No technology but still participatory journalists: Viewpoints from Zimbabwe's rural folks

Abstract

It has generally been accepted that non-professional media actors empowered by novel digitally networked technologies are changing the media landscape in the West. In contrast, this is less obvious in the case of sub-Saharan Africa. Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a diverse range of citizen media in Africa, empowered by digital technologies such as mobile phones, blogs, micro blogs, video-sharing platforms, and mapping. Through participant observation as well as a review of the existing research, this study aims to critically analyse and position the impact of citizen journalism in the African discourse, specifically exploring the Zimbabwean case, where citizen journalism appears uniquely non-integrated with traditional reporting as journalists continue to question the ethical basis for commercially engaging alternative form of journalism. While others like South Africa-based *Mail and Guardian*'s 'Thought Leader' continue to coerce citizen participation, evidence on the ground show that conventional media in Zimbabwe is still skeptical about the prospects of embedding the works of citizen journalists into their mainstream packages. However, operating on their own, others like *kubatana.net* have thrived, further underscoring the perceived democratic value of citizen journalism. This research endeavors to examine and compare the citizen journalism narrative, contextualizing the largely uncovered rural setting in order to understand ways through which these communities communicate with little or no exposure to the Internet.

Keywords: Africa, Zimbabwe Citizen Journalism, rural, participatory

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Introduction

The ubiquitous availability of digital technologies has been credited with giving the customarily non-professional audiences unmatched access to the tools of media production and dissemination. (Loader, 2009). Africa has not been spared by the near-dramatic, rapid emergence and seamless exposition of new media technologies, whose complexities, while being evidently palpable, have also been celebrated as springboards for social and democratic change (Watkins, 2009, p. 18). This research seeks to explain the extent to which Zimbabweans are actively engaged in participatory journalism, elaborating on their purposes and methods of participation before evaluating the overall impact of their involvement. The research not only sought to deconstruct the Western notions of news, but also provide an assessment of different forms of contesting participation-based journalism initiatives and narratives in an African setting. Using participatory observation conducted in three remote Zimbabwean villages, the paper argues that the concept of participatory journalism is not new to Zimbabwe. It categorizes the participation into two camps, namely the traditional African and the Western-sponsored form of participatory journalism. Data gathering started in March 2008 during a one-month field trip to Murewa, a farming district located roughly 78km north of the capital Harare. A follow-up visit was also made in July 2011.

The use of anthropological methods in media-related research is not a new phenomenon. Ethnographic studies were conducted to deepen the understanding between print and online journalists in Australia (Fulton, 2008). Through their research, Cramer & McDevitt (2004) even suggested ethnographic methods could be used as news-gathering techniques by news reporters. This study chose to observe, discuss and narrate the villagers involvement in the dissemination of news at citizenry level further explaining why living with the villagers was imperative. Besides, the research sought to explore citizen journalism, in the context of the African rural context, which traditionally is marginalized and left out from the participatory discourse, which normally focuses on urban dwellers. Over the last five years, several studies have attempted to get a good grasp of participatory journalism in the African settling. (Mudhai, 2013). However, none of these have exclusively used rural dwellers and research participants. Since the study also sought to distinguish the dichotomy of citizen journalism in the Western and African settings, a clear focus on three separate villages seemed more appropriate. Journalism's fundamental role in a society, according to Reddick and King (2000), is to act as public watchdog, seeking truth, operating independently and transparently, disseminating the message to the audiences and readers. However, the Internet can facilitate the redundancy of professional journalists, as claimed by Bardoel and Deuze (2001). Still, it has also

facilitated affordable communication on "a one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many basis," acknowledges Cowling (2005, p.2). Citizen journalism has nevertheless had its own share of criticism. While proponents of citizen journalism, including Glaser (2006), are of the opinion that citizens potentially contribute important information that otherwise gets ignored by traditional media, citizen journalists have been criticised for lacking transparency, especially by choosing to remain anonymous when they publish or broadcast their work. Johnson and Weidenbeck (2009), for instance, believe unless they carry by-lined stories, citizen journalists will attract criticism for perceived lack of credibility. It must, however, be noted that the non-use of by-lines is also quite prevalent in professional journalism. It is quite common to open a newspaper and be greeted by a story written by "staff writer" or "own correspondent." In the case of Zimbabwe, journalists may choose not to identify themselves to protect themselves and their sources from possible victimization.(source). However, the advent of the Internet has seen web-based sites inaccurately covering events in the county prompting others to question whether citizen journalism can be considered journalism. This paper therefore sought to answer three questions: In what ways are citizen journalists in an African rural setting different from other forms of city-based participatory paradigms? Can citizen journalism be considered a trusted provider of reliable news? What constitutes news?

The quality of citizen journalism also been extensively questioned. Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong (2007) have shown through content analysis that work produced by citizen journalists lack originality. Identifying a gradual decline in the quality of traditional journalism, Bruns (2009) highlights the role played by citizen journalists, crediting them for displaying "persistence and determination both in uncovering political and other scandals and in highlighting the shortcomings of professional journalism". As noted, the ethical standards and overall credibility of citizen journalism have been the main point of discussion among journalists and academics alike. This is despite the fact that in a global trend, traditional media organizations have also launched citizen journalism initiatives (Weber, 2008). Lowrey (2006), for instance, concluded that most of the content on blogs run by professionals is commentary on news stories. Scholars such as Wall (2005) have argued that content produced by citizen journalists can be considered 'news', since others within their ranks have equally adopted universal norms recognized by professionals. This view is not shared by Kahn and Kellner (2004), who are convinced that online activists use new media vices such as blogs to promote their own agendas and interests, a view that strongly contradicts the demand for 'balanced and fair' coverage deeply embedded in traditional ethics of journalism. Discussions on whether citizen journalists should be accountable

to journalistic integrity will always attract attention and debate and predictably, there will be no consensus on this topic.

The counter-narrative could however stem from the fact that traditional journalism, which supposedly values standards and ethics, has nevertheless attracted unrelenting criticism over the last two decades after practicing cadres including the New York Times' Jayson Blair and USA Today's Jack Kelley notably admitted fabricating and falsifying stories. Despite its shortcomings, the Internet remains curiously more appealing because it offers a different and unmatched set of dynamics, argues McChesney (1996), who is adamant there is no evidence that the Internet will be subject to "corporate control as have broadcasting and traditional media". Yet this paper pinpoints that citizen journalism does not always have to be dependant on technology. For villagers in three Murewa neighbourhoods, participating in community affairs was not dependant on their exposure to technology.

Review of existing body of research

Often referred to as "citizen journalism", "open source journalism," (Bentley et al., 2005) or "user generated content" (Schweiger & Quiring, 2006), participatory journalism embodies mass media-related content produced, published and distributed by non-professional journalists mostly for free consumption. Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 7) have been credited with coining the term "participatory journalism". While examining its relationship with social movements, Downing (1984) called it "alternative media". In his attempt to define participatory journalism, Lasica (2011, August 7) argued that "when small independent online publications and collaborative news sites with an amateur staff perform original reporting on community affairs, few would contest that they're engaged in journalism". An element of dynamic commitment is central to understanding participatory journalism with Whipple (2005) cited in Hermida et al. (2011) declaring "the underlying assumption behind the notion of participatory journalism is a shift from passive consumption to active engagement" (p.6). Bowman and Willis (2003) define participatory journalism as an "act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (p. 9). But others like Watson (2011) believe "there is little consensus over what constitutes citizen journalism" (p. 2).

Nip (2006) sees a difference between citizen and participatory journalism, asserting that under participatory journalism, non-professionals engage trained journalists to produce content, while citizen journalism is the work of untrained professionals working independently. In addition, Carpentier (2007) is adamant there is need to make a clear distinction between participation 'in' the media and 'through' the media. But similarities can be drawn between content from traditional outlets and that from citizen journalism, as was shown by Lowrey and Burleson Mackay's study of blogs, which concluded that "topics and information in new-oriented blogs are similar to those in traditional news content, at times uncomfortably similar" (p. 64). Johnson (2011) furthers the argument by claiming blogs rely "heavily on traditional media for information gathering. Nevertheless, citizen journalism is redefining the whole essence of journalism, as "wisdom of the crowds" has been shown to be more empowering than that of experts such as reporters and editors in terms of making good decisions and finding solutions to societal problems, posits Surowiecki (2004, p. 5).

Furthermore, the concept of citizen journalism is "literally as old as a rock" argues Bentley (2008), who traces its origins to Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, whose 85 essays were published in 1787. While Bentley's argument (2008) traces the traditional foundations of citizen journalism in the American context, my research sought to solidify and justify the viewpoint that participatory journalism was already in existence in Zimbabwe long before the arrival of the British colonialists in the 1880s. Regrettably, the only notable distinction news or journalism practice in pre-colonial Africa and particularly Zimbabwe stems from the fact that no one has portrayed the traditional one-to-one or one-to-many exchange of information among Africans as "news", since such a conclusion may not be in line with the Western conceptualization of news.

Technically reinforcing Bentley's argument is the view that if the University of Missouri opened doors to the world's first journalism school in 1908, it then means that anyone engaged in professional journalism work before that period could be considered a "citizen journalist" on grounds that they did not receive any formal professional training. Johnson and Weidenbeck (2009) propose that lack of professional training is the central characteristic of citizen journalism. The Internet has arguably been the key precipitating factor in the development of participatory journalism and to its credit, "online journalist" is presently an acceptable professional term in journalism practice (Hernandez, 2010). Hence, technological innovation has indeed enhanced the work of citizen journalists world over even though contrary to popular belief, the concept is not entirely new. While scholars such as Banda (2010) consider the ICT revolution as a stepping-stone to improving

democratic and developmental institutions on the continent, others like Noam (2002) are less optimistic. Whilst acknowledging the Internet's mediating role in facilitating direct access to public officials, Noam is keen to remind us that "only a few messages will get through" (p. 58). For Noam, the Internet disconnects as much as it connects. In Africa, others argue that the historically negative depiction of the continent in the traditional Western press is the main driving force behind the surging need for alternative sources of media (Mutsvairo & Kleeven, 2011). In its present form, the concept of participatory journalism is rather more appealing to those citizens opposed to the institutionalized coverage of African issues in Western press because it offers an enabling platform for participants to air and share likeminded views and opinions.

Participatory journalism is pioneering new ways of content development and content sharing as suggested by Gillmor (2004, p. 24), who goes as far as saying "for the first time in history, at least in the developed world, anyone with a computer and Internet connection could own a press. Just about anyone could make the news". Gillmor's assessment, which is based on the Western conceptualization of the news discourse, leaves several questions unanswered. What is news? Who determines what news is? Should news only be technologically deterministic as proposed by Marshall McLuhan? Can news still be conveyed or disseminated through any other mediums outside the dominant means of print, broadcasting and new media attributes such as the Internet and mobile telephony? One's geographic location does not hinder the production of news, with Reddick and King (1997, p. 4) suggesting the Internet allows journalists to "do their jobs better no matter where they are physically located". Yet several reasons have led to the indispensable spread of participatory journalism. Scott (2005, p. 90) argues that for the commercial press, the need to make profits has eclipsed journalism's traditional roles in healthy democracies, concluding, "it has become increasingly clear that the public service mission of democratic journalism has been abandoned by the commercial press in favor of expanding profit margins". For Allan (2006, p. 10) "the spontaneous actions of ordinary citizens compelled to adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in the making of online news," is central to the rise of the concept of citizen journalism.

Conceptual and theoretical discourses

Defining what constitutes "news" can be highly subjective. Stovall (2005, np) defines news as "information that journalists believe is important or

interesting for their audiences". Admitting it is a difficult concept to define, Shoemaker (2006, p. 105) simply says news is "what comes in the newspaper everyday". Taking a cue from Evans' definition suggesting, "news is people. It's people talking and doing" (Whittaker, 2010, p. 8), this paper defined news as the conveyance of previously unknown information to individuals and masses. This also means that gossip can be categorized as news. The universally accepted characteristics of news include the fact that it needs to be relevant to a large number of people while being timely and sometimes unusual. In line with Shoemaker's argument, the providers of news, including television, radio and newspaper outlets take an intermediary role of seeking, editing and publishing news for the readers. Apart from having an audience following, they are also widely considered knowledge providers, argues Brinkman (2011). Most of these agents seek to make profit for their services and are also guided by a set of ethics. Similarly, in the traditional African setting, news agents, as was the case in the Murewa villages, are either paid or unpaid servants who convey news to the villagers through word of mouth, on behalf of the headman or chief, for instance. They deliver news through word of mouth, a less popular medium in the technologically-rich West. After news has been delivered in one homestead, the family members take a role of informing others within their community about the new development. This way, word spreads in a speedy way. Inaccuracies are thus widespread, as also frequently occurs in the technologically-enabled news disseminated on TV, print or digital mediums.

Zimbabweans are accustomed to using word of mouth as an important source of news. As indicated in Figure 1, word of mouth is shown to be the most popular way of obtaining information for Zimbabweans living in the UK, where they certainly have an extensive pool of news options to choose from.

Figure 1: Common Sources of Information for Zimbabwean in the UK
Word of Mouth (36%)
Radio (14%)
Newspapers (9%)
Internet (19%)
TV (11%)
Leaflets in English (11%)

(*Source: IOM 2005)*

Exploring the historical origins of news, contemporary media scholar Wall (2004) recognizes the assumption that "news itself can be said to have existed since people needed to exchange information between villages or tribes". Wilson (1987), making a case for traditional forms of

communication, argues that customary African communication methods are mostly considered antagonistic and inferior to modern ones developed in the West. That assumption is not always accurate. When a funeral occurred, one village headman said, it would not be broadcast on TV or published in a newspaper, yet mourners would gather literally within hours of the initial announcement. While his subjects would deliver the news to selected groups of villagers and the word would spread from there, the use of membranophonic drums and aerophones was a more effective way of grabbing the villagers' attention. Villagers are traditionally familiar with a range of sounds and their meanings and hence will be aware of an upcoming funeral.

No million-dollar technology is used here, yet news is meticulously delivered. Also, the practice of seeking medical or psychological treatment from witch doctors is common in several African cultures. It could also be argued traditional healers "break the news" about their clients' source of misfortune, for instance, in the same way a weather presenter would warn viewers about an impending typhoon on mass media TV in the West. The only difference is that in the Western context, seeking medical assistance would not be classified as "news." Neither do witch doctors consider themselves newsmen as such, even though they unknowingly deliver important news just like any other commercial TV channels in the West. The only problem with calling this "citizen journalism" could be the fact that the notion of "citizenship" could therefore be applicable to every profession, including "citizen professor" or "citizen lawyer." I consider citizen journalism an informal version of the profession and there can be no better place to find unofficial versions of professions than in Zimbabwe. Moreover, to understand citizen journalism in the African traditional context, one needs to accept the perception that it is not a profession but rather a practice, which has and will always be available for everyone to pursue.

In the West, news and advertising heavily depend on each other. In traditional African communication, advertising is present in many different forms. In Murewa, villagers use tree stumps and mountain paintings to showcase their products. Vendors selling products also perform door-to-door advertising. Most of these vendors also convey news. Singing and drumming, as was the case with Inge Brinkman's findings in remote southern Angolan villages, also play a crucial role in disseminating news or advertising events. In Murewa, I, for instance attended several ancestral-appeasing services known in local language as *bira*. Nobody is allowed to go to sleep on this day and villagers sing and dance in honour of the deceased. They also listen to the music of *mbira* or the thump piano, as well as the rattling sounds of *hosho,* a round-shaped gourd filled with kernels. The non-stop singing

therefore allows the hosting family to "advertise" its occasion as uninvited passerby's previously unaware of the event could be seen joining the occasion. The singing therefore plays a pivotal role in advertising events.

In the context of this research, technological determinism, defined by Bimber (1990, p. 333) as "what is really a variety of distinct views about the relationship of technological enterprise to other aspects of human activity" and which he attributes to Karl Marx while Munday (2003) have links it to Marshall McLuhan's "medium is the message verbatim" becomes nearly obsolete. Is technology the force shaping society in Zimbabwe? Does the rural folk need technology to speed up the way they communicate? Do they understand technology and does it positively change their lives? It is indeed being celebrated as a potential catalyst for democratic and social change, but there is little evidence to support this school of thought. While technology's ability to change societal dimensions can rarely be questioned, it is quite evident in Murewa villages that it is having little impact. It is dangerous to conclude that technology is good for the rural dwellers in Murewa, because some of them have never encountered mobile phones, and if they were offered laptops, they would not know how to use them, and might not even be willing to learn. The determination of the people can effect democratic changes in Zimbabwe. Technology may have little to do with it. There are societies where technology has been credited with spearheading democratic changes. Zimbabwe is a different case. For example, it is widely acknowledged that state security agents have in the past confiscated solar-powered radio transmitters said to be broadcasting anti-Mugabe propaganda. NGOs were behind this campaign. Eventually, when all enabling technology was impounded, the people still had to start afresh.

Zimbabwe: Changing patterns in online participation

While Internet access in Zimbabwe is significantly more limited than in the rest of the developed world, Zimbabweans have been on the forefront of online participation. Several factors contribute to this digital explosion. The Zimbabwean Diaspora, the majority of whom claim to be victims of alleged political oppression back home, has over the last 10 years played a central role in the exponential growth of online presence in Zimbabwe. Online newspapers and blogs dedicated to providing news and commentary about Zimbabwe's political and social problems have dominated the Web over the last decade. Websites, including *Newzimbabwe.com*, *thezimbabwean.co.uk* and *Zimdaily.com* have given Zimbabweans an unlikely podium to read, debate, criticise and, through active forums and blogs, even suggest ways to solve the problems they face. (Mutsvairo, 2013). In fact, "community

stations and individuals print out stories from these websites for friends and family, thereby providing information to those without access to newspapers," posits Zimbabwean journalist Nyaira (2009, p. 24). *The Zimbabwean*, which unlike other web-based Diasporic newspaper, also publishes print copies for its readers in Zimbabwe and uses untrained professionals for the bulk of its content, as acknowledged by its editor Wilf Mbanga, "Zimbabweans love to tell stories. The Zimbabwean receives more than its fair share of its news in this way; today, reports received from nonjournalists in Zimbabwe is perhaps the main source of the information contained in our columns" (Mbanga, 2008). But if "Letters to the editor" section already existed in Zimbabwean newspapers long before they went online, another reason to believe participatory journalism is not a new concept. Villagers in Murewa, despite abstaining from calling themselves "journalists", could also be considered citizen journalists because they do not need a trained journalist from Harare or anywhere else to tell them what is news. They determine what is news on their own and literally deliver and systematically share news among each other in their communities on a daily basis. Hence the notion that "everyone is a reporter."

According to Moyo (2011, p.10), Zimbabweans are no longer "helplessly bombarded with messages by mass media: they are actively producing news and initiating news flows among themselves". Standalone sites dedicated to unedited blogging are another form of participatory journalism, as suggested by Outing (2005, May 31). *LivinginZimbabwe.com* is one such site. It says it is "open to content submissions on anything to do with Zimbabwe" ("About", n.d.). Furthermore, 3Gmedia, a Diaspora-based company that publishes seven online newspapers dedicated to Zimbabwean news including *Zimdaily.com*, unveiled its citizen journalism program in July 2009, claiming it would offer "accurate, unfiltered news."[1] Using what it calls "e-activism," *Kubatana.net* has made use of Western funding to provide a platform where Zimbabweans are encouraged to lobby and mobilize (mostly politically engaged) initiatives through the use the information communication technologies (ICTs). The majority of people in the rural areas have not heard about it. In the three Murewa villages sampled for this research, several people owned pre-paid mobile phones, which they called "receivers," meaning they mostly waited for someone to call them other than vice-versa. It is generally expensive for them to top-up credit available at USD 1 each during the 2011 trip. They have other priorities such as buying basic food for their families. The only way they are exposed to mass media from Harare

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[1] "3MG launches Citizenship Journalism Programme" 22 July 2009
http://gmricapital.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=103
Accessed 6 October 2011

and internationally is when they listen to the radio (one in 10 families owned a radio set) or*SW Radio Africa*'s free SMS news campaigns Villagers acknowledged benefiting from the campaign launched in December 2006 by the London-based radio station, which sent headlines of its largely anti-Mugabe news packages to subscribed telephone numbers in Zimbabwe. Zimbabweans mostly in the Diaspora were free to send an email to the radio station containing the phone numbers of relatives and friends whom they wished to receive the news.

Conclusion

In the common understanding that new media has revolutionized the process of producing and sharing content, unsubstantiated claims have emerged, attributing citizen journalism to increased democratic participation. This chapter has argued that while the potential of citizen journalism to democratize the political space cannot be underestimated, participatory journalism is a misunderstood concept. New technologies have indeed helped activists build up their case against tyranny. However, technology only plays an enabling role. While the technological use of social media can relatively be considered a new concept, there certainly is nothing new about citizen participation in community affairs. Citizens will always participate in issues that affect their communities and even though they may find citizen journalism an interesting platform, they may as well do without it. Consequently despite being a relatively new concept, citizen journalism may need to be redefined. The paper has also shown different viewpoints on what constitute news under participatory journalism. Besides, rural folk in Murewa has also shown that access to technology is not a key requirement to participating in community engagements.

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