

Digital Journalism and Citizen Engagement in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the place of digital journalism and citizen engagement in Nigeria. Digital journalism has maintained its relevance through the advent of digital media which has fostered citizen engagement. Digital media such as Facebook, Twitter, and so on has allowed various news organizations and individuals to own a page on their platforms which has made the citizens of Nigeria aware of the news going on in their locality via electronic means and allowed them to give any form of rebuttal to any policy or activities of the government that are not welcomed by them. The democratic participation and the uses and gratifications theories of the media were used to guide this paper. It was acknowledged that digital media which serves as a tool for digital journalism and citizen engagement possesses the potential to bring about online citizen engagement among Nigeria's population through offering them a platform for acquiring information necessary for citizen participation; for engaging in political discussions/debates in an atmosphere of enhanced freedom of speech; for direct conversations with elected representatives; for pushing for change; and for achieving group mobilization. The paper, however, argues that before digital media could effectively perform these roles as a tool for digital journalism and citizen engagement, certain factors must first be addressed and these include the extent of the youth's interest in politics, the conduciveness (or helpfulness) of the political environment and the responsiveness of the government of the day to the citizen engagement cause.

Keywords

Citizen, Digital, Engagement, Journalism, and Nigeria



I. Introduction

The functionality and growth of human society are promoted by effective communication as no human activity could be carried out without proper communication (Eyiuche, 2003). Citizen engagement forms a vital part of human activities which makes communication indispensable. Citizen engagement refers to the process whereby citizens participate in the governance of their political entity. At whatever level of governance (federal, state, or local), nevertheless, citizen engagement ensures that citizens are carried along in the governing process (Aondover et al., 2024).

The emergence of digital media such as Twitter, Facebook, and so on, has brought about new opportunities for strengthening citizen engagement online, particularly among the youths who are considered to be internet savvy. The digital media are considered a “balancing force” according to Lin, Bagrow, and Lazer (2011) to the traditional media, to which activists and the underprivileged can turn or must turn to have their voices heard. The growth of

modern technology and the sophistication of society over a while became a big challenge for traditional media of communication (Aondover et al., 2022). In order for the media to survive this challenge, they resorted to the coverage of news with economic benefits against the interest of the citizens. On the other hand, the citizens having discovered this development, decided to look for ways of satisfying their quest to know the happenings around them (Adelabu, 2008).

Citizen engagement as regards digital journalism has become a phenomenon the world over, owing partly to the expansion of the internet, digital media technologies, and social media platforms. In Nigeria particularly, the dawn of the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) over two decades ago, and the growing access to cheap mobile phones, social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and User Generated Content (UGC), such as blogs, websites, and so on, has made popular citizen interest in journalism. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and many other social networking sites have provided innovative means for the engagement of citizens in matters relating to the public. With the advancement in technology of social networking platforms and smooth access to the internet, the public acting as journalists has become breathtaking as anyone with gadgets can make content and upload it without any hindrance (Mahamed, Omar & Krauss, 2020).

Aondover et al., (2025) are of the view that social media is quickly becoming a prime political battleground for several political contenders. This is because it has a democratic potential that opens for new forms of political participation and conversations. The popularity of online spaces has led to an increase in the visibility of political opinions, which is also fostering online participation. The internet for instance is changing young people's political outlooks and participatory behavior. For several young people, online participation is a gateway to meaningful engagement in political life, as some communication scholars have noted that social media elevates political efficacy, knowledge, participation, and social capital (Kim and Geidner 2008). This paper, therefore, explores the strengths of digital journalism and citizen engagement in Nigeria.

II. Review of Literature

To create a framework for this paper, the theories of democratic-participant and uses and gratifications will form its theoretical basis. While the democratic-participant theory offers a normative imperative within which the media (including the digital media) could be viewed as a platform for citizen engagement, the uses and gratifications theory underscores the fact that the audience's media use dispositions are also a factor in the extent the media could serve in engendering citizen engagement.

2.1 Democratic-Participant Theories

As one of the normative theories of the press, it is an alternative politico-media ideology that aims to democratize access to the media in challenge to the monopolistic tendencies of the powerful political and economic forces operating in the society. The emergence of the theory is motivated by discontentment with the libertarian media theory or free press and the social responsibility theory. Such discontentment arose because they failed to achieve the social benefit anticipated for them. The two theories have also failed to stem the increasing tide of commercialization and monopolization of privately owned media (Aondover et al., 2022). They have also been unable to prevent the centralization and democratization of public broadcasting institutions even when they have been founded according to social responsibility norms.

The democratic-participant theory thus represents a radical effort to neutralize all sorts of monopolies in media gate-keeping, therefore accommodating popular participation as represented by diverse societal interests like students, labor, political parties, gender groups, and religious bodies, among others. The theory is a direct answer to the emergence of “monopoly journalism” as a result of the “extreme commercialization” of the media in the developed world (Okunna, 1999). Okunna comments further as follows: (The) private media have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer individual owners or ownership syndicates. Despite the existence of pluralism (as also advocated by the libertarian theory), the mass media voices that are available tend to speak with one voice because several media outlets may belong to the same owner or ownership syndicate (Okunna, 1999).

The democratic-participant theory “advocates pluralism as against monopolization and decentralization as against centralism... It also suggests horizontal as against up-to-down communication. It stresses its commitment to feedback in the socio-political communication circuit... This theory has been described as the press equivalent of ‘grassroots democracy’.” The theory also advocates equality between sender and receiver or what has been called association mode as against the command mode or superiority of the sender to the receiver in a one-way communication system. The theory equally observed that given the fact that the mass media has become too important socially, it should not be left in the hands of the professionals. This theory has been described as the press equivalent of grassroots democracy.

Applied to the subject of this paper, the democratic-participant theory helps to conceptualize the digital media as a platform for popular democratic participation where the common people excluded from the bureaucracy permeated traditional media would have the opportunity to make their contribution to governance. Digital media, under its dynamics, naturally lends itself to popular participation.

2.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory holds that the nature and extent of the effect of the mass media on the audience is conditioned by the uses that the audience makes of the media. As an effect theory, Melvin (1999) writes, there are three objectives in developing the uses and gratifications theory:

- a. To explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs. “What do people do with the media?”
- b. To discover underlying motives for individuals’ media use.
- c. To identify the positive and the negative consequences of individual media use.

The bottom line of uses and gratification theory is that media do not do things to people; rather, people do things with media. Specifically, the objective of the uses and gratification theory, according to Burgeon, Hunsaker and Dawson (1994), is to explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs. Putting it analogically, the theory explains why one person rushes home, for example, to stay up late at night to watch the local news or read a medium. In the words of Ojobor (2002), “All the discussions before now had emphasized what the media does to people. To embrace the interactive relationship between the media and the audience, the discussion at this point changes to what people do with the media.”

The uses and gratifications theory also highlights the positive consequences of individual media use. In their contribution, Baran and Davis (2001) conclude that audience members actively seek out the mass media to satisfy individual needs. These include learning,

passing time, companionship, escape from tension, excitement and relaxation. In other words, the theory is an alternative paradigm, a challenge to the old thinking that saw the media as irresistibly forcing itself on the audience. This old idea had inspired earlier theories like the hypothermic needle, mass society and social control – which all conceived the audience as a helpless absorber of media messages. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974), identify a key figure in the development of this theory, called attention to the need for a functional uses and gratifications approach to understanding media effects.

They write that uses and gratifications theory is concerned with the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which leads to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratification and other consequences, mostly unintended ones. The theory holds that the audience's use of the media is principally inspired and shaped by the benefits that it looks forward to by consuming specific media messages. Ojobor (2002) elaborates on this point: people do not just buy papers listen to the radio or view television programs just for the sake of doing so. There must be expectations of some gains from the program or publication. The theory therefore is concerned with how people use the mass media to satisfy their needs.

The theory is based on the assumption that the audience is proactive and seeks media that satisfies their needs; that people choose what they want to see or read and that different media compete to satisfy each individual's needs. For example, if we watch the 9 o'clock network news on channel 10 everyday and like the newscasters or their rendition, that means we seek gratification of news by watching channel 10. As we gain experience with segment of the media and create a cyclical process that reverts us to watching the news everyday on the same channel.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Overview of Digital Journalism

Most historical scholarship on the nascent beginnings of digital journalism identifies 1980 as a turning point. While the industry saw disruptive technologies such as television before that, it was in 1980 when Knight Ridder began "Viewtron," an initiative dedicated to sending news to subscribers digitally. More than a decade later, in 1994, the *San Jose Mercury* became the first American large circulation newspaper to deliver a daily electronic reproduction of its paper (Klinenberg, 2005). By the early 2000s, almost every major newspaper in the country offered a digital edition, and Media General's more than \$40 million investment in a converged newsroom featuring *The Tampa Tribune* and an NBC affiliate became the industry's gold standard for producing what was then called converged journalism.

Newsroom convergence, or the coalescing of technologies from formerly discrete media such as print or broadcast, became a trendy buzzword in the industry at this time (Dailey, Demo, & Spillman, 2005). Converged media became such a desired goal and mission for journalism organizations because it combined familiar consumption mechanisms such as text, photo, audio, and video with digital delivery that allowed for a more seamless and engaging experience for the user (Singer, 2011). For journalists, this meant expressions such as "backpack journalist" and "MoJos" becoming commonplace; these terms describe journalists working in the field while carrying all of the tools necessary to file multimedia stories away from the newsroom (Singer, 2011). With technology becoming an essential part of most

journalists' daily habits, the era of digital journalism one that does not implicitly separate distinct technologies such as converged journalism began.

3.2 Digital Journalism in Nigeria

Oreoluwa et al., (2024) maintained that two momentous developments have defined the Nigerian journalistic landscape in the last ten years. The first is the migration of all major Nigerian newspapers to the Internet (while actively sustaining their print editions) in hopes of reaching the highly educated Nigerian migratory elite in the diaspora (Reynolds 2002). The second development is the robust growth and flowering of transnational, diasporan citizen online news media that have vigorously sought and captured the attention of Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora. On the surface, these developments seem contradictory, even counter-intuitive: the migration of news content from homeland legacy newspapers to the Internet should have functioned to satisfy the thirst for domestic news by geographically displaced diasporan Nigerians and therefore remove the need for diasporan-run citizen news outlets. This is more so because the Nigerian diaspora in the West, though highly educated and savvy, had never before now been a vector of informational flows to the homeland.

The defunct Post Express, under the direction of the late Dr. Stanley Macebuh, is widely acknowledged as the first Nigerian newspaper to migrate its content to the Internet in 1996 (Kperogi, 2011). Like many newspapers at the time, the Post Express merely recycled its print content to the Web. By the close of the 1990s, a few other newspapers, notably the (Nigerian) Guardian, Punch, Vanguard, and This Day, had websites where they episodically republished selected contents from their print editions. By the early 2000s, almost all the legacy newspapers in Nigeria had some Web presence, aided in part by the aggregation and distribution of their content, along with those of other African newspapers, by the AllAfrica.com, the Washington DC-based multimedia content service provider widely recognized as the world's largest Africa centered site. The site signed content agreements with over 130 African news organizations, which "generate steady revenues for the content partners and give them, in turn, access to the prize-winning reporting of the AllAfrica team" (All Africa.c.com, accessed May 14, 2011, <http://allafrica.com/whoweare.html>). By the mid 2000s, newspapers without their own websites became the exception rather than the rule.

3.3 Concept of Citizen Engagement

Adler and Goggin (2011) say citizen engagement refers to how citizens participate in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future. This term citizen engagement in the past few years, involved a new movement to promote greater citizen engagement by older adults but nowadays it has been used primarily in the context of younger people. Citizen engagement means working to make a difference in the citizen life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes (Vitalis et al., 2024).

Citizen engagement is a term that explains the process whereby citizens participate in the governing process of their political community or nation. Also known as citizen participation, it has been defined as "Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern". This term citizen engagement in the past few years, involved a new movement to promote greater citizen engagement by older adults but nowadays it has been used primarily in the context of younger people. Citizen engagement means working to make a difference in the citizen life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means

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Ehrlich (2000) sees it from a moral perspective; as a duty of an individual to be a contributory member of his/her society. In his words: A morally and citizenly responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and citizen dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and citizen judgments, and to take action when appropriate. In other words, citizen engagement has many elements, but in its most basic sense, it is about decision making, or governance over who, how, and by whom a community's resources will be allocated. The principle of citizen engagement underscores the most basic principle of democratic governance, i.e. that sovereignty resides ultimately in the people (the citizenry). Citizen engagement is about the right of the people to define the public good, determine the policies by which they will seek the good, and reform or replace institutions that do not serve that good. Citizen engagement can also be summarized as a means of working together to make a difference in the civil life of our communities and developing the combination of skills, knowledge, values, and motivation in order to make that difference. It means promoting a quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.

3.4 Digital Media as a Tool for Digital Journalism and Citizen Engagement

The media, being the most powerful means of communication in the modern world, have been noted to be of essential benefit to democracy and all its elements, including civic engagement. The digital media, given its participatory nature, becomes even more relevant in this respect (Owens-Ibie & Aondover, 2025). The role of digital media in civic engagement could be viewed within the overall framework of what has come to be known as “e-democracy”. Vitalis et al., (2023) established that on e-democracy comments that E-democracy (a combination of the words electronic and democracy) is using 21st century information and communications technology to promote democracy. That means a form of government in which all adult citizens are presumed to be eligible to participate equally in the proposal, development, and creation of laws (Yar’Adua et al., 2023). E-democracy encompasses social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self-determination. More precisely, the use of digital media in advancing civic engagement could be understood within the broader concept of “Internet democracy.” It is commonly defined as “using the Internet, and other Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), to further democratic ideals and forms of governance through “the Internet’s information flow, augmented by ever increasing rainfalls of data, constantly altering people’s knowledge of public affairs and more broadly the political relations of citizens within and between societies” (Margolis & Moreno-Riano, 2009). The role of digital media in civic engagement is realized through several processes as discussed below:

3.5 Acquiring Relevant Information for Informed Civic Action

Digital media assists civic engagement by equipping citizens with relevant information for efficient political participation. According to Margolis and Moreno-Riano, (2009), the first step taken by the digital media in propelling civic engagement “is the empowerment of individuals. People who have an interest in current political issues and the capacity to learn about them now have access to the information they need to be equipped to make an impact on public policy. ”This position is re-echoed by Faber 2011 when he observes that the “information capacity available on the internet allows citizens to become more knowledgeable about government and political issues.” The posting “of contact information, legislation,

agendas, and policies makes government more transparent, potentially enabling more informed participation both online and offline” (Engelman, 2013).

Citing research by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, Faber (2011) contends that youths who pursue their interests on the Internet are more likely to be engaged in civic and political issues, according to a new study of student Internet usage by a group of civic learning scholars (Msughter & Abba, 2017). Youths who use the Internet are also more likely to be exposed to diverse political viewpoints, the study shows. An important dimension of the role of digital media in the civic engagement process is the uniqueness of the information capabilities of digital media. It is a very rich and dynamic information space with peculiar advantages. Silverstone (1999) writes, that what is new about digital media is precisely the creation of this new and more complex relation to knowledge (regarded as being in continuity with the aspirations of modernity, however, and not as a postmodern relation). He describes the emergence of a new ‘knowledge space’ that is in stark contrast to an older knowledge space that was characterized by its linearity, hierarchy and rigidity of structure. This new space – the space of the World Wide Web – is distinguished by its open, fluid and dynamic qualities: it is a space of creative profusion and disorder.

3.6 Participating in Political Discussions in an Atmosphere which Enhanced Freedom of Speech

Another way through which digital media could aid citizen engagement is through providing a platform for political discussions/debates in an atmosphere of enhanced freedom of speech. Concurring with this sentiment, former US Secretariat of State, Hillary Clinton elaborates on what she termed “the freedom to connect”: The freedom to connect – the idea that governments should not prevent people from connecting to the Internet, to websites, or each other. The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate. Once you're on the Internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society. Still on the immense capacity of digital media to drive civic engagement through aiding discussions and debates. The Internet also plays a central role in deliberative democracy, where deliberation and access to multiple viewpoints are central in decision-making.

The Internet can provide an opportunity for interaction and serves as a prerequisite in the deliberative process as a research tool (Aondover et al., 2024). On the Internet, the exchange of ideas is widely encouraged through a vast number of websites, blogs, and social networking outlets, such as Twitter; all of which encourage freedom of expression. Through the Internet, information is easily accessible, and in a cost-effective manner, providing access and means for change. Another fundamental feature of the Internet is its uncontrolled nature, and ability to provide all viewpoints no matter the accuracy. The freedom the Internet provides is able to foster and advocate change, crucial in E-Democracy.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the advent of digital media has enhanced digital journalism which fosters citizen engagement. However, this technology, to be successful in this role, must negotiate with certain intervening variables that exist within the political system and within the individuals that make up the system. This is because technology is and has been a blessing, “but before we go to that well too often, we also need to realize that it is not the answer to every problem” (Trembly, 2009). This underscores the inevitable role of the human facilitators who must, via conscious and well strategized efforts, work towards realizing these potentials of the digital media vis-a-vis civic engagement among Nigerians.

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