

An Appraisal of the Press as an Institution in the Digital Age: Key Dynamics

Philomena Effiong Umoren

Department of Mass Communication
Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria
philoumoren12@gmail.com

&

Etop Okon Akpan

Department of Mass Communication
Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria
akpanetop02@gmail.com

Abstract

Digital communication is changing media practice, relationships between individuals, media, government and society. In the wake of the increasingly complex media environment, the philosophical assumptions of some normative media theories and the media effects theories require re-examination as new models are needed given the current social realities. In order to answer the stated objectives, the qualitative research method was applied. The appraisal showed that digital technologies had widely become indispensable for journalism practice. Thus, the press in the digital era should be participatory, deinstitutionalised, innovative and entrepreneurial. The paper concluded that the press must be institutionalised so that it may guarantee participatory equality and use its financial and symbolic clout to call the powerful to account, and that journalists must be held to norms of public service rather than financial profitability.

Keywords: Digitisation, Normative Media Theories, Journalism and Nigerian Mass Media

Introduction

A theory describes how a phenomena functions or is predicted to function. The application of theories helps to shed light on the most likely course of events. In order to comprehend a phenomenon, one needs explanations, and these can be found inside a theory. It is a hypothesis that can be investigated to see if it adequately explains a phenomenon (Nwabueze, 2014). A theory is a statement of why things happen in a given way, based on extensive and careful observation of the world (Nwodu, 2006). This demonstrates the importance of theoretical viewpoints in providing an explanation for observed behavioural or emotional trends among individuals and groups (Nwabueze, 2014).

An understanding of the communication process, pattern, activity, or impacts on the audience and society can be simplified with the help of mass communication, mass media, or communication-related theories. This means that mass communication theories explain how and why various facets of society, including people, organisations, and governments are connected to and impacted by the various forms of communication that occur. Many distinct schools of thought exist in the realm of mass communication theory. Normative media theories are of one such group; they propose guidelines for how a media system should ideally be managed by the State, a governing body, a leader, or the general populace. Normative theories of the press are what set these theories apart from others in the field of communication theory because they do not offer any scientific explanations or predictions (Griffin, 2000; McQuail, 2010; Nwabueze, 2014).

On the other hand, the development of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has altered the nature of conversation. The use of these technologies has improved communication

patterns and has far-reaching effects. This suggests that pre-ICT era theories that were refuted by later theories may need to be reevaluated to determine their relevance in the present day. This research examines conventional media ideas against this backdrop, to determine whether or not they still hold water in the era of social media. Digital communication is changing media practice, relationships between individuals, media, government and society. In the wake of the increasingly complex media environment, the philosophical assumptions of some normative media theories require re-examination as new models are needed given the current social realities. Oluwasola (2020) explains that the changing political institutions, leadership modes worldwide and the peculiarities of the new and social media have necessitated the need to reconsider some of the basic assumptions of some of these earlier theories within the confounding realities of the digital and social media era.

Overview of Normative Theories

Normative theories were first proposed by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book called “Four Theories of the Press”. At first the word “Normative Theory” was pronounced in USA during the height of “Cold War” with Communism and Soviet Union. Often it was known as Western theories of mass media (Elebute, 2015). The normative theories describe the ideal way for a media system to be controlled and operated by the government, authority, leader and public. These theories are basically different from other communication theories because normative theories of the press are not providing any scientific explanations or prediction. At the same time, these “four theories of the press” came from many sources rather than a single source. Sometimes media practitioners, social critics and academics were also involved in the development of these normative theories (Anaeto, Onabanjo & Osifeso, 2008).

Authoritarian Theory

The Authoritarian theory posits that all forms of communications are under the control of the governing elite or authorities or influential bureaucrats. Authoritarians are necessary to control the media to protect and prevent the people from the national threats through any form of communication (information or news). The press is an instrument to enhance the ruler's power in the country rather than any threats (Folarin, 2005). The authorities have all rights to permit any media and control it by providing license to the media and make certain censorship. Censorship is a suppression of any communication which may be considered as harmful to the people, King, government and its nation. In some other cases, censorship helps to protect the rulers and authorities from sensitive issues. There are different types of censors like political censor, moral censor, religious censor, military censor, and corporate censor (Benkler, 2011). If the media violate the government policies against license, then the authority has all the right to cancel the license and revoke it. The government has all the right to restrict any sensitive issue from the press to maintain peace and security in the nation. The authoritarian media theory operates and exists in authoritarian States where every form of social, political and economic lives are controlled and determined by the State. Examples of countries in this category include Saudi Arabia and North Korea.

Libertarian Theory

The Libertarian theory is one of the “Normative theories of press”. The theory originally came from libertarian thoughts from 16th century in Europe (Holmes, 2005). The libertarian theorists are against the authoritarian thoughts. Liberalism means information is knowledge and knowledge is power (Folarin, 2005). Libertarianism is free from any authority or any control or censorship. The libertarianism is an idea of individualism and limited government which is not harmful to another. The Libertarian theory sees the populace, most especially, the media professionals as knowledgeable enough to distinguish between good and bad ideas on their own.

The theory states that people are rational and their rational thoughts lead them to find out what are good and bad (Watson, 2003).

Social Responsibility Theory

From the mid-20th century up to date, most of the developing countries and third world nations have employed this social responsibility theory of the press which was developed by “The Commission of the Freedom of Press” in the United States in 1949. In the book, *Four theories of Press*, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963), they authors state that “pure libertarianism is antiquated, outdated and obsolete.” That paved way for replacement of Libertarian theory with the Social Responsibility theory.

Social Responsibility theory allows free press without any censorship but at the same time the content of the press should be discussed in public panel and media should accept any obligation from public interference or professional self-regulations or both. The theory lies between both authoritarian theory and libertarian theory because it gives total media freedom on the one hand but the external controls, on the other hand. Here, the press ownership is private (Anaeto, Onabanjo & Osifeso, 2008). The social responsibility theory moves beyond the simple “Objective” reporting (facts reporting) to “Interpretative” reporting (investigative reporting). The total news is complete facts and truthful. However, the Commission of the Freedom Press states that journalists should no longer give facts truthfully. Rather, they should give the necessary analyses or interpretative reports on facts with clear explanations.

The theory helped in creating professionalism in media by setting up a high level of accuracy, truth, and information. The Commission of Press Council also included some tasks based on social responsibility of media, which are:

1. Formulate the code of conduct for the press.
2. Improve the standards of journalism.
3. Safeguarding the interests of journalism and journalist.
4. Criticise and make some penalty for violating the code of conduct.

Soviet-Communist Media Theory

The Soviet-Communist media theory is imitative of Leninist principles which are based on the Carl Marx and Engel's ideology. The government undertakes or controls the whole media and communication to serve working classes and their interest. The theory states that the state has absolute power to control any media for the benefits of the people. They put an end to the private ownership of the press and other media (Fiss, 2009). The government media provide positive thoughts to create a strong socialized society as well as provide information, education, entertainment, motivation and mobilisation. The theory describes the whole purpose of the mass media to be the education of the greater mass of the working class or workers. Here, the public is encouraged to give feedback which would be able to create interests towards the media (Folarin, 2005).

According to the Authoritarian theory, the media are controlled and censored by the ministries in the country but libertarian is fully free without any intervention of any authority or government, Social responsibility theory – press freedom on one hand but on the other hand, press controlled through raising question. With the Soviet-Communist media theory, the whole control of the media is under the leader of the nation.

The Digital Era

The term “Digital Age or Era” is defined as the period in the course of human history that is shaped by digital information and communication technologies. The digital Age is thus the period in which digital change through digitalisation and digital transformation has progressed so far that digital technologies have a formative influence on people's lives. In the sequence of historical epochs in the history of mankind, the “Digital Age” follows the “Industrial Age”. The transition from the industrial age to the digital age takes place within the context of “Digital Change”. Due to the magnitude and speed of the change, it is also called the “Digital Revolution”, which emphasises the radical character that characterises an abrupt turn of time (Lengsfeld, 2018). The period before the digital age is called the “Predigital Epoch”. It encompasses all epochs of human history before the beginning of the digital age. The early phase of the Digital Age is called the “Protodigital Epoch”. The term “Digital Information Age” is used synonymously.

The *Collins Dictionary* defines the digital age (or information age) as *a time when large amounts of information are widely available to many people, largely through computer technology*. According to Techopedia (2017), the digital revolution is *the advancement of technology from analog electronic and mechanical devices to the digital technology available today. The era started during the 1980s and is ongoing. The digital revolution also marks the beginning of the “Information Era”*. In addition, the digital age also encompasses the digitisation of businesses. For risk managers, digitisation is likely high on the risk agenda. Digitisation is the procedure of moving a business into the digital age – embracing the technologies that are relevant to improving your organisation and enabling it to become more competitive in the marketplace.

Cloutman (2019) describes digitisation as *the process of purposefully moving from manual or analogue processes, such as managing commercial insurance renewal data using email and spreadsheets, to digitised and, where possible, automated processes without any in-kind changes to the processes themselves*. Taking this to a basic level, digital tools can be used to speed up manual, repetitive tasks and take away human error. However, it is not just operational administrative tasks that can benefit from digital tools, digitisation can be incorporated into a whole business model – supporting business strategies and actually becoming income generating, rather than just reducing operational costs.

The Press as an Institution in the Digital Age

This analysis will be based on four schools of thought. The first and most common argument is that journalism should be interactive because of the capabilities of digital and social media and the underpinning beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and knowledge of the people who were previously passive consumers of news. The second school of thought is that journalism should be “deinstitutionalised,” which means dismantling professional jurisdiction, weakening the self-regulatory power of the legacy press, questioning organisational hierarchies and erasing differences between journalists and their audiences, or disaggregating and decentralising the process and outcomes of journalism. Third, academics insist that journalism must innovate in order to stay up with rapidly developing technologies, the changing needs and preferences of networked audiences, and the volatile and unpredictable nature of the media industry. Lastly, researchers conclude that journalists need entrepreneurial skills, such as the ability to work independently, cultivate an audience, secure finance, and establish personal brand in the digital age. These claims can be found across the media and communication studies literature; albeit, scholars do not always make their normative viewpoints apparent and few support all four of these ideals for the press in the digital age.

Participation

The concept of "participatory journalism" has been around long before the rise of digital media, and it has different roots. The public journalism movement, which originated in the mid-1990s and attempted to position a more dialogic, though still properly convened, journalist-citizen contact, is one example of the ideal-typical alterations. Anderson (2011) contends that by the 2000s, the goals and practices of public journalism had shifted into digital journalism. The critiques of "top down," "one-way," and hierarchical, industrial modes of communication were prevalent in the technological press and business literature at the time public media reformers like Jay Rosen began to focus on digital journalism (Levine et. al, 2009; Turner, 2006). To combat the mass production of news and entertainment, reformers promoted audience involvement as a basic tenet of a democratic society.

For instance, Borger et al. (2013) use a genealogical analysis of 119 digital journalism articles to show how interest in normative notions of participatory journalism began to develop after 2003. This trend implies that academia and public intellectuals were inspired by the techno-optimism and consumer empowerment rhetoric around Web 2.0, which aligned with many of the principles of the public journalism movement, albeit not perfectly. The authors explain how a select number of academics and public intellectuals came to be regarded as the "founding fathers" of participatory journalism, a practice that is now the subject of academic study and used as a standard of excellence. This new normative interest in participatory journalism was "formulated on the assumption that digital technologies enable the audience to get involved in generating and sharing news," and it emerged in part because of the proliferation of digital technology (2013). Borger et al. (2013) identify Dan Gillmor, Jeff Jarvis, Jay Rosen, Clay Shirky, Axel Bruns, and Henry Jenkins as "founding fathers" of participatory journalism for their "strong trust in the democratic potential of digital technology" (p.126).

The issues and analyses of digital journalism have been influenced by the normative thinking of scholars, which Borger et al. (2013) characterise as having four aspects. In the first place, there is widespread excitement among academics about the democratising possibilities of digital technologies. Second, academics are often dissatisfied with the professional journalism industry because of its reluctance to adapt. Third, academics are unhappy with the commercial rather than democratic motivations of professional journalists to facilitate participatory forms. Finally, there is dismay about the public's apparent disinterest in participatory journalism.

Deinstitutionalisation

The concept of deinstitutionalisation is closely tied to digital journalism and appears in related literature. Deinstitutionalisation, as defined by the field of organisational studies, is the eroding or discontinuing of an institutionalised organisational activity or practise (Oliver, 1992). The term "deinstitutionalisation" refers to the process by which an institution loses its legitimacy, its ability to carry out routine tasks, and the support of the community. Although deprofessionalisation is synonymous with deinstitutionalisation, it more accurately describes the process through which a profession loses its independence, authority, and respect among the general public.

Whether or if deinstitutionalisation and deprofessionalisation are actually occurring is a topic of contention, but there are robust streams in the digital media field that applaud both on normative democratic grounds. As mentioned above, proponents of public journalism felt that a well-functioning institutional press and trained professionals who worked as conveners and facilitators of publics would provide the kind of normatively acceptable democratic discussion that was previously mentioned. Scholars advocated for increased non-market funding for institutions that aid professional journalists in their pursuit of public interest. Scholars and public

intellectuals in the field of digital journalism, on the other hand, often emphasise the democratic virtues of deinstitutionalised amateur and non-professional forms of "produsage" and "participatory cultures" (Bruns, 2008), "citizen journalism" (Allan and Thorsen, 2008), and "we media" (Raetzsch, 2014).

Journalistic and professional organisations are sometimes portrayed as impediments to citizens' ability to exercise agency through free expression, especially among academics who prioritise participation as the central democratic virtue. A common line of thinking in the academic literature holds that digital media by its very nature is democratic, participatory, two-way, and open. Scholars frequently contrast what they regard as the advantages of digital technologies with the limitations of the traditional, closed, and one-way information production system that pervades the journalism industry. Of course, the world is more nuanced than these basic binary, and the literature is more textured with diverse arguments, as Flew (2009) has shown.

Nonetheless, many digital journalism academics have welcomed the decline of journalism's authority over the news's production processes and final form, especially the press's traditional gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and framing roles, on the grounds that this is in the best interests of democracy (Russell, 2011). Scholars now typically embrace "second order gatekeeping," or public ownership over the accessibility of the subject matter through sharing on social media (Singer, 2014), and responsibility over journalistic integrity through the public criticism of bloggers and citizens, suggesting that deinstitutionalisation is now as much a problem of spreading as it is of publicity (Singer, 2007). Meanwhile, research on "network gatekeeping" hints at even more covert kinds of authority and control exercised by institutions in the modern media landscape (Coddington and Holton, 2014).

Innovation

The emphasis on "innovation" as a means to social salvation can be found across the literature on digital journalism, a trend that Vinsel (2014) finds to be pervasive across disciplines over the last half century. "Innovation talk," as coined by Vinsel (2014), is rife in the media. At the outset of its report, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities (2009) urged government officials to direct media policy toward innovation, competition, and support for economic models that provide marketplace incentives for great journalism. The Knight Commission (2014) argues that innovation and competition should be the cornerstones of media policy, but that market processes are not the sole way to boost innovation's value. Journalistic creativity, according to Downie and Schudson's (2009) assessment, has created new possibilities for collaboration between blogs and traditional media. The authors argue that colleges should be laboratories for digital innovation in the collection and dissemination of news and information due to their relative isolation from market influences.

Similar to the discussion of entrepreneurship that follows, "innovation" is often used as an umbrella term for a wide range of creative endeavours. Due to its lack of a clear definition, "innovation" is often used loosely by academics in discussions of digital media. Vinsel (2014) argues that the problem with the narrow scholarly embrace of innovation is that the concept is often ill-defined, asked to do too much work, and uncritically celebrated, despite the fact that calls for innovation often stand to benefit the already privileged in social life and may undermine many valuable institutions. As Vinsel (2014) argues:

If in the grand scope of social science, asking what factors encourage innovation is incredibly narrow, in the context of our society's problems, it's myopic. As a society, we have come to talk

as if innovation is a core value, like love, fraternity, courage, beauty, dignity, responsibility, you name it. Innovation speak worships at the altar of change, but it too rarely asks who those changes are benefitting. It acts as if change is a good in itself. Too often, when it does take perspective into account, it proceeds either from the viewpoint of the manager or the shareholder, that is, from the perspective of people who are interested in profits, or from the viewpoint of the consumer interested in cheap goods. Other social roles largely drop out of the analysis.

Scholars and public intellectuals frequently invoke innovation as a concept and value in the digital journalism discourse to push for shifts in practice, defend and advance novel economic models, and reduce the stranglehold of professionals over the dissemination of news and information. As Lewis & Usher (2013) put it, technology-focused approach to journalism innovation has been the most successful subfield of journalism. This is true because journalists are increasingly adopting the principles and methods of programmers and the open source movement. In the research of these academics, innovation comprises the development of novel types of journalism that are reoriented around the normative ideals that animate models of open source technical production.

For example, these journalists may reframe the act of reporting as akin to the creation of software or the management of information in a decentralised manner. The hiring of tech industry personnel (Agarwal & Barthel, 2013; Ananny & Crawford, 2014), the efforts of funding agencies like the Knight Foundation (Lewis, 2011), the transfer of normative practices from the open source movement to journalism, and the broader cultural work of meta-journalistic (Carlson, 2006) discourse about technology are all examples of how Lewis & Usher (2013) notice and normatively welcome the incorporation of these principles into traditional media.

Conclusion

The conventional wisdom surrounding digital journalism has been excessively unbalanced up until this point. A discourse about the future of journalism has failed to address how the usually uncritical acceptance of participation, deinstitutionalisation, innovation, and entrepreneurship may undermine other values for and duties of the press. The press must be institutionalised so that it may fight to guarantee participatory equality and use its financial and symbolic clout to call the powerful to account, and journalists must be held to norms of public service rather than financial profitability.

Indeed, scholars who make normative claims for digital journalism and explore the institutional and regulatory frameworks that support democratically desirable practices have brutally reworked the key terms of media practice from the days of normative theories, advocating the view that there are just people, not groups that are differentially positioned with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. (Christians et al., 2009). Furthermore, modern normative theorising of digital journalism has abdicated any responsibility for the state, the profession, or the institution of journalism in fostering a healthy public sphere, thus disregarding the significance of free speech, a socially responsible and institutionally potent media, and a diverse and open public sphere.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions above on the press as an institution in the digital age, the following recommendations are made:

1. Media professionals must, despite the phasing-off of the first four normative theories of the press abide by the sacred ethics of the profession and perform their duties with aplomb

and efficiency for the development of society.

2. There is need to constant training and retraining of media professionals on the changing trends and inversion of digital technologies into the media profession. This will help keep journalist abreast of the new trends in digitalisation and it affects their profession.
3. Communication and Media Studies researchers should develop a broader and encompassing curriculum that will address the above discussed trends and deficiencies that are inherent in contemporary media practice in the digital age.

References

- Agarwal, S. D. & Barthel, M. L. (2013). The friendly barbarians: Professional norms and work routines of online journalists in the United States, *Journalism*, published online 12/2022.
- Allan, S. & Thorsen, E. (eds.) (2009) *Citizen journalism: Global perspectives*, Vol. 1. New York: Peter Lang.
- Anaeto, S. G., Onabanjo, O. S. & Osifeso, J. B. (2008). *Models and theories of Communication*. America: Africa Renaissance Book Incorporated.
- Anderson, C. W. (2011). Deliberative, agonistic, and algorithmic audiences: Journalism's vision of its public in an age of audience transparency. *International Journal of Communication*, 5: 529-47.
- Benkler, Y. (2011). Free irresponsible press: Wikileaks and the battle over the soul of the networked fourth estate. *Harv. CR-CLL Rev*, 46: 311.
- Boczkowski, P. J. (2010). *News at Work: Imitation in an age of Information Abundance*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Borger, M. V., A., Meijer, I. C. & Sanders, J. (2013). Constructing participatory journalism as a scholarly object: A genealogical analysis. *Digital Journalism*, 1(1): 117-34.
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From production to produsage*, Vol. 45. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cloutman, S. (2019). Viewpoint: Risk managers have stalled at the digital crossroads. <https://insuranceday.maritimeintelligence.informa.com/ID1127766/Viewpoint-Risk-managers-have-stalled-at--the-digital-crossroads>.
- Coddington, M. & Holton, A. E. (2014). When the gates swing open: Examining network gatekeeping in a social media setting. *Mass Communication and Society*, 17 (2): 236-57.
- Collins English Dictionary (2016). Information age.
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/information-age>.
- Downie, L. & Schudson, M. (2009). The Reconstruction of American Journalism (http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php?page=all).
- Elebute, A. (2015). Issues on the gagging of Nigerian press with obnoxious Laws. *International Journal of Arts and Journalism*. 4 (1): 207-223.
- Fiss, O. (2009). *The irony of free speech*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Flew, T. (2009). Democracy, participation and convergent media: Case studies in contemporary online news journalism in Australia. *Communication, Politics & Culture*, 42 (2), 87-109.
- Folarin, B. (2005). *Theories of mass-communication*. Ota: Bakinfo Publications.

- Glasser, T. L. (2000). The politics of public journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 1 (4): 683-686.
- Griffin, E. (2000). *A first look at communication theory*. Fourth edition. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Holmes, D. (2006). *Communication theory: Stephen, W. Littlejohn/Karena, F. Theories of human communication*. Eighth Edition.
- Imhoagene, R. G. (2015). How much does the theoretical operation of the Nigerian press differ or agree with the normative theories? University of Benin, Benin City. www.academia
- Kemp, S. (2019). Digital 2019: Global internet use accelerates. <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates/>
- Lengsfeld, J. (2018). Digital era framework. <https://joernlengsfeld.com/en/definition/digital-age/>
- Levine, R. Locke, C., Searls, D. & Weinberger, D. (2009). *The cluetrain manifesto*. Basic Books.
- Lowrey, Wilson (2012) Journalism innovation and the ecology of news production. *Journalism and Communication Monographs*, 14.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail mass communication theory (Fifth Edition)*. London : Sage Publications.
- Nwabueze, C. D. (2014). *Introduction to mass communication: Media ecology in the global village*. Owerri: Top Shelves Publishers.
- Nwodu, L. C. (2006). Technological determinism theory and media practitioners' perception of cultural influence of ICTs on developing nations. *The Nigerian journal of communications*, 1 (4) 72-83.
- Oliver, C. (1992). The antecedents of deinstitutionalization. *Organization studies*, 13 (4): 563-588.
- Oluwasola, O. (2020). The normative theories of the press in the digital age: A need for revision. *IMSU Journal of communication studies*, 4 (2), 27 – 36.
- Pavlik, J. (2001) *Journalism and new media*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Raetzsch, C. (2014). Innovation through practice: Journalism as a structure of public communication. *Journalism Practice (ahead-of-print)* 1-13.
- Siebert, F. S, Peterson, T, & Schramm, W. (1963). *Four theories of the Press*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Singer, J. B. (2014). User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space. *New Media & Society*, 16 (1): 55-73.
- Techopedia (2017). Digital revolution. <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/23371/digital-revolution>.

Turner, F. (2006). *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Vinsel, L. (2014). How to give up the I-Word' Parts 1 and 2, Culture Digitally. Available online at: <http://culturedigitally.org/author/lee-vinsel/>.

Watson, J. (2003). *Media communication*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.