

Draft Presentation

**“New Media and its Effects on Journalism and
media development-citizen Journalism”**

Mr. Silas Gbandia,
Deputy Director; Center for Media, Education and Technology, C-Met
Freetown, Sierra Leone
sgbandia@yahoo.com
Tel; 00232 33 500332

Introduction

Mass media is a term used to denote, as a class, that section of the media specifically conceived and designed to reach a very large audience (typically at least as large as the whole population of a nation state). It was coined in the 1920s with the advent of nationwide radio networks and of mass-circulation newspapers and magazines.

The term **public media** has a similar meaning: it is the sum of the public mass distributors of news and entertainment and other information: the newspapers, television and radio broadcasting, book publishers, and suchlike. To this have been added more recently the Internet, pod casting, blogging, and suchlike. All of these public media sources have better informed the general public of what is going on in the world today.

Some traditional public broadcasters are turning to these new areas to reach more people or quicker. These methods of communication reach a greater number of people faster than traditional oral communication. Such things as pod casting and blogging give people an opportunity to express themselves in ways that can only be done with such technology.

The mass-media audience has been viewed by some commentators as forming a mass society with special characteristics, notably atomization to lack of social connections, which render it especially susceptible to the influence of modern mass-media techniques such as advertising and propaganda. It is also gaining popularity in the blogosphere when referring to the mainstream media (MSM). The mass-media audience can be easily persuaded one way or another (depending on the subject of discussion) whether or not they want to believe the media. Mass media can be one of the hardest forms of media to decipher what is true and what is not.

The situation in Sierra Leone

There is the proliferation of newspapers and radio stations across the country currently. About 60 newspapers, over 50 radio stations and 2 television stations are registered with the Independent Media Commission (IMC). Newspaper publication is still a Freetown based phenomenon and English is the language of the papers. Some of these newspapers could be accessed through their websites. There are also online newspapers and blog sites emerging for instance the newpeople and cocorioko.

The existence of many radio stations across the country has come alongside with the wide spread availability of mobile phones. There are currently 5 registered mobile phone companies- Zain, Comium, Tigo, Africell and Datatel(almost out of business) Some of these companies are offering internet services to their subscribers. These developments have brought greater participation of the

citizenry in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. Thus enhancing the practice of citizen journalism.

Today, the Sierra Leone media is characterized by vibrant and people-oriented practice normally expected of a post-conflict African society.

In a society of five million with more than 60% illiterate, radio is the most appealing instrument for the people to participate in their elected government.

In this vein, comes in what has now been regarded as “phone-in” for ongoing democratic discourses. With the emergence of the cellular phone facilities in 2001, and the ‘death’ of the land-line telephone systems, people/citizens are able to contribute to radio programs and using the same facility, mobile phone users have been able to provide photos to newspaper editors from live scenes of events, even at amateur levels.

With minimal internet services-users (courtesy; high illiteracy level and cost), blogging and internet communication (effects inclusive) might be minimal and less effective, save for high government functionaries and diplomatic/NGO missions who mostly would need such services for their work.

Even internet service providers have not stretched their services beyond the capital Freetown.

The Impact of the new media on citizen journalism/Media Development

The Sierra Leonean media and, accompanying practices, have benefited a lot from new media technologies and practice. And this has in turn impacted a lot on the new approach to citizen journalism, wherein the people report their own news about themselves from their own communities; using available simple media technologies such as hand cameras, cellular/mobile phones and internet blogging. With the use of mobile phones for example, photos and voice recordings that had been hitherto unavailable, are now used as actualities in TV and radio broadcasts, often times supplied by mere citizens who may not have had any substantial and professional media training. With the new media technologies and the involvement of citizens to report their own news in their own way and about events in their communities, one would say that the news is everywhere and that there is no where to hide.

Less than a decade ago, with some African newspapers still doing ‘cut-and-paste’ of newspaper dummies, radio and television stations using the ‘reel-reel’ style of editing, this method of news gathering, packaging and reporting would have been unheard-of. One great impact of the new media/citizen journalism is the timeliness and relevance of news, while quality and content have improved immensely.

The rapid growth in information communication technology has broken the earlier world in which official information was offered only through government

controlled radio and television the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service Radio and Television (SLBS/TV) for instance. It has therefore ensure greater transparency and account ability in the governance process as there are alternative ways of publicizing news and information. People now have the opportunity to respond in time to what the see, hear and read in the main stream media as mobile phones and internet services have placed the power of reporting in the hands of the public. It has created a window of opportunity for the exercise of the freedom of expression as well as the right to participate.

The new technology has in a way bypass press censorship. The subjects of discussion are no longer limited. Anything could be texted around or viewed on the internet.

On the flipside, the new media has given way to the flow of news and information that is lacking in quality and content. Propaganda messages which sometimes lack substance are past around through mobile phones and internet. This therefore questions the objectivity sometimes of citizen journalists/citizen journalism.

Despite some of the criticisms advanced against citizen journalism, It has greatly enhanced the development of the media in that news producers and recipients are now interacting. The increase in the number of radio station across the continent and establishment of mobile phone companies most especially have not only open up the flow of information but also the active participation of the audience on what goes around. It is therefore necessary that journalists include citizen journalism in practicing their profession.