Original Paper

Journalism and Convergence

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Abstract

The internet's influence on the production and consumption of news has brought about revolutionary changes in the field of journalism. The people previously known as the "audiences" are now actively involved in creating and disseminating news via online news sites and websites. This increase in players has both positive and negative consequences for democracy.

This paper provides an overview of the positive and negative changes that have come about due to convergence. Through an observation of what is happening on various online sites and journalists' everyday experiences, the paper offers an analysis of the impact globally. On a positive side, for example, citizens are engaging in conversations online with journalists and also with each other on various social platforms on issues that matter to them. The internet is applauded for promoting the number of voices online and freedom of expression. On a negative side, citizens bemoan the rise in fake news and disinformation which is harmful for democracy and is discrediting journalism. Journalism is fundamental as it influences society's worldview. It thus becomes paramount for media houses and society to be more digital literate so as to distinguish between "real" and "fake" news in order to make more informed decisions.

Keywords

online journalism, convergence, democracy, social media, fake news, media ethics

1. Introduction

The field of journalism is undergoing tremendous change due to convergence of media technologies. From sub Saharan Africa to Europe and the United States, news boundaries have been broken as events take on a transnational shape. The evolution of the fixed deadline into a continuous one now guides journalists as events are updated 24/7 online. The abundance of information online comes with its own negatives and positives for citizens, media organisations and democracy.

2. Method

2.1 Observation of Online News Sites

This paper offers an overview of the positive and negative changes that have come about due to convergence, the integration of print, broadcast and internet while posing some questions. Convergence impacts on how citizens and media organizations create, consume and disseminate information. This paper was produced based on observation of what is happening on various online news sites and social media and journalists' everyday experiences.

3. Result

Social media has become integral in journalists' everyday work altering the ways in which they gather news, link with their sources and publish their stories (Heinrich, 2011). Reporters get news ideas from profiles of prominent people. From Facebook to Twitter, Instagram to Snapchat, Flickr to Delicious and Reddit among other social networking platforms including blogs, the web is flooded with a multiplicity of perspectives which journalists use to give their stories context. The "personal" and sensational thus dominate the news space, as the private and public co-exist online (Papacharissi, 2002).

The decentralization of the internet, non-linearity in information production and flow, the plurality of information are some of the advantages of the internet on communication (McNair, 2009). Media organizations across the world compete to want to be the first ones to break a story. "Stories break at the speed of light, circling the globe instantly via the internet" thus overcoming space and time constraints (Pavlik, 2000, p. 231). Events are consumed online in real time, in video, audio and text. However, ethical principles such as verification, accuracy and truth are brought into question as the notion of what is news has become problematic (Mutsvairo, 2016).

Events are experienced in real time giving editors a little opportunity for gatekeeping (Otufodunrin, 2017) which can be advantageous to citizens who are exposed to a wide range of voices and information. Mainstream media are flooded with triviality and gossip and very little analytical stories on politics and the economy (Gant, 2007). Questions about the role of the media in a democratic society are being asked as society is looking for truth in order to make important decisions about their lives.

4. Discussion

Pessimists decry a situation in which "fake news", trivialities and gossip are dominating online, which they say has detrimental effects to democratic processes. They argue how in the abundance of information, people are less informed and thereby unable to make more informed decisions about their future.

On the other hand, optimists celebrate the internet and social media in extending the platform for participation especially by people whose voices were marginalized on mainstream media such as "opposition" voices, women, gays among others what Fraser (1992) refers to as co-existing publics or counter-publics. As (Moyo, 2011, p. 1) argues, "digitization has occasioned new counter-hegemonic spaces and new forms of journalism that are deinstitutionalized and deprofessionalised, and whose radicalism is reflected in both form and content". For example, more hashtag movements are seen on social media when these social groups freely express themselves and confront their abusers. The "text messaging generation" which brought down Estrada in the Phillipines is being witnessed globally (Shirky, 2011). For example in 2014, society witnessed the #bringbackourgirls campaign. The #metoo and #menaretrash are examples of online movements of 2018 that gained a lot of support offline. The issue of how much success they brought is however debatable. These "new" watchdogs of society have come about due to the internet which extends the platform. More scandals, theft, and corruption by public officials and people in the lower echelons of society are being exposed. Personal gadgets such as smartphones and tablets are dominated by user-generated content through various news websites that have mushroomed and some of them include "fake news".

With the rise of fake news, the more the call for verification of information is being made to those in the business of producing and disseminating information for journalistic purposes. But more so to people previously called the audiences in order to ascertain the authenticity of such information. The journalistic space has now more players and there has never been a time in history when there was so much information surrounding us. Audiences, who for a long time, just consumed news have become active players in the news production process (Fancher, 2009; Ludtke, 2009; Mutsvairo, 2016). But more importantly citizens are looking for truth and this brings emphasis on the ethical principles that have and continue to guide professional journalism and also rendering it respectable.

It is no longer enough for journalists to know how to craft stories only. The 21st century journalist has to be able to do more including taking pictures, recording videos and being able to edit them and tell stories in the most engaging ways in order to take advantage of multimodality. Journalists have to be more experienced, knowledgeable on top of acquiring new skills as stories are being done in concert with citizens (Otufodunrin, 2017; Fancher, 2009). Journalists should be able to fact check stories and distinguish themselves from the inexperienced, untrained individuals who engage in journalism. More people prefer entertainment than being informed (Gant, 2007). Can we safely say that we are at the

height of a new democratic dispensation? Is the internet extending the space for participation? Questions of access, inequality and power still remain central in Africa as some people still do not have access to mobile phones and the internet (Mudhai et al., 2009). What kind of democracy is it where governments move onto online platforms to control the internet? Some even go to the extent of shutting down the internet totally in order to cut off communication with the international world when there are protests and unrest. On the other side, the same head of states and government officials set up Facebook and Twitter accounts in order to engage citizens directly on issues that affect them in various parts of the world. The story goes on and on.

What then is the future of the news media? What measures should media organizations put in place in order to safeguard the credibility of journalism? There is a pressing need for society to be more digital literate in order to consume news online more critically. Media organizations and journalists need to strengthen their ethical policies when it comes to doing journalism online and invest in fact checking. Journalists need to realize that society looks up to them to sift "real" from "fake" news and not participate in the sharing and liking of stories whose origins are unknown so as to provide society with credible information.

Acknowledgement

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