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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND ADVERTISING PRACTICE IN AN ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Anthony Ogbonna UCHE PhD. & Adanma Vivian OBIORA, PhD

Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Offa, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author Email: anthonyouche@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The It is common knowledge that we are steeped in a digital era where content consumers have also become producers. It has therefore become increasingly challenging to strictly adhere to ethical practices by citizen journalists who flood social media platforms with advertisements in burgeoning proportion. These citizen journalists often act as though in competition among themselves as they engage in weird practices just to drive traffic, and generate more comments, likes, and revenue for themselves. This study, which leans on the Democratic Participant theory, explores social media and the practice of advertising vis-à-vis ethical practice by citizen journalists in Nigeria. The study design is conceptual and adopts a library research methodological approach. Findings indicate that although the Nigerian advertising regulatory body is saddled with the responsibility of overseeing both online and offline advertisement, advertising activities of citizen journalists on social media platforms remain a challenge to ethical practice. The study, therefore, recommends a consistent interface between the regulatory body and citizen journalists for information sharing and enlightenment on ethical practice in the online space.

KEYWORDS

Citizen Journalism, Advertising, Social Media, Digital Era, Journalism Ethics

Introduction

The world is dynamic. The activities of citizens are also dynamic. There is hardly any static or unchanging phenomenon. This is why it is often said that the only constancy is change. The old is always giving way to the new. In the past, the means of information dissemination and consumption is via the traditional mode. The development led to the institution of modern means of communication. This involves a technological interface. Arising there-from is mass communication which ensures that scattered and diversified heterogeneous audience receives the same message transmitted

through the mass media simultaneously. The mass media refers to the print and broadcast outlets such as newspapers, magazines and books on one hand and television, radio and cinema on the other. These conventional means of communication are now referred to as the old media. This description is occasioned by the inception of the internet which has given rise to what is now described as the new media. Within the gamut of the new media is the social media.

Advertising practice in the past was also performed by certified advertising agencies and practitioners who as required by law must

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comply with ethical practice guiding the profession. Dunu, Uche, Ojiakor and Obiora (2017) aver that the usual media of advertising have undergone tremendous changes as television, radio, newspapers and magazines are no longer the exclusive platforms for relaying advertising messages. New media has entered the advertising scene and as such has begun to get and gain its fair share of the 'advertising cake' thus indicating the liberalization of the advertising landscape.

It is also true that citizen journalism, which is a journalistic practice that is open to all with the ability to operate mobile devices without the requisite qualifications, has become common in Nigeria. Adults, youths especially students and young graduates are often engaged in information packaging and distribution. Unlike what was obtained before the era of new media, content creation and dissemination were the exclusive preserve of media outlets such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines. Those outside the media are mainly content consumers. Not anymore! No thanks to citizen journalism. The citizen journalists' activities are carried out across different new media cum social media platforms such as X.com, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok among others. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the activities of citizen journalists across social media platforms especially as they relate to advertising practice.

Statement of the Problem

In a world surrounded by new media technologies, there has become a perceptible paradigm shift in human activities including relationships and business operations. Social media seems to be calling the shot in almost every area of human endeavor. It is no respecter of persons. It welcomes all and discriminates against none except those lacking the skills requisite for its operation. This feature of openness and liberal concepts upon which social media operates has its challenges. These challenges are often human-threatening. This has been adduced to be responsible for heightened insecurity, fraud, spam and several online vices that have plagued and still plague our modern society (Uche, Ebeze, & Obiora, 2016; Uche, et al 2017a, Uche & Obiora, 2022).

There is a palpable fear that if the activities of social media operators especially citizen journalists are not regulated, society may be heading towards Golgotha. In the field of advertising, activities are rife in social media that are quite disturbing to discerning minds. With new technologies such as Photoshop and Corel Draw, passing off, piracy and invasion of privacy have become increasingly common. Other vile activities found in the social media platforms that are purportedly perpetrated by citizen journalists include nudity, the embedding of pornographic clips within advertisement for the sale of sex-enhancing drugs, shape and beauty products, wealth-creating programmes including Ponzi schemes, cross-dressing, gender transformations and body parts enhancement programmes. These acts are done with reckless abandon to the chagrin of the public and the consternation of media and advertising regulators. Media practice entails the observance of ethics since the practitioner owes certain moral obligations to society (Okoye, 2010). Nonetheless, those engaged in citizen journalism often jettison such obligations.

Objective of the Study

This study is concerned with the incidence of citizen journalism and advertising practice in a social media era. It explores the activities of citizen journalists in relation to ethical conduct in advertising via social media platforms.

Conceptual Review

Citizen Journalism

In a globalized world of digital media, information is no longer left to only professionals (Uche & Chukwuemeka, 2022). Every individual anywhere can have a say with the aid of an internet-enabled device. Citizen journalism is an all-comers interactive and participatory journalistic practice. Most people who engage in the practice have little or no journalistic training and qualifications. What is often needed is the ability to use a mobile device such as a smartphone, iPad or laptop computer. These are the reasons why Uche, Nwabudike and Anho (2017) posit that citizen journalism is making steady progress in the "comity of Journalism." Citizen journalism is therefore the unregulated journalism practice by untrained individuals in the society whose centre of operation is the new media.

It is a practice that welcomes all individuals irrespective of tribe, talent, training or taste in the news gathering and dissemination process either as a pastime or business. Citizen journalists are untrained people who use their internet-enabled devices like smartphones to send information whenever they want and how they want, both within and beyond their immediate geographic space (Uche & Chukwuemeka, 2022).

Citizen journalism has varied descriptions and appellations such as participatory journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003); journalism of the people (Salawu, 2013); we journalism (Dare, 2011) and all-comers journalism (Uche & Chukwuemeka, 2022). Citizen journalism has also been described as a situation whereby individuals play a major role in the process of news gathering, reporting, analysis and information dissemination (Onyebuchi, 2010; Anorue, Obayi & Onyebuchi, 2013).

Social Media and its Characteristics

Certain characteristics differentiate social media from other kinds of media such as traditional media. Some of these include participatory; it permits the involvement of the audience in message creation, rather than condemning them to the role of passive consumers. The audience aside from content consumption gets into the creation of content. This empowerment courtesy of social media confers on the audience the right to be heard too thereby leading to information production and dissemination liberalization. It is flexible; this means that messages are relayed through social media without passing through the rigours of elaborate packaging and the attendant waste of time and resources associated with traditional media. Thus, the mechanical rigidity associated with information creation and dissemination that characterises traditional media is not found in social media. Nigerians who possess basic computer and internet knowledge today leverage it to make their feelings and ideas known by contributing to blog sites. These social media savvy individuals often upload their photos, change profiles, chat and do a whole of things, because of the flexibility of

social media platforms. There is affordability associated with social media in terms of message production and dissemination. This feature of affordability lends credence to its popularity and patronage across different demographics including students. Social media is decentralized; it can be said to be the media of the people by the people and for the people. It is not elitist. It is not discriminatory. The control and management are with the masses and not with a particular proprietor or authority. None can monopolize, strangle or centralise its content creation features. It is amenable to a multiplicity of applications and tools coupled with mass participation in content creation. In social media, decentralization is the norm rather than the exception (Uche & Obiora, 2016). Social media's popularity is occasioned by the following reasons as specified by Virtual social media (2010):

- ✓ They are interactive in nature and user-friendly
- ✓ They have much-customised options
- ✓ Online place where you can do what you want
- ✓ Have a wide reach and a huge amount of traffic daily
- ✓ Provide so many facilities, writing, sharing, uploading, linking, networking and commenting
- ✓ Provide a lot of fun and entertainment
- ✓ Option of developing a unique page for business or personal interest. If someone likes your post, picture or link then he/she forwards it and informs friends and other relatives.

Advertising Practice in a Social Media Environment

Mobile screen is now the basic screen for citizen journalists and not a TV screen. Their primary dictionary and personal assistant is Google. With the various goals of social media which include the building of brand awareness, community, extension of customer service, reputation management and brand engagement, most businesses now rely on online advertising, especially on social media.

The Doing Business Magazine, FinIntell, posits that marketers and their clients in Nigeria are now more informed about the need for online advertising and its effects. Ad agencies no longer rely on traditional means of advertising. They educate their clients on the need to carry out advertising campaigns across social media platforms (FinIntell in Dunu et al, 2016). Digital marketing platforms are increasingly available just as there is a change in media consumption. There is rapid growth of online consumers as many first interface with communities on social media before deciding what to buy and from what outlet. It is also noted that there is a measure of control in the online environment (Dabiri, 2015). There is the possibility of determining who is engaging with ad placement even in real time. It is equally obvious that more advertisers are opting for social media platforms. This is seen as better than other advertising options which might not be sustainable over a longer period.

The New Advertising Regulatory Agency

There is a new regulatory agency for advertising practice in Nigeria. This is known as the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) which came into existence with the signing into law of the ARCON Act, 2022 and the repeal of the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) Act, Cap. A7, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004. ARCON's responsibility spans the entire spectrum of advertising practice in Nigeria including social media advertising. Advertising is defined inter alia:

Advertisement means a notice, announcement, exposure, publication, broadcast, statement, infomercial, commercial, hype, display, town cry, show, event, logo, payoff, or trademark to promote, advocate, solicit, showcase, endorse, vote or support a product, service, cause, idea, person or organization with the intention to influence, sway, actuate, impress, arouse, patronize, entice or attract a person, people or organization by an identified sponsor irrespective of media, medium or platform;

Advertisement means any act, action, activity, construct, or undertaking directly, or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, aimed at creating, planning, strategizing, managing, developing, producing, propagating, servicing, or facilitating an advertisement, brand or marketing communications ideas (The ARCON Act, 2022).

Under section 52, is the Advertising Standards Panel (ASP). The Panel is empowered to vet all advertisements before they are exposed to the media. No advertisement ideally is to be exposed by the media unless it has been vetted and approved by the Advertising Standards Panel (ARCON, 2022). This means that every manner of advertising whether online or offline. Nevertheless, the compliance rate is still an issue to be determined.

Comparative Analysis of Actors and Actions in the Media

In the old media, the major players were trained practitioners. These practitioners were mainly professionals such as journalists, broadcasters, advertising copywriters, public relations officers and managers, certified marketers, photographers, video camera operators, photojournalists, sound engineers, graphic artists etcetera. These acted conscientiously, bearing in mind the ethics of their respective callings, programmes and activities. With the widening of the operational space coupled with the concomitant liberalization and democratization of journalistic functions; several untrained individuals have flooded the field of media and advertising practice. This new set of individuals is not keen on operational ethics and etiquette. This is the group within which citizen journalism falls into. Citizen journalism practitioners are very adept with mobile devices. They are upwardly mobile and dexterously savvy. Their whole world revolves around the new media landscape. They are constantly in touch with happenings across the new media platform, especially social media. They are social media obsessed. They seem to not distinguish between private and public life. Their daily activities and happenstances in and around them are recorded and disseminated with reckless abandon. They live and breathe a new lease of life via social media. They are often described as social media mavens, social

media influencers and social media experts. They are daily and constantly uploading pictures, and news items, including fake and unverified posts, some even have blogs where they keep tabs on by uploading and disseminating several items to build a strong and large followership. The extent of traffic they can drive invariably determines the gain they stand to make through advertising contracts. The adverts they allow and even create are often unregulated and uncertified by regulatory authorities and agencies such as the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON). They often do not belong to any known professional body: NUJ, NAWOJ, RATTAWU, NGE, etc. This therefore makes it even difficult to know actually who they are, where they operate from, regulate their activities or hold them accountable.

Citizen Journalism and Ethical Issues

The advent of new media technologies such as social networking: X.com, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Blogs, etc, has given everyday citizens the overall accessibility to information vis-à-vis the ability to disseminate information globally, a power which was once reserved for large media corporations. With the explosion of information in the new media as predicted by Marshall McLuhan, there seems to be a lack of control in the messages people give out or receive. The use of digital devices has made access to these messages a lot easier, which makes almost everyone a media creator, owner and actor instead of a passive user (Ezeibe & Nwagwu, 2009 cited in Talabi, 2011). Citizen journalism sometimes threatens to destroy the circulation of factual news, by spreading incorrect, misleading information and opinion rather than truth thereby posing security threat to the corporate existence of any nation.

Adhering to laws and ethics guiding the media practice has been noted to be of immense benefit towards gaining audience trust (Adeyemi, 2013) and as such the application of media laws cannot be over-emphasized. As a result of the delicate nature of information, it is pertinent for the providers of information to be regulated. Media audiences sometimes are keen to have factual information and tend to verify sources of information they see online.

The existence of laws and ethics guiding journalism practice enables practitioners to be abreast of rightful or wrongful actions and inactions that could enhance or jeopardize professional journalism practice (Nwanne, 2011). To citizen journalists, such is not the case. There is more or less no professionalism involved in citizen journalism.

El Semaary and Al Khaja (2013) noted that young people are sceptical about information that comes through social networks thus, raising issues concerning the safety of citizens swallowing news emanating from citizen journalists hook, line and sinker. According to Nwamah (2017), the media must be regulated owing to its delicate nature. A media void of ethics is a media without identity, bewildered and unbridled, and a chaotic field to disseminate unfounded news (Motamednejad, 2000) cited in (Babran & Ahadzadeh, 2010). In a similar development, Uche, et al. (2017a) argue that owing largely to the unregulated nature of citizen journalism, citizens' rights could be jettisoned, and truth compromised while the rights of individuals become threatened, compromised and sometimes outrightly flouted and trampled in the mud.

Theoretical Framework

For this paper, the Democratic participant theory is explored to build a framework for this study. The democratic-participant theory came to fill a vacuum created by the monopolistic control of the mass media content by political and commercial interests. Ojobor (2002) posits that the theory arose mainly as a reaction against other theories and actual experiences and represents a positive move towards new forms of media institutions. There is in this theory a desire for horizontal rather than Vertical (top-down) communication. The stimulus for democratic-participant theory has been the reaction against commercialization and monopolization of privately owned media or monopoly journalism, centralism and bureaucratization of public broadcasting institutions.

McQuail (1987, p.123) identifies the principles of this theory:

Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media (right to communicate) and rights to be served by media according to their determination of need.

The organization and content of media should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control.

Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for media organizations, professionals or clients of the media.

Groups, organisations and local communities should have their own media.

Small-scale, interactive and participative media forms are better than large-scale, one-way, professionalized media.

Certain social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands, nor through the state and its major institutions. Communication is too important to be left to professionals.

Citizen journalism which is more or less domiciled in social media by its very nature fits into the conceptual framework represented by democratic-participant theories. This is because social media accommodates popular participants, and negates elitism, politicisation, commercialisation and bureaucratisation that characterise the traditional media (Uche & Obiora, 2016).

Methodology

The design of this study is qualitative. It gathered data from both online and offline secondary sources through an in-depth literature review of works that revolved around citizen journalism, social media and advertising practice.

Discussion of Findings

The literature has revealed that the operators cum actors in the media both old and new are of different bents. Whereas the former were mainly trained professionals who were concerned with ethical conduct, the latter were mostly untrained yet internet savvy and more

daring (Uche, Ebeze & Obiora, 2016). The former actors had verified and verifiable institutional affiliation which is often lacking in the new operators (citizen journalists) who often hide behind the online wall of anonymity and non-affiliation.

Citizen journalism exposes what has been shrouded in secrecy and often attempts to break the wall of privacy through leaks and whistle-blowing. Private and intimate life and affairs of high-profile individuals in the society are most times thrown open on social media. Such leaks often go viral with untold implications for the victims such as emotional trauma, public disdain and opprobrium, condemnation, stigmatization, dehumanization and demonization.

In advertising practice, instances of ethical breaches are noted to be rife in social media platforms. Some unregulated products are advertised, nudity displayed and soft porn surfaces in some of these social media outlets as a result of the activities of citizen journalists.

Summary/Conclusion

There is no doubt that citizen journalists have played a crucial role in the news media, stepping in for professional journalists in their absence to capture and distribute news material during major global events. Nonetheless, citizen journalists are untrained, with little or no knowledge of journalistic ethics and principle of accountability; they are therefore at risk of using unreliable sources and publishing incorrect or nonfactual news or even reporting events in unacceptable style or form. This scenario constitutes a major threat to peaceful co-existence and national security.

The above notwithstanding, Merrill and Lowenstein in Uche et al (2021) posit that journalism ethics is primarily personal for individual journalists and must be internalized within the journalist for it to be meaningful. Therefore, it is arguably impossible for a citizen journalist who is not trained as a professional journalist to internalize the professional ethics of journalism. This is because citizen journalists as outsiders from the environment of journalism cannot be acquainted with the media process, its laws and ethical codes that govern the practice. This lack of ethical knowledge and professional conduct often results in a disservice to nationhood.

Recommendations

Arising from this paper are the following recommendations:

- ✓ Nigeria media organizations should organize training and enlightenment programmes for citizen journalists across all media platforms.
- ✓ Bloggers' activities should also be evaluated by media regulatory agencies to ensure compliance with media laws and ethics.
- ✓ Citizen journalists should also become gatekeepers and watchdogs on their own bearing in mind that any security breach has implications both for them as citizens and the generality of the polity and not just for the government of the day.

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