

***New media and its effects on journalism and media development,  
including Citizen Journalism***

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**8 September 2008**

**Delivered to AFRICAN FORUM FOR MEDIA DEVELOPMENT**

**Building Capacity for Media Development  
Grahamstown, South Africa, September 7-8, 2008**

Some say media development is a process. Some say, it is an end in itself. Others say it is a goal to achieve other ends such as development, nationalism, public diplomacy and democratisation. It is not my object to discuss “media development” in depth in the context of a 15 minute presentation.

Suffice to say, that how one understands “media development” – and there are probably many different understandings of it in this very room – will color the strategic choices made when rolling out programmes to achieve it – such as support for new media.

Worldwide, the practice of media development has most often been associated with interventions (deliberate steps) involving and impacting on *journalism*. Here, I understand journalism to be the ‘professional’ practice of gathering, organising and analysing information concerning contemporary events and issues in the public interest by independent persons or associations in order to represent these as “realist communication” in mass media (Berger 2000). Indicators of media development the goal of various activities which may take the form of journalism education, direct commodity, technical or financial support to news institutions, efforts to aid media law reform and train media

lawyers, support for professional journalism and broadcasting institutions, support for developing financial sustainability of media outlets, building or rebuilding infrastructure for media, initiatives designed to transcend national, religious and ethnic barriers in the media, competitions, awards and others (Price et al 2002:2; Kumar 2004:1; Howard 2003:15).

However, the idea of media development needs to be (and is) employed more widely than just the scope of journalism. Very often media development considers the way that “media”, more particularly the mass media (newspapers, television, community radio) acts as a carrier of signs to “multi-point destinations” across time and space (Berger 2001: 4).

‘New media’ is a relatively young category which includes an technologies, platforms, outputs and practices that are rapidly transforming to adapt to the potential and challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs). New media generally employ digital technologies for the production, distribution and use of content on any number of platforms (mainly though not exclusively limited to the World Wide Web). The new media permit interactive experiences with its texts, new representational possibilities, prospects for use, reception and (re)creation of media, identity formation and the blurring of boundaries between genres like news and entertainment among other things (Lister et al 2002).

Whereas the mass media model based on proprietary technologies, closed communication systems and gatekeeping, the new media are most often based on open source technologies, collaborative communication systems and gatewatching – not to the exclusion of the above.

‘New media’ challenge media assistance assumptions by introducing ruptures within the old media continuum, while offering both opportunities for continuities and reform in the media development project. NICTs underpin the emergence of ‘new media’ which possess characteristics that provide opportunities for continuities and ruptures with old media. ‘New media’ is a relative concept or category with very real consequences for traditional media, models and thinking (Lister et al 2002).

Every traditional medium (radio, TV, newspapers) has a new media trajectory. In fact, every traditional medium was in fact at one time a ‘new medium’. Every ‘new medium’ possesses the latent potential to reshape media spaces, how audiences use journalisms and relate to their world, how media companies and newsrooms are structured, how citizens challenge authority, how authorities restrict freedom of expression, and so on (Lansner 2006).

Below are some of the ways that media as an institution is being transformed through the rise of new media:

- Convergence is everywhere (in technologies, in regulation, in companies and industries, in newsrooms, between media and online offerings, in audiences [online your audience can be from DRC or Brazil]) Consolidation of media companies and telcos;
- Telcos entering triple play markets – calls, data and content
- Traditional media having its top LSMs pilfered by high tech competitors;
- Users spending more time online and less with traditional media
- Advertisers big and small realize the power of direct contextual based advertising that reaches elite audiences in high LSMs Results include:
  - Closing of newspapers and job shedding;
  - Newspapers respond through increasing tabloidization and freesheets;
  - The move from newspaper to viewpapers;

- From broadcasting to narrowcasting;
- The role of the mass media as the centre of our discourse and the mediating institution between the source and public is under attack. Competitive responses such as the multimedia logic of newspapers and the cooption and creation of citizen journalism and social media spaces (witness Fox buying Myspace; Mail and Guardian's Thoughtleader, 24.com's user blogs, CNN's INews and their virtual citizen media bureau in Second Life);

The destabilisation of media political economy has also led to the transformation of – and a series of new choices by legacy media, especially related to aspects like restructuring newsrooms, training journalists, retrenching staff, changing the news product etc.

### **Citizen journalism**

One of the ways in which journalism as a practice is changing is the rise of “citizen journalism” more particularly through platforms for user generated content on the World Wide Web like blogs.

User generated content creation and sharing is central to the Web experience because the Web is centrally about communication exchange (Marshall & Burnett 2003: 73). User content publishing and interaction has begun to blur the distinction between producers of news and their audience<sup>1</sup>.

There are two sides to this story.

*Notwithstanding, not all user generated content (UGC) necessarily constitutes “journalism” as understood in within its dominant liberal articulation; neither are all blogs “citizen journalism”.*

On the one hand, “citizen journalism” challenges the status of institution driven journalism, as well as the occupational ideology of professional journalism. This is done by decentralising the privileged position of the media to interpose itself between source and user as it simultaneously holds out the potential to allow audiences to become active participants in cultural production (Marshall & Burnett 2003:73). Furthermore, the sheer volume of blog content and users’ trust thereof has also changed online users’ consumption habits –where people find news and views and how long they spend with these new media forms as opposed to legacy media. This threatens the future sustainability and viability of traditional media.

On the other, progressive news organisations adopt citizen journalism and social media aggregation as part of an integrated strategy to enhance brand awareness, leverage user relationships and recommendations, harness collective intelligence etc. Citizen spaces make good business sense – as they increase users’ online session time, content is generally freely available, and the channel can be used by media to drive users from one of platform to another (e.g from print to online or vice versa).

So citizen journalism, despite its disruptive aspects can in fact be good journalism and good for the role and business of media, albeit that it is a labor and capital intensive enterprise with little economic return.

The transformational impact of citizen journalism (in its varied forms – hyperlocal; user generated content; crowd sourcing, pro-am etc.) lies in its capacity, among others to:

- activate public, sectoral and special interest views from grassroots;
- contribute to the rise of multi-perspectival news – a greater diversity of perspectives – than media organizations could ever previously afford

- Another advantage of the new media technologies is the potential for radical democratic approaches to citizen participation and engagement with each other and with their governments
- to move users to the centre of agenda setting (rather than elites);
- to encourage the free flows of ideas, content and representations of communities and cultures;

In other words, citizen journalism can be used as a participatory form of public interest communication that – if properly managed and supported – could influence deliberative democracy and participatory development.

Surely, the enhancement of the media environment and improving of access, quality and means of public communication ought to facilitate democratic participation in productive growth, the use and distribution of public goods and in political decision making (as opposed to leaving these processes to autocrats, experts or the market) are in the best interests of media development? (Hamelink 1995:19).

Notwithstanding the challenges of the Digital divides, media development bodies have a strategic interest to facilitate “robust communications infrastructure that lets people talk with one another” as a way to break the power of elite autocracies, convert authoritarian governments and improve civic participation in stagnant democracies (as was seen in USA President elect, Obama’s recent campaign).

Depending on what side of the divide media assistance and media development bodies find themselves, and depending on a nuanced understanding of the role and place of ICTs in the evolution of the media, media development organizations are either investing or holding back.

The transformation of the media markets of our integrating 'information societies' strongly suggests the need for the inclusion of so-called 'new media' to the 'media support mix' of development agencies and aid bodies to facilitate the growth and sustainability of legacy media organisations.

In Africa, media industries, including the media development industry and media education still has a little time to adapt. These changes are on the way and will impact on all of Africa's media industries to a greater or lesser degree depending on context. It will happen, just slower.

The disruptions throw up some interesting choices for media development bodies:

For example:

- ICTs open the world up to the forces of globalisation and democratisation. Ordinary users have used them to overthrow their governments and campaign against human rights abuse. ICTs have contributed to the rise of so called third wave democracies.
- But these days public diplomacy and mass media messages are easily countered by the very same forms of interactive communications such as blogs and mobile phones. For example, it is not possible to predict how ordinary members of the public may use new media to critique foreign policy initiatives of donor states, for example in Iraq. Adler writes that the idea of a single political universe needs to be replaced with the concept of a decentralised multiverse.

## So what can be done?

- Media development bodies need to develop intelligence about new media issues that impact on cycles of media production, distribution and consumption at local levels within countries. It needs to be acknowledged that each country will have their own unique trajectories but there are a few common principles which govern this.
- Media assistance and development organisations need to consider that they too need to converge. Community development programmes need to include critical media literacy training and citizen reporting training if we are to avoid paying lip service to the idea that media freedom belongs to all.
- Support for small media is paramount. Small media are most vulnerable to shocks resulting from changing consumption and advertising patterns.
- ICT4D programmes and media development programmes need to be sharing information.
- Citizen journalism programmes need to involve mass media practitioners because new media social platforms changes the balance of time that people, particularly young people are prepared to spend with the media. Mass media cannot keep people informed or help inform the polity if we are not where are young people are.
- Collaborative approaches to media support for democratisation should be encouraged to provide critical support for mixed media systems that deepen democratic participation at various levels.
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- Consideration needs to be given to support for broadcasting industries approach to “new media”. For example, the impact of digital migration on African media production and consumption need to be considered. For example, who will subsidise the cost of migrating community radio to digital broadcasting platforms? How will platform migration impact on

already tenuous revenue streams for broadcasters left using FM band only?

- The significance of donor sponsored conferences such as DCI and Highway Africa is that they offer an opportunity to network and discuss the current and future challenges of digital technologies to mass media. Those who support media development ignore these at their peril.
- Mass media organisations need to be empowered at various levels to use, create and develop new Open source media technologies that communicate with the majority of African users. Failure to do so will result in increasing information asymmetries as generations of old media fail to use new media technologies to counter or balance information flows in cyberspace.
- Media development bodies need to be lobbying around national policy and regulation in their telcom and mobile sectors. These sectors are the pipelines will become the primary channels for communication and content. You fail to understand electronic communications law at your peril.
- Empower the educators. Donors need to focus on media education and educators. Skills for teaching new media praxis are scarce. We hemorrhage our best minds to industry and foreign education institutions. Media education and training in African needs needs to be based on realistic future local scenarios and intelligence which means encouraging and fostering academic research in these areas. Journalism educational institutions need to focus not just on theory or the technology but praxis which will empower Africa's future journalists but also engender a vanguard of critical digital citizens.
- We need to empower our self regulatory mechanisms like press councils to consider how they will deal with complaints emanating from newspaper's Internet and mobile multimedia offerings.

- Media development institutions must begin exploiting open media forms and harness new and old technologies to continue telling stories to and about ourselves – particularly in our own languages.

Finally we must always consider the relevance of technologies to human needs by truly understanding how users to receive and send communication in further. Failure to do so results in increasing information asymmetries as a generation of old media are not able to employ technologies to counter balance.

The choice is whether to lead or follow.

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