the Asian tsunami incident of 2004, most land animals living in the affected areas had relocated to safer places in droves which might tempt one to think that the alert of an impending danger as a piece of information must have been duly circulated among those animals, ostensibly by none other than themselves. Scientists have long confirmed that animals do communicate using diverse means contingent on the environment of habitation and the animal's level of physiological development.

Among humans, the quest to know the latest information in one's environment is a drive that is as disturbing as the desire to feed when famished. Even those who may not necessarily show interest in gossip soon find themselves asking serious questions when a major event happens in their

neighbourhood. In short, everyone would want to know what has happened, how it happened and what effect it would probably have on the inquirer. The statement is credited to Marcus Tullius Cicero, a famous Roman orator that “if a wise man were granted a life of abundance of everything material so that he had leisure to contemplate everything worth-knowing, still if he could not communicate with another human being, he would abandon life”. The import of this statement may be best understood by someone who has experienced the trauma of solitary confinement. And so, man not only generates information, he processes it, seeks it avidly and sometimes pays heavily for it. Among the elite, people spend so much on procuring media gadgets and other materials on a daily, weekly or monthly basis all in a bid to be informed. Worldwide, the information industry is said to be the fastest growing business in contemporary time just as mouth-gaping media technologies are churned out almost on a daily basis to ease information transfer and reception.

Media history shows that man started disseminating information through signs and signals and later developed language in the form of word of mouth from which he proceeded to using objects to graphically and symbolically express himself on stone engravings, wall pictures, bark of trees, smoke, leaves, etc. With advancement in knowledge leading to improved technology, information dissemination graduated to the level at which man was able to conquer space and reduced physical distance in the communication process. The emergence of the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, satellite and recently Internet has greatly transformed the information industry globally. Marshal McLuhan has rightly described this phenomenon as the *Global Village* (Griffin, 2000) which is the miniaturization of the world into close units of interaction, not essentially in terms of space, but through technology.

A corollary to the development of information technology was the emergence of a profession –Journalism –which exclusively concerns itself with information dissemination. The professionals in this trade –Journalists –make use of media of mass communication to reach their diverse audience. Traditionally, such information transfer has always nearly been completely unidirectional with the media organization feeding a passive vast audience that has the capability of little or no feedback mechanism. However, all that has changed with the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web in the communication arena. Some scholars have even questioned if the end of Mass Communication as a concept and practice has come (Chaffee and

Metzger, 2001:365-379). A fall out of this development is that today, the question of who is a journalist is becoming more challenging to answer. The once docile (*lame duck*, courtesy of Wilbur Schramm) receiver of mass communicated messages has become both a receiver and sender (trans-receiver). Consequently, the concept of journalism as a practice, is gradually becoming amorphous to define. Obijiofor (2002, p.51) has noted that:

Defining the properties or characteristics of a journalist is not easy, in particular in this era of the new communication technologies, which make it easy for anyone to engage in journalism practice. However, professional journalists and journalism academics seem to agree on one point: that the Internet has affected the way news is gathered, produced and reported.

He attests to the fact that there has also been a major shift in the core attributes required of good journalists. One of these is that a good journalist now must possess basic computing skills i.e. computer literacy.

These assumptions are not baseless because virtually everyone can practice journalism at the moment, at least viewed from the narrow sense of being able to disseminate information through the Internet to a large, heterogeneous and scattered audience. This is what has been termed Citizen Journalism, a participatory form of reporting events in society by just anybody who feels concerned. Quoting Glaser (2007) Okorie, Oyedepo and Usaini (2012, p.163) write that “Citizen Journalism also known as ‘public’, ‘participatory’, ‘democratic’, ‘guerrilla’ or ‘street journalism’ is the concept of members of the public ‘playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information’”. Okorie, et al cited above further state that “When the ordinary person as a citizen of a nation takes up the initiative to report or express views about happenings around, then the occurrence is popularly termed citizen journalism or participatory journalism”. These scholars also note that the practice of citizen journalism has been embraced even by professional journalists who use news blogs to comment on news stories to evaluate public reactions to them adding that since this occurs outside a formal news outlet, it is also considered as citizen journalism. Obijiofor (2002, p.51) says that “... a major concern about the Internet is that it has given rise to the proliferation of ‘pseudo-journalists’

obviously referring to the untrained hands in the business. No doubt, citizen journalism is a radical departure from the traditional art of reporting by a selected group of 'experts' in the field who were trained for and sometimes on the job. Indeed, this is a blow to the so much clamoured for professionalism in Journalism but a converse plus to media democratization as advanced by some scholars. How this has changed the face of journalism as well as social interaction generally and what the society should brace up with as challenges from this unfolding development is the knot this paper seeks to untie.

Citizen Journalism as an Extension of Community Media

The term 'Citizen' applies to a legal resident of a country and one who has rights/privileges attached to his/her residency. In simple language, a citizen is a legitimate member of a community. The idea of citizen journalism creates an impression of a genre of journalism practised by members of a social group connected together in a social network. Okorie, et al (2012, p.162) remark that "As blog writing behaviour is directly connected with belonging to an interactive community through a blog, it might be expected that blog authors can benefit from activating communication with, and consequently gaining acceptance from others". This is why the whole process is rooted in the workings of social media, a way of aggregating people from different backgrounds who are scattered over a wide geographical area into a social forum of interaction. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.60) cited in Johansson (2010, p.1) see social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Web 2.0 is a platform on which social media is based (Carlsson, 2010, also cited by Johansson, 2010). Wikipedia, quoted by Johansson (2010, p.6), defines social media as:

media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues. They support the democratization of knowledge and information and transform people from content consumers to content producers, (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/social media). Social media are

distinct from industrial or tradition media, such as newspapers, television and film. They are relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information, compared to industrial media, which generally require significant resources to publish information.

Johansson (2010) gives examples of social media technologies to include blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, and crowd sourcing. Many of these social media services, according to the author, could be integrated via social network aggregation platforms like Mybloglog and Plaxo (citing [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social media](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media)).

Okorie, et al (2012, p.162) add that “different blogging communities may have different (but overlapping) sets of procedural rules that also act as indicators for affiliation. Only those who know and follow those shared routines and expectations will be considered part of the community and subsequently will have the chance to attain their communicative goals”.

Viewed from its participatory nature, citizen journalism and blogging could be seen as an extension of community media. Community media are usually media outfits set up in the rural areas to cater to the information needs of the local community. Such media are owned and operated by the community whose members equally play a dominant role in their operations. In essence, the content of such media should have a predominantly local flavour. But quite unlike the traditional community media like radio, television and newspaper/magazine, citizen journalism is anchored on media outlets that are owned, operated and regulated by one or more individuals/organizations depending on the level of its sophistication. The availability of web/blogsites, otherwise known as the blogosphere, on the World Wide Web has made citizen journalism and social networking a profound success. Visitors to the web/blogsites do not only access information but are able to contribute their own opinions and report issues through the same process.

Social media can take many different forms, according to Johansson (2010, p.1 citing Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Weber, 2009), which include social networks, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. Weber also includes search engines in the definition of social web, and describes them as reputation aggregators with the task of aggregating sites with the best product

or service to offer and usually put things in order of reputation (Weber, 2009). Search engines available for this interaction include Twitter, YouTube, Face book, Google, Yahoo!, Ask and Live, etc.

In each case, the individual participant needs to link up by registering with the web/blogsite, which could be owned and managed by anybody, and subscribes to the conditions specified by the web/blogsite operator. Automatically, the individual becomes a part of a vast network in which he/she has access to thousands of other visitors to the site. Through this means, someone could keep thousands of friends and chat constantly with them individually or collectively. Here again, we see the idea of Marshal McLuhan resurfacing that the world has become a global village. However, we need to add quickly that content sent in as contributions to such sites are still subject to editing either by the operator or the recipients of the messages sent based on predetermined conditions set by the operator(s). This is why some web operators would not post certain information which does not conform to the *modus operandi* of the web/blogsite.

Theoretical Framework for the Discourse

This treatise is anchored on two theories of mass communication: Democratic-participant media theory and the Libertarian media theory. Democratic media theory is an offshoot of the normative press theories which help to explain the expected role of the media in any given socio-political context and how factors in the media environment shape the operations of the media. The central proposition of the normative theories as expounded by Siebert, et al (1956, p.1) cited in McQuail (2010, p.175), is that the “press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social control”. In particular, democratic-participant media theory was expounded by Denis McQuail alongside Development media theory which the scholar felt best suited for articulating media role in the development of the third world countries (Folarin 1998, p.31) and so the two theoretical postulations could aptly be used as a paradigm for evaluating press role in national development. Herein lies the harshest criticism of these theories in the sense that no country could be said to have got it all in matters of development. Every country has its own peculiar challenges of development at different stages.

Democratic participant media theory emphasises grassroots participation in the use of the media. In essence, media should be available to whoever wants to use them. In this case, the democratic participant theory deemphasises media concentration, centralization, professionalization, bureaucratization, and monopolization as hindrances to public access to the media and which in turn make the media ineffective in their performance. Applying this tenet to this paper, one would discover that the emergence of the new media and consequently social networking, which is the focus of this discourse, has finally given expression to the ideals of the democratic participant media theory. This is because unlike the conventional media that are strictly owned, controlled and regulated by concerned professionals, citizen journalism, as part of social networking, offers a platform that tends to neutralise and make nonsense of such thinking. Everyone can be a journalist at any time and in any place, so it seems citizen journalism is saying.

Libertarian press theory emphasises the freedom of information flow through the media. The theory deemphasises censorship of the media for whatever reason believing that the good and the bad ideas should be allowed to mingle together in the *free market place of ideas*. The theory recognises that the media audience are rational to determine what they consume as media products and that in due course, the good ideas would drive out the bad ones. Related to this paper, the libertarian press theory has found a solid ground to manifest in the practice of social networking in the sense that both the good and bad ideas find their way into the public domain. It is up to the media audience to decipher which idea to go along with in interpreting societal issues.

Prospects of Social Media

The advent of blogging has been a blessing to the information industry. For one, information dissemination has been greatly enriched and the frontiers expanded. What the traditional media would ordinarily miss or deliberately leave out in the coverage of issues/events in society is easily captured through citizen journalism although the journalists in this case may just be anybody. Today, when an event occurs, no matter how remote the scene of the event is, it easily becomes public knowledge in a matter of seconds through blogging. For instance, on 25 October, 2012, the light plane of Governor Danbaba Suntai of Taraba State crashed in a bush near Yola, Adamawa State and before any news media could air the report, many users

of social media had got the information almost instantaneously as it happened. It was only the following morning that Radio Nigeria reported the incident, nearly 24 hours later. Again in Nigeria of recent, most of the reported cases of bomb blast in the country are made news instantly through blogging using mobile phones. The news is always accompanied with pictures and details continue to filter in as the event unfolds. Follow up reports come in consistently from different observers/eye witnesses of the incident.

Thus the traditional journalist in the conventional media has nothing to hide from the public. Whichever slant he gives to the story can either be confirmed or disproved by the accounts of the bloggers. Citizen journalism seems to say that in news reporting, there is no privileged position for the professional journalist any longer and worst still, the monopolistic power of the editor in slanting news has been grievously punctured. Matt Drudge, an Internet gossip columnist who revealed the illicit affair between former President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, reportedly rejoiced over the power which the Internet has conferred on everyone to practice as a journalist. Obijiofor (2002, p.15) quotes him as saying, "This is an era vibrating with the dim of small voices. Every citizen can be a reporter; can take on the powers that be". Okorie, et al (2012, p.164) cite as an example Wikileaks, which "is an international non-profit organization that publishes submissions of private, secret and classified messages from anonymous news sources and news leaks" adding that Wikileaks has stated that its "primary interest is in exposing oppressive regimes in Asia, the former Soviet bloc, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East", and that they "also expect to be of assistance to people of all regions who wish to reveal unethical behaviour in their governments and corporations". These scholars note further that "In January 2007, the website stated that it had over 1.2 million leaked documents that it was preparing to publish". They submit that "Through blogs, citizen journalists have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, and other issues of concern to local and national communities" citing as examples *Sahara Reporters* who carried controversial stories indicting prominent Nigerians in the business and political circles and, Wikileaks which exposed several classified documents of the U.S government war campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Citizen journalism plays a corrective role in news reporting because apart from offering varied 'vivid' accounts of the incident from different sources, it

helps the audience to decipher the true reports from the false. This is possible because as more information filters in, the audience is able to ascertain which version is credible by comparing notes and which to discard. Thus the audience tap into the benefits of the concept of the *market place of ideas* emphasised in the libertarian press theory.

For instance, it was rumoured through blogging that the ill-fated Dana flight which crashed in Lagos on 10 June, 2012 was held up in the sky in spite of the pilot's repeated appeals for emergency landing at the Lagos airport just because the wife of the President of Nigeria, Dame Patience Jonathan, was about flying from the airport. It was in the same vein that Governor Danbaba Suntai was rumoured dead in the plane crash referred to earlier in this article through blogs. It was later discovered that both information were false as more people sent in their accounts of the incident to their friends in the social network. The rumours were quickly discarded. If it were the conventional media that carried such a report, it would have caused all hell to be let loose and would have taken a much longer time to correct the error. Citizen journalism has kept everyone on their toes behaviourally speaking because any little act of misdemeanour could be noticed by someone around who could post such information as a blog. Pictures of police officers collecting bribe on the highway, men and women caught in illicit affairs, demonstrations and other forms of protests among others are on a daily basis uploaded on the blogosphere for public consumption. The journalist is everywhere, so it seems to be and his eyes are like the Nigerian symbolic EFCC's Eagle's eyes watching everywhere.

Social media would also liberalise the media landscape and promises to be more enlightening. The fact that media audience now have the opportunity to make their input in news reportage goes a long way to correcting some misleading assumptions about societal issues held by participants on social networking. For example, when any event is reported either through blogging or conventional online media, reactions come from readers in the form of personal comments on the issues. These postings are equally assessed by other readers in the social network who would either agree with or disprove the earlier comments. The good thing about this development is that instantly negative and uninformed comments are seriously criticised and rebuffed to the humiliation of the commentator and such a person is forced to beat a retreat. Even the conventional journalist has become very careful in what to write.

Ethical/Social Challenges of Social Media

A fundamental challenge that citizen journalism has thrown up is the issue of non-observance of journalism ethics in reporting events. This problem crops up because the 'citizen journalist' in most cases is untrained in information management. He is driven by passion to share the news with those in the clique of his network. In the process, the good, the bad and the ugly is reported.

For instance, gory pictures, which would have been properly cropped by trained journalists before being released to the public, are ubiquitously displayed in the blogosphere. This might irritate many people thereby causing more harm than good. As a free-for-all arena, anyone could take a shot of a scene with his camera phone and straightaway post it as a blog for the world to see. On the contrary, conventional journalism is guided by the principle of social responsibility which regulates the journalist's manner of handling stories, pictures and other news materials. Citizen journalism seems to relegate the values of social responsibility to the background.

The confusion created by varied accounts of the same incident rendered through blogging could be problematic because of the likely misinterpretation members of the audience might give such reports. There is the natural tendency for mischief makers to manipulate news reports in order to achieve some sinister objectives. This could spark off crisis in a very serious situation. It is not everyone that would wait for a confirmation before re-acting to an unfavourable news report about one's tribe and religion (as in Nigeria) especially in places where tempers are persistently high. The immediacy with which the events are reported on the social media makes it difficult to control its circulation. As one receives a message, he/she would expeditiously send it not only to one receiver this time but multiple receivers who would equally continue the mass dissemination of the message. However, as earlier mentioned, since both the correct and wrong information are disseminated side by side in the social network, there is the possibility of checks and balances in the process which could minimize the dangers of misinformation.

Further, Citizen Journalism has emerged to deal a blow to professionalism in journalism, though a highly controversial concept, and the clamour for it. Could journalism ever be practised only by trained journalists? The answer is pointedly in the negative direction so long as the new media are gaining

ground on each passing day. This obviously has rubbed some mud on the professional garb of the gentlemen of the press. Okorie, et al (2012, p.159) citing Flew (2008) note that “The use of blogs in citizen journalism began in the mid-90s, though was not widely recognised as a journalistic tool by professionals and institutions until 2000”. Unfortunately today, blogging has been embraced by professional media organizations as one source of news, although not wholly dependable. Edwin Madunagu, a columnist with *The Guardian* newspaper throws a poser on this issue by stressing the inherent weakness of journalism as a profession. Obijiofor (2002, p.15) quotes him as saying, “a profession whose boundaries are so elastic and flexible, which demands so little from entrants, but which, in spite of this, or because of this, constitutes a very powerful socio-political institution, cannot have a sustained or sustainable code of ethics”.

The insecurity challenge posed by the use of social networking is as disturbing as the threat of nuclear weapons. A case in point was the murder of a Nigerian lady in Lagos recently. *The Sun* Newspaper (02 September, 2012) notes in its editorial that “The recent murder of Miss Cynthia Osokogu, a post-graduate student of Nassarawa State University, Keffi, by friends she met on the social media, Facebook, vividly underscores grave dangers unassuming people are exposed to in the hands of those who abuse the technology”. The editorial continues “The 25-year old student, businesswoman and daughter of Major-General Frank Osokogu (rtd), was lured to Lagos ostensibly to purchase ladies wears for her boutique, but was drugged, raped and strangled to death in a room at the Casmillo Hotel at Lakeview Estate Phase 1, Amuwo Odofin, FESTAC, Lagos, on July 23”. *The Sun* editorial referred to above laments:

It is very sad, indeed, that a remarkable technological advancement designed to revolutionize communication was turned into a platform for luring young girls to be raped, robbed and in Osokogu’s case, killed. The inventors of the media did not mean it to be used for such evil purposes. This incident should teach all Nigerians to be wary of the abuse of social media. The lesson is that the media can be used by fraudsters and killers to gain undue trust of gullible people with a view to harming them.

The perpetrators of the crime, when apprehended later, confessed that Miss Cynthia Osokogu was their fourth victim but unfortunately, she was the first to be killed by them.

Obviously, the social media, which are effective tools for making new friends and finding lost ones, have also become a means of luring unsuspecting victims to destruction. On the contrary, it is on record that so many people have formed enduring relationships like marriage, business connections and found help in critical conditions through the social media. For instance, *The Punch* Newspaper, September, (2012) reports that:

While a large number of Nigerians have expressed concern over the safety of social networking sites, 28-year-old breast cancer patient, Osarere Idiagbonya, is certainly among the few that will not agree that the sites are evil. Her friends on Twitter had harnessed the social media site to raise over N6m for the cancer patient for overseas treatment.... Idiagbonya needed N6m for her breast cancer surgery, which is to be conducted at the Maryland Teaching Hospital, Baltimore, United States. Her friend, Michella Jonathan, who spearheaded the social media campaign, met her on Twitter in 2010.... she was moved by Idiagbonya's condition and started the fundraising campaign on August 25, 2012 after visiting her. Jonathan said she was moved by Idiagbonya's story and consequently started the campaign on BlackBerry Messenger and Twitter, while also contacting some popular bloggers.

We cannot blame the brains behind the social network sites rather we should accept the fact that each succeeding media technology has always come in the shape of a two-edged sword. This is why it is necessary for a critical analysis of the likely gains and pains of each emerging media technology to be carried out scientifically in order to ascertain what challenges such technology poses to the society. This point is well made by Etuk (2009) at the first Prof. Emmanuel Akpan Memorial Lecture that:

Since on a daily basis, our lives are being affected, whether we like it or not, by these new media, preoccupations suggested and defined by them, and tastes

excited and either satisfied or frustrated by the same, it is high time we took a good look at them and at least awaken our consciousness, even if there is nothing we can do to influence or stop them.

FADs (2007) cited in Moemeka (2007, p.8) attests to this fact that “each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique messages”. *Newsweek Magazine* (June 6, 1994, p.18) puts it more graphically “As communications software grows more sophisticated, there is always the danger that it will complicate rather than streamline its user’s life....” MacBride, et al (1980, p.31) note that “...technological progress in general – and more particularly the increasing use of communication and information technology – is now sufficiently well advanced for it to be possible to forecast trends and to define prospects, as well as to identify risks and stumbling-blocks”.

Federman (2004) also cited in Moemeka (2007) caps it by saying “the presence of a new medium sends a new message across which could trigger off changes in society”. Expanding the opinion expressed above, Alemoh (2011, p.19) writes that:

The message here implies the impact such a medium would have on society. In other words, the introduction of a new medium of communication usually produces some identifiable behavioural changes in people and with this as early warning signal, the new medium could be characterized and identified before it becomes obvious to everyone. This process... could take years or even decades to complete. The good thing about such early observance of the effect of a new medium on society is to enable people to discover if the new medium brings along effects that might be detrimental to society. With this, the society would be in a good position to influence the development and evolution of the new medium before the effects become pervasive.

Today, every Tom, Dick and Harry could type a text message on a cell phone and send it to a couple of friends with the instruction to pass it on to several other people as a safeguard to their lives. Many of such messages have bothered on abstaining from eating certain food items hawked around in

one's neighbourhood; not receiving calls from certain strange phone numbers; planned attack on people, among others. The funniest thing is that the source of the message would never be ascertained even though some of them had been falsely attributed to recognized organizations like the BBC and the Nigeria Police. One could only imagine the anxiety such messages always generate. What surprises one most is the ease with which the perpetrators gain access to the various network service providers' lines without being detected. The Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) certainly has a case to answer in this matter in the way it regulates the telecoms industry in the country.

Not only that, many a Nigerian has been swindled of good cash through the use of fake service promotion allegedly attributed to the network service providers. The perpetrators would call on the unsuspecting subscriber or send a text announcing the latter as a winner in a promo supposedly sponsored by the service provider. A certain amount of money would be requested from the "lucky" subscriber to process the deal before the money is remitted to the winner. However, people are becoming wiser now in that they would ask those making a request for "processing fee" to spend a part of the prize money in processing the deal while the balance would be sent to them (the winner). This has always put an end to such discussions.

A more dangerous aspect to the whole phenomenon is the fact that many Nigerians have been embarrassed on social media by being declared stranded in certain cities in Europe or elsewhere and needing financial help urgently. Though this has not been so successful as an operational strategy for the fraudsters, the embarrassment it has caused the victims and the efforts they make to correct the stigma is worth considering. Also very disturbing is the effect of the use of social network on time management ability of youths today. It is not surprising that even when lectures are going on, some students are comfortable *face booking* or *twitting* and would never pay attention. What of the overall percentage of time those youths spend on each day's meeting and interacting with people via social media not over issues that could give them headway in life but frivolities and fantasies. Consequently, many of such youths have been heartbroken on several occasions because of unprofitable relationships they have been keeping on social media.

Conclusion

The fact that social networking has come to stay is indisputable but it is a development whose effects cut both ways. On the one hand, its emergence has democratised media practice, something that has long been advocated by some media scholars as a panacea to fast tracking development of the third world countries. Further, its emergence has given impetus to the libertarian ideal in journalism as the media audience are once again left with the choice of not consuming media fare from restricted sources but are able to sift the wheat from the chaffs in the abundance of information available in the blogosphere. The concept of the free market place of ideas has been greatly enhanced.

Equally, the argument on agenda setting of the media is assuming another dimension in that the case seems to tilt more on the side of the people as the true agenda setters. As it is now, there is no gainsaying the fact that with the people taking the lead in reporting issues ahead of the conventional media, the enviable position the media had once enjoyed had been taken off them. It is the people who would determine what goes on in the public sphere, and not just a couple of privileged persons sitting in a concave somewhere to chart the course of social discourse.

However, care must be taken in celebrating the prospects of social media because anything that is virtually left unregulated, as its nature largely seems to suggest for now, could be deleterious to the wellbeing of the society. Even though the operators of the social media might be compelled to take some measures at ensuring that what passes through their domain to the public is filtered, this does not still offer much guarantee of safeguarding public conscience. Much of the 'unwanted' information would certainly find its way to the public sphere because everyone is allowed access into the public arena. The government certainly has a role to play in safeguarding the wellbeing of its citizens in this matter. Following the dastardly killing of Cynthia Osokugo, many people had called on the Nigerian government to place an outright ban on the use of social media in the country. Obviously, this is far from the solution just as the Minister of Communication Technology, Mrs. Omobola Johnson, declared that banning or restricting internet and social media is not the answer to various internet crimes (reported in *ThisDay*, 28 September, 2012). Speaking at the 2012 Nigerian Internet Governance Forum in Abuja, the minister maintained that such internet services have greater

positive roles to play in the development of Nigeria. She, however, harped on the need to strengthen the sense of responsibility of internet users in the country.

On his part, the Vice-Chairman, Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), Dr Eugene Jiwah has hinted, according to the newspaper, that a bill was under way to check the excesses of Internet Use in Nigeria. He expressed hope that the security bill which has been proposed in Nigeria since 2011 would be given to the House (National Assembly) for passage soon adding that when there are appropriate cyber security laws in the country, enforcement of infractions or breaches of those laws can then take place. In his words, “Currently, you cannot enforce any cyber security violation because the enabling law is not there. But when we have this, NCC can then enforce appropriate use of the internet, and sanction violators”. The need for government to intervene in this critical sector cannot be overemphasized.

As it is at the moment, every observer can only watch and see where this new genre of social commentary would lead man in a couple of years to come. Indeed, we make our tools and they turn around to make us, as Marshal McLuhan would say. Nevertheless, the warning of Kurt Waldeim in footnotes to *Many Voices, One World* (1980, p.33) is most pertinent:

...failure to assert the primacy of policy over technology is an alarming and increasingly dangerous phenomenon in the modern world. This danger is present in the area of communication. Unless it is removed, further communications developments may well produce consequences which were neither foreseen nor desired from a more comprehensive national or international perspective.

Certainly, the emergence of social networking has provided media scholars and other social thinkers a vexed question to keep them busy for a few decades to come. The earlier something is done to regulate the new media, the better it will be for everyone.

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