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INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL MEDIA, NEW ORDER?

Victor Ayedun-Aluma

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL MEDIA, NEW ORDER?

Victor Ayedun-Aluma

How may the Nigerian media environment be characterized? The African Media Barometer (AMB) project has addressed and published reports on this question, among others, “every three to four years” since 2005. Using three broad descriptors, namely: diversity, independence and sustainability, the AMB Nigeria 2015 report provides a nuanced characterization of the Nigerian media environment. Using the report as a point of departure, the Nigerian media environment may be described as **diverse** to the extent that all categories of media – indigenous, modern and postmodern – are represented. They include newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, recorded music, books, feature films and video, digital online media and indigenous media (such as festivals). Ownership types include federal and state governments, commercial firms, community organizations, universities and foreign-owned media. However it harbors contra-diversity forces to the extent that: governments use the power of advertisement patronage to control the editorial content of media; national ICT and media policies “lack coherence”; ethnic and religious minorities are not adequately represented; legal and regulatory regimes do not adequately prevent the occurrence of media concentration and monopolies; and the process of licensing does not promote the transparency of media ownership.

Further, the Nigerian media environment may be categorized as **independent** to the extent that: the media system covers all issues and does not recognize any “no-go” areas; media industry-wide associations make efforts to promote professional codes of conduct/practice,

while individual media companies make efforts to enforce their professional codes of conduct/practice; media professional associations and trade unions are active in protecting and promoting the interests of media professionals; journalists (especially those in the private media) are reputed to not practice self-censorship. However the Nigerian media environment harbors the forces that promote a dependent media system to the extent that: the operations of media organs owned by the state governments are generally subject to state intervention; media (especially broadcast media) regulatory institutions are subject to governmental influence through their legal status as well as methods of appointment of their membership; the subventions to state broadcast media organizations have been significantly reduced, thus opening up 'new' influences from private sector advertisers; some media professionals (especially journalists) are reputed to be corrupt and to engage in unprofessional conduct for financial gain; the Nigerian constitution recognizes the role of the media in ensuring good governance, but does not provide specific protection for media freedoms beyond the freedom of speech granted to every citizen.

The media environment is **sustainable** to the extent that: the Nigerian constitution assigns a function to the press/media; the Freedom of Information Act (2011) protects the citizen's right to know and guarantees access to public records and information; the advertising market required for media support is large and growing; the growth of digital/new media component of the media environment is supported by Nigeria's youthful demographic profile and currently benign legislative posture to digital/online media. But threats to sustainability exist in the fact that: there is resistance to compliance with the Freedom of Information Act, particularly at the level of state governments; the process of media legislation generally lacks extensive and inclusive consultation; and, the structure and process of the advertising market required for media support is generally neither adequately diverse nor robust.

In the plural media environment outlined above, the digital component includes the Internet (accessed through computer and mobile platforms), digital satellite broadcasting (through pay-TV), digital terrestrial television (through “embryonic” free-to-air TV), and mobile television (using DVB-H). The plurality is marked not only by the traditional “mass” media entities (such as newspapers) being represented online, but also by new (hitherto marginal) ethnic, religious, sexual and other minorities asserting their voices through websites, blogs, mailing lists and chat groups. These digital technologies (especially social networking sites such as Facebook and Nairaland) have also opened new channels of conversation between political leaders and their followers as well as forums for impassioned political exchanges among networked Nigerian citizens at home and abroad.

Between 2000 and 2016, Internet use has witnessed an “explosion” in growth. According to figures available on *Internet Live Stats*, the (estimated) Internet penetration was 46.1% as at 2016, up from 0.1% in 2000. In other words, over a space of fifteen to sixteen years, the proportion of the Nigerian population that had access to the Internet on any type of device

through any type of connection increased from one in one thousand to about 461 in one thousand. It is significant however that this growth has been concentrated in less than one-fifth of Nigeria's geographical area and even then urban areas have had most of the growth, leaving rural areas with very little growth.

While it might be early days yet for a thoroughgoing assessment of the impact of the “boom” in Nigeria's digital media on the larger media environment, some factors are clearly having a speeding up or slowing down influence on the rate of the digital expansion. These factors include: the regulatory disjunction between the Nigerian Communication Commission and the National Broadcasting Commission; the domination of the broadcast media landscape by government-owned broadcasters that might be more responsive to the dictates of political elites than the demands of a mass market; the intolerance of government officials to the operations of an independent media; the speed (indeed agility) in information-gathering and sharing afforded by Internet and mobile platforms; the politicization of spectrum allocation and opacity of medium ownership; the strengthening of competition in the media markets through the entrance of private sector participants, particularly in digital satellite broadcasting and in mobile telephony; and, inadequate levels of access due to the unaffordable cost of digital equipment and facilities, particularly in rural areas.

To what extent then is the rise of the digital media precipitating significant changes in the communication and social order in Nigeria? A major strand in the study of communication and society is that changes in the technology of communication somehow are accompanied by changes in the structure and practice of social organization. In other words, innovations in the technical mode of communication come with their concomitant innovations in social practice. The reason for this association as well as its nature and ways of occurrence are the subject of many investigations and theorizations.

Historians of the relationship between communication technology and social practices, point out five moments of change in the story of communication technology. First is the emergence of the technology of speech. Second is the emergence of the technology of writing. Third is the emergence of the technology of printing. Fourth is the emergence of the technology of analog electronic communication (broadcast and non-broadcast). And fifth is the emergence of the technology of digital in particular, networked electronic communication. Each of these moments of change it is claimed had (rather, has) its concomitant range of social practices.

In Poe's (2011) admirably lucid account, changes in communication technology are a cause of changes in social practice. This happens by means of the interaction between properties of the technology of communication and properties of the social formation. The properties of the social formation are of two broad kinds, namely: human nature (i.e. those things we are genetically wired to do as humans) and material-historical conditions (i.e. the nexus of

political, economic, social and cultural circumstances in which we exist).

An important intermediate phenomenon between communication technology and social formation is the communication (or media) network. The network is a product of the communication technology; and its properties reflect those of the communication technology. In conjunction with the two categories of social formation, the properties of the media network determine the ways in which technology impacts society. The impact tends to be manifested as emergent social practices and values. The fascinating details of Poe's account (which are based on Harold Innis' theories) need not detain us here. Rather, the key proposition is that changes in communication technology tend to result in the emergence of new social practices and values.

In this book, arguments and evidence are advanced in support of the proposition that new media may be resulting in new practices and values in the Nigerian media environment an environment characterized by systemic weaknesses of political institutions and of welfare services. The new media having that effect include the Internet, accessed largely through mobile media. The communication networks being created include online communities whose members enjoy the license of anonymity. The locus of emergent practices and values are to be sought and found among professional and amateur media producers as well as media audiences (and publics).

In Chapter 1, Adeniran & Atofojomo locate the site of new practices (resulting from the introduction of new media technologies) on the pages of leading Nigerian newspapers. They find that new columns in *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust* have been created to feature selected content from the Internet. In this innovation, the “columnist” is a communication technology the Internet (more accurately, Web pages) rather than the traditional individual pundit.

In line with Chapter 1, Azeez, Lamidi & Doghuje in Chapter 3 find new practices in journalists' use of new communication technologies for newsgathering and production. They go beyond the impact of new technologies on media producers to locate new practices among media audiences. Azeez, Lamidi & Doghuje report that the media audiences they studied are accessing news in novel ways using new media technologies and developing new habits of news consumption in response to the properties of the new media. Olona & Odesanya in Chapter 7 identify a high level of correlation between the content of selected online newspapers and the views of their readers with regard to Nigeria's 8th National Assembly. Thus, they provide evidence for the operation of the “traditional” agenda setting theory in the new context of online newspapers.

Chapters 2 and 8 explore new practices among the audiences of new media. Nababa & Ya'u in Chapter 2 investigate the use of social networking sites for sharing disaster-related

information among youth audiences. They find that among the sampled Nigerian youth the preferred source of information about the disastrous floods of 2012 were social networking sites. Does this finding suggest an emergent shift in practices of media consumption, particularly among the youth?

In Chapter 8, Jibril & Simon analyze readers' comments, on selected online newspapers, about a network radio and television broadcast of President Muhammadu Buhari's maiden media chat. They report the predominance of the attack mode (including abusive language and hate speech) in the sampled online readers' comments and, in this nest of communication technologies, suggest that the new media might be the factor enabling such speech. Indeed might this finding (of a predominantly attack mode of speech in the public sphere) not be plausibly attributed to the privacy afforded by the new media?

Maikaba in Chapter 4 documents novel practices in journalism and mass communication education that are attributable to the use of new media. These practices include the use of search engines and Web 2.0-based document (including slide and video) hosting and social networking services to source new learning materials and to manage instructor-student interactions.

Fayoyin (Chapter 10) records and critiques the use of social media in “achieving developmental and public health outcomes” in Africa. He demonstrates (through a critical evaluation of several case studies) the fact that the field of development intervention is indeed active in the *innovative* use of new communication technologies, but cautions that adequate attention needs to be given to the *effective* use of these technologies. In a similar vein, Owolabi (Chapter 9) argues for the increased adoption and use of new media as change agents in poverty reduction projects, having highlighted the limitations of mass media industries in playing that role.

Finally, Sanda (Chapter 5) and Ya'u (Chapter 6) analyze two important aspects of the circumstances of digital media in Nigeria. Sanda dwells on the ethics of journalism practices aimed at protecting national security and building peace, while Ya'u describes journalists' perceptions of national security in Nigeria. These two authors provide an evaluation of the beliefs and practices of a group of communication professionals that are rightly considered as crucial in translating the potential of new communication technologies into auspicious social practices and values.

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