

RETHINKING CITIZEN JOURNALISM: TWITTER BAN, CITIZENS' FURY AND THE PATRIOTISM QUESTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to revisit the citizen journalism phenomenon and its role in shaping the socio-political order, using the events around the October, 2020 End SARS protests in Nigeria. The article theorises on two fronts: The first is that citizen journalism on its own is inchoate without the handiness of cheap and easy access to digital devices and self-managed social media platforms that enable citizens to create and publish contents without inhibitions. Secondly, that the cosy relationship between the state officials and big businesses; and the mainstream journalists which impaired public-oriented journalism practice, leaves a vacuum that enable the citizens to engage in self-help in order to meet their information needs. This scenario has led to general crisis of state in which the state, the mainstream media and the citizens battle for the control of the public sphere. The article contends that, for the citizens' anxiety to be calmed and to make them become accountable and patriotic, the State, as a matter of necessity must be more open and transparent in its dealings with the people, and then paving the way for it to set regulatory frameworks on which the social media and telecommunication companies, as well as the internet providers can operate. It is also argued that the press needs to review its alliances with the hegemonic forces in the Government and in big businesses as a way of closing the gaps in trust between the media and the citizens. Taken together, the article submits that the popularity and the foothold of citizen journalism on the social order will dissipate, with a more informed citizen becoming accountable and patriotic to the society.

Key words: Citizen Journalism, Twitter Ban, Citizens' Fury, Patriotism Question.

Introduction

Citizen journalism has become a phenomenon the world over, owing in part, to the expansion of the Internet, new 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 etc., has

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popularised citizen journalism practice. Mahamed, Omar and Krauss (2020), opine that social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, provide innovative methods for stimulating citizen engagement in public life. As a result of this technological advancement of social networking sites and easy access to the Internet, the idea of the members of the public acting as journalists or as purveyors of information has become a phenomenon where anyone with digital gadgets such as Internet-connected smartphones can create and upload content without inhibitions.

As this article makes clear subsequently, germane to the citizen journalism debate, is that, there appears to have emerged, three extreme, albeit two-faced positions or schools, with each hanging on to its ideals. The first perspective is that of the State. From the historical standpoint, the State, seen as the supreme authority in political science parlance, does not tolerate the idea of a liberal journalism practice that takes the State to task. That is in the case of mainstream media. The advent of citizen journalism with its culture of publish or post without hesitation, has heightened the State's vigilance, leading to laws and rules to curb the free flow of information. The State, however at the same time welcomes the idea of citizen journalism, but only if it's for the propagation of its programmes and policies. *Freedom House* in its 'Freedom in the World Data' (2019) laments that press freedom has been on the decline the world over – both in established democracies and in the authoritarian societies. It chronicles the situation:

In some of the most influential democracies in the world, large segments of the population are no longer receiving unbiased news and information. This is not because journalists are being thrown in jail. Instead, the media have fallen prey to more nuanced efforts to throttle their independence. Common methods include government-backed ownership changes, regulatory and financial pressures, and public denunciations of honest journalists. Governments also offered support to friendly outlets through measures such as lucrative state contracts, favourable regulatory decisions, and preferential access to state information (*Freedom House, 2019*).

The upshot of the situation as chronicled by the Freedom House is to make the press subservient to the powers that be, with the public becoming onlookers in their own matters.

The second perspective is that of the civil society, which consciously views the State as the source of corruption, oppression and domination. It also views the mainstream media as being too close to the State and businesses to report all that occurs in the corridors of powers and corporate boardrooms, hence the need to overtake the conventional journalists and release scoops that ruffle the feathers. To this school, journalistic code of ethics is a hindrance to the right to know. Conversely, evidence abounds from the Nigerian experience that, as many civil society actors as possible, are sponsored by the State to create blogs, multiple social media accounts and form pro-state groups that promote State and party officials, counter their opponents and cover-up their anomalies. This they also do under the cloak of citizen

journalism. Ikelegbe (2001) points at the negative roles of some civil groups; which he links to their narrow-minded, acrimonious, contradictory and disjointed tendencies that undermine democratic goals. Similarly, Page (2021) documents the emergence of fake civil societies in Nigeria. He avers that in an attempt to avoid scrutiny, 'Nigeria's top power-brokers have cultivated a new generation of pro-government non-governmental organisations (NGOs), that masquerade as authentic civil society groups that sing the praises of officials and attack their critics (Page, 2021 p. 1).

The third school is the mainstream or the traditional media. Citizen journalism has no doubt rattled the established journalists. The press indeed has found itself between the proverbial devil and the deep blue sea. While uncomfortable with the unrestrained nature of citizen journalism trade, the mainstream press often times is pressured to highlight on its platforms, developing stories from the citizens' media platforms, particularly the social media networking sites. The conundrum is succinctly put by Simon Kolawole, publisher of *The Cable*, a Nigeria online newspaper: 'Social media can be used as a force for good and bad. While the big platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook have greatly helped the professional media, they have also provided the biggest space for mobs to congregate and pontificate' (DW Online, February 17th, 2021).

Flowing from the above, it can be argued that citizen journalism like every new phenomenon has not only taken root, but has firmly germinated as a pillar of a modern democracy that cannot be separated. The fluctuating positions of the three schools captured above, give an impetus to a continual robust interrogation of the concept of citizen journalism, as this article sets out to do, with a view to balancing the contending issues for the peace of the society.

Citizen Journalism: A Conceptual Overview

In conceptualizing citizen journalism, it is better to begin by clarifying meanings. Etymologically, from Anglo-French *citisein* (fem. *citeseine*), comes the word citizen, which connotes an inhabitant of a city or town, a native or a town dweller; member of the state or nation and not an alien. Journalism on the other hand, was first a French word *journalisme* - daily publication (Etymology Dictionary, 2021). In other words, a citizen belongs to a community, nation or society, with a sense of belonging, entitlement and all rights, while journalism is the activity or a job involving gathering and editing information for public consumption through the media. What emerges from the above meanings of citizen and journalism, is, a citizen or citizens engaging in collecting information and presenting same to the public, but without editing. Editing is a key function in media production process, which involves processing and preparing written, audio/visual and cinematic materials to be newsworthy and to make them grammatically and factually free of inaccuracies before presentation to the public. An unedited news report is like a rough diamond that has not been refined. Citizen journalism is therefore, a situation where citizens enjoy their freedom of collecting and sharing (albeit unprofessionally) information with the general public. What is clear here is that, the foundation of the mainstream media as the major source of information

gathering and dissemination, has been disrupted and; unless the free citizen is restrained (not forbidden) in one form or the other, crisis becomes inevitable.

The controversies that trail the citizen journalism phenomenon make it a groundless exercise to want to stick to an acceptable definition. Miller (2019) opines that people without knowledge of journalism benefit from “the convenience and low cost of social computing technologies” to create and publish their own content. Researchers have also contended that notwithstanding its controversial nature, citizen journalism has performed well, and that its foothold on the societal affairs is made inevitable by the failure of the professional media to meet the community’s information needs, as well as the widening gaps in political trust between the state officials and the people.

However, the proliferation of user generated content by citizen journalists come with its downsides. Government, professional journalists, media organisations and media scholars have argued that citizen journalism is devoid of professional accountability and requisite expertise; it is unregulated, substandard, and arbitrary in quality and coverage. Miller (2019) amplifying this position avers that apart from the inability of citizen journalists’ news quality to meet journalistic standards, they unlike journalists in the traditional media are not likely to reflect plurality of opinion; or be more open in communicating the identities of their sources, and rarely reflect the position of official sources for their stories. Consequent upon this reality, the government of Nigeria is not left out of the growing concern and agitation for the regulation of citizen journalism. According to Statista Research Department (2021), there are about 43 million users of social media in Nigeria and it is projected to grow to 103 million users in 2026.

Twitter is one of the social media platforms with which the Nigerian Government had concern. The concern of the Government was the enormous influence of Twitter on Nigerians, particularly on socio-political and economic issues. The concern of the Government was heightened on October 4, 2020 when a video went viral on Twitter showing officers of the State Anti-Robbery Squad of the Police, popularly known as SARS dragging two men from a hotel and shooting one of them outside. The brutality meted to the two victims elicited civil reactions and led to an online campaign on Twitter with the hash tag #EndSARS. Like a wild fire, the viral video of police brutality had 48 million tweets in ten days. Aided by this online campaign on Twitter, a few days later, protests erupted across Nigeria during which at least 56 persons were killed (Afolabi, 2021) by excessive use of force by the army and police. The climax of the protests was the shootings by the military at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos (the rallying point) for the massive protests where celebrities joined the protesters and recorded the events live to the global audience on October 20, 2020. This was followed with a global condemnation of the Nigerian Government’s brutality on the citizens, particularly by global media organisations like *CNN*, *BBC*, *Aljazeera* etc.

Prior to the End SARS protests, the Nigerian government had floated the idea of social media regulation on different occasions. However, attempts to pass an anti-social media bill in the past failed owing to massive outcry and campaign by the citizens on Twitter. Following the outcry that trailed the shooting, and days before Twitter was officially banned, the country's minister of information Alhaji Lai Mohammed had labelled Twitter's activities in Nigeria 'suspicious', citing its influence on the End SARS protests. On June 5 2021, the Nigerian government made real its threat by formally announcing an indefinite ban on Twitter, restraining it from providing its services in Nigeria. According to Douliery (2021), the Nigerian Government's move came two days after Twitter had temporarily suspended the account of President Muhammadu Buhari for violating the social media company's abusive behaviour policy. Buhari's account was put on hold for 12 hours after he threatened to punish a regional secessionist group in the southeast of the country which was blamed for attacks on government buildings. The Government on its part claimed that although the deletion of the President's tweets was part of what informed its decision to ban Twitter, but that it was primarily based on a litany of problems with the social media platform in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news thrived with attendant violent uprisings.

According to Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed; the ban was to be lifted once Twitter submitted to local licensing, registration and conditions. He maintained that Twitter would be licensed by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), and must agree not to allow its platform to be used by those who are sponsoring activities that are unfavorable to the corporate existence of Nigeria. Sequel to this ban, Nigerians began to express shock and condemn the action of the Federal Government. The ban was also condemned by the international community including, the United States (US), the European Union (EU), Amnesty International (AI) as well as the British, Canadian and the Swedish missions in Nigeria. Equally, domestic civil society organisations like the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) and the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) voiced their readiness to pursue legal means to seek redress. The SERAP consequently instituted an action against the Nigerian Government at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice. Nigerians, particularly the young people, started another round of campaign against the ban, defending Twitter and creating alternative means through which Nigerians can access Twitter illegally. The fury expressed by the citizens against the ban on Twitter, and the attempt in particular, to place the micro blogging platform - Twitter above the Nigerian nation, underscores, not only the influence of the social media on the Nigerian people but also the extent the people are ready to go to ply the citizen journalism trade.

Citizen Journalism and the Patriotism Question

The world over, the power of the Internet and its influence on the development of citizen journalism cannot be denied. Licitar (2018) opines that without the Internet, citizen journalism would not exist as we know it today. Bowman and Willis (2003), earlier state that the concept of citizen journalism applies in a situation where a citizen "plays an active role

in the acquisition, report, analysis and dissemination of reports and news items". In other words, the citizen is responsible to gather, and distribute the information over a self-operated gadget and self-managed digital platforms, thus controlling all the news' production processes. This definition clearly differentiates citizen journalism from participatory journalism, in which there is evidence of co-operation between citizens and journalists in the mainstream media domain. This alliance can be exemplified by a video of an accident or disaster sent by an eye witness to a media house which is in turn published on its digital platforms.

In his own view, Suárez-Villegas (2017) avers that citizen journalism is a practice that has found its main capacity of action far from professional management (in decentralised formats with high capacity of interaction between users) as it is the case of blogs and social media. To him, citizen journalism is a practice that produces contents which cannot be considered to have professional value because they were not produced following a protocol of informative diligence, but indeed with a high social value.

It is pertinent to note that the emergence of citizen journalism in Nigeria and the technological platform for its operations has gained popularity. Dare (2010) in his study "The rise of citizen journalism in Nigeria – A case study of Sahara Reporters" examined the immense following and support that citizen journalism receives among Nigerians at home and in the diaspora and voiced his concern about how User Generated Content (UGC) has stimulated and dominated political and social discourse in Nigeria and how far they have set the country's decision makers on edge. According to him, the citizen journalists inundating the social media platforms have been fuelled by the interactive and investigative vacuum left by the traditional media in Nigeria and the style of journalism offered by social media platforms and its limitless, unregulated possibilities has spurred them into a new era of citizenship awareness, greater political participation and a greater demand for accountability and transparency from those that govern them.

Although, both citizen journalists and professional journalists aim at furnishing the public with timely information by engaging in environmental scanning, they however fulfil different roles and thereby have different responsibilities. Those who are on the side of citizen journalism are claiming that citizen journalists should be free to publish whatever they deem fit on the social media platforms. On the other side are those who are of the opinion that press freedom comes with responsibilities. When these responsibilities are analysed, the patriotism question in Nigeria will be better answered.

First, the activities and the contents of online journalist's social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and User Generated Content (UGC), such as blogs, websites, and YouTube Videos are primary means of generating intrinsic and extrinsic values for the operators just like it does for the owners of the traditional media. These contents in the hands of the unregulated and sometime 'faceless' citizen journalists are devoid of social responsibility and seem to do more harm than good thus rendering the claim of patriotism as superfluous and misguided at best.

The fact remains that journalists, the operators of the media regardless of its form and nature are capable of creating realities from their own perspective and misrepresenting existing social actualities. It has been argued that the media environment that is influenced by sensationalist and commercialist priorities for news coverage can initiate events on its own, assign meaning, interpret it and provide a potent platform for reactions and discussions that shape public opinion in favour of the cause that the media is promoting.

On the other hand, and in contrast, the media should be characterised by balanced reporting, emotional distance, presenting a broader and more multifaceted view of issues and rejecting partisan interests as a major influence on news presentation. The media normally should be an independent public sphere for open and free communication between different interacting segments of the society (Poepsel, 2021). For all intent and purpose, the traditional media to a large extent is regulated and can be held accountable by the statutory regulatory bodies that have statutory oversight on them. An example is the case of Channels TV, a Lagos, Nigeria-based medium that was slammed with a 5 million Naira fine for interviewing the spokesperson of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist agitation group that has been outlawed by the government. The import of this is that when the media is aware of regulations and control by statutory means, sanity and respect for professional code of conduct in journalism will gain a foothold.

Arguments and counter arguments continue to rage in justifying and condemning the ban of Twitter in Nigeria. Douliery (2021) noted that Nigerians have reacted severally branding the government's decision "shameful, "unconstitutional", "a move that should be immediately reversed", "a move that will only end in disgrace". He further revealed that some went to the extent of urging users to download a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to retain access to Twitter and dubbed the ban on Twitter as a "disaster" as coming from the "Federal Ministry of Emotional and Irrational Reactions". Equally three days after the ban, NetBlocks (a digital rights platform that uses statistics from the World Bank, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and Eurostat to evaluate the economic effect of an internet outage, mobile data blackout, or app restriction reported that the ban had cost the country over 6 billion Naira (Ubah 2021).

In order to mitigate the effect of the ban, users looked for ways to get around the block of Twitter by using a VPN to access the social networking website. Roy (2021) revealed that users who frequently express their opinions on Twitter and other social media platforms turned to VPNs to hide their IP addresses, keeping ISPs in the dark about their online actions and whereabouts. This in a way represented a threat to national security because, VPNs are, at their core, security solutions that enable users avoid being hacked, tracked, monitored, or otherwise compromised.

From the foregoing and on the balance of sound reasoning, the action of the Federal Government of Nigeria to ban Twitter can be seen as a way to bring sanity to the unregulated and chaotic online and social media landscape. Although, Nigerians with their hue and cries

condemned the ban placed on the operations of Twitter, the truth is that Government's attempt at regulating the media is not peculiar to Nigeria. In the world over, government is a major institution whose roles in determining media structure and performances are sacrosanct. Several instances abound. A case in point is the Communication Act 2003 by the British Parliament. Section 127 in particular makes sending a malicious communication using social media, a criminal offence. An ample example can be gleaned from the protracted case involving the founder of *Wikileaks*, Julius Assange who took the world by the storm, publishing on his whistleblowing website, classified documents and diplomatic cables provided by the US Army intelligence analyst, Chelsea Manning. Manning was tried and sentenced in 2013 for violating the Espionage Act and other sundry offences. Julius Assange, who took refuge in the Embassy of Ecuador in London in 2012 to avoid prosecution, was eventually arrested by the British Police in 2019, after 7 years in the Embassy confinement and held in Belmarsh Prison, London, while battling to prevent being extradited to the United States, to face Espionage charges over his online activities. The British Court of Appeal ruled in December, 2021 that Assange can be extradited to the US. This Assange/Manning case highlights the concern of nations around the world over the unregulated and threatening activities of citizen journalists on the Internet.

Further, in the United Kingdom for example, the media is not absolutely free. The British media system is under government approved regulatory authority of the Office of Communications (Ofcom) which presides over licensing, research codes and policies, complaints and protection of the radio spectrum from abuse (Office of Communications, 2003). Further, in the United Kingdom, the print media is regulated by a body established by newspaper bodies themselves, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). It holds newspapers and magazines to account for their actions, protect individual rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression for the press.

Private television and radio are regulated, respectively, by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Radio Authority (RA), both provided for in the Broadcasting Act 1990. These bodies have broad licensing powers and the governing statute requires them to establish certain codes to which licensees must conform. They also have broad powers to sanction broadcasters who breach license conditions, including through suspension or revocation of licenses.

The analysis of a country's media system is a necessity if the interrelationship between the media and the government of the country in question at any given time is to be understood. This is so because; the political ideology of a country essentially moulds the philosophy of its media. This position was amplified by Poepsel (2021) when he opines that mass communication affects both society and culture; and that different societies have different media systems, and the way they are established by law influences how the society operates. The truth is that media as an institution within a society, derives its functional relevance from its collaboration or link with other elements of the society.

Rethinking Citizens Journalism: Concluding Thoughts

There exists the opposing possibility of sensationalist or balancing media. Media owners, editors, journalists cannot simply escape taking responsibility for their actions. Journalists can be powerful individually and collectively. The changing nature of the media over time and the influence that changing conditions in the society at large bring to bear on it is an important context to consider. Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer (2013) identified two elements in this phenomenon which are: conditions associated with the political environment and the conditions related to the media environment. The latter can be defined as the sum of professional convictions, values and practices applied in news production. The political environment is based on the private and public norms, attitudes, customs and values that shape political life. These environments undergo changes over time.

Alhomoud (2013) opines that journalists, because of their influence and responsibility need to be aware of how cultural perceptions affect how they write, organise and present their works. Based on the foregoing, it will rather be good to have a media environment in which press freedom is guaranteed to the limits of regulations and control apparatus imposed by the society than an environment of absolute press freedom as being agitated for by those in support of citizen journalism, particularly Nigerians who expressed fury over Twitter ban by the Nigeria Government. Those who seek for freedom must of necessity be prepared to have freedom that entails responsibilities. Patriotism entails being free as a member of a society, but to the extent that the freedom does not jeopardise the health of the society. As much as the citizens demand accountability from the State officials, it is imperative that the citizens in turn must show readiness to be accountable. On its part, and as equity demands that 'he who seeks equity must do equity', the Nigerian Government, as a matter of necessity needs to be more open and bridge the gaps in trust between it and those consenting to its authority. This should be followed with the speedy passage of the Social Media Bill pending before the National Parliament, as a way of curbing the excesses of certain citizens on the Internet.

Moreover, in order to strengthen citizen journalism in a way that compliments the traditional media and expand the public sphere, citizens should be made to imbibe similar ethical culture that operates in the traditional media realm. Most importantly, social media organisations, telecommunication companies and other Internet providers should be mandated by laws to put in place measures that prevent harmful activities on their platforms. As variously affirmed by scholars, since it is the cheap and easy access to electronic devices and the Internet that aid citizen journalism and turning it into a danger that may consume everyone, the most effective means to impose decorum on the citizens, will be to have the social media, telecommunication and Internet operators under regulatory authorities.

In conclusion, while not disaffirming the contributions of the mainstream media to the making of a democratic Nigeria, practitioners as well as media proprietors might need to embark on a professional soul-searching, with a view to redressing those problems that gave birth to citizen journalism in the first place. While there is no denying the fact that the nature of journalism makes the practitioners to know and have access to the high and the mighty in

Government and corporate circles, it is pertinent that journalists review their cosy relationship with the state and corporate players or their 'dual allegiances to political and professional goals' (Golding and Elliot, 1979) that rob them of independence to engage in public endeavour journalism practice. By doing this, the influence and the dangers pose to the society by citizen journalists, will naturally wane as the majority of citizens will rely on the established media for their information needs and remain patriotic to their society. It may also reduce the growing attacks on the media or what Simon Kolawole rightly called 'mob censorship' (*DW Online*, February 17th, 2021) by the angry citizens who view the mainstream media as supportive of the repressive activities of the hegemonic state.

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