ICT and Mass Commnication

The Trends and Challenges of Reporting Public Affairs in an ICT- Driven World

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Abstract

This paper reviews the environment of public affairs reporting in Nigeria and examines it against the global trend as shaped by ICTs and the challenges this poses to the business of reporting. The paper observes that not only have the traditional reportorial tools been replaced with slim, fast and versatile digital tools, the challenges of computer assisted live news reporting, appropriate terminologies, precision and transparency in reporting and publishing of news items electronically are daunting tasks the public affairs reporters must tackle everyday while on the beat. The paper recommends ICTs capacity building for media houses and reporters, as well as practical training on ICT use, curriculum review or enrichment with ICT specific modules and the need to embrace change.

Introduction

Our world continues to become increasingly complex, interconnected, and dynamic everyday. We live in an information society in which more people must manage more information, which in turn requires more technological support, which both demands and creates more information. Electronics, information, communication, and technology are mutually reinforcing phenomena, and one of the key aspects of living in the information society is the growing level of interaction we have with this complex and increasingly electronic environment.

The general consequences of the information society are three fold: "Larger volumes of information, new forms and aggregation, and new tools for working with information" (Marchioni, 1997.21). These new tools lead to an increasingly interdependent world of Communication and Information Technologies (ICTs). Its resultant information driven society, which is fast catching on all of us, implies that the processes of news sourcing, processing, packaging and dissemination are greatly dependent on technology. These technologies have not only changed so fast in the last five years, but have displayed an interacting and inter-linking role, within the mass media cum communication framework of the print, broadcasting, film and recently cable, the Internet and satellite.

The contemporary communication situation in the world today has given abundant meaning to Marshall McLuhan's (1964) communication concept, which sees the world as a "global village" where everyone will be linked together by communication and forced to share the consequences of one another's action. More fascinating in these fleeting information and communication scenarios is the revolutionary development impacts ICTs

have on the performance of these media with each successful application and utilization. At no time in the history of the world has communication both at national and international scale become more expedient than in the present century where local, regional and international conflicts in diplomatic relations, politics, food security, environment, peace and survival call for ceaseless dialogues in which modern ICT play a major part. When CNN beamed live pictures of the Gulf War in 1993 via on site satellites, this was to be only the tip of the iceberg that restores the position of television in the global scale. This and other developments in the ICTs world were to change the face of reporting public affairs and pose a plethora of challenges to the business of reporting in particular and the media in general.

The first goal of this paper, therefore, is to review the environment of public affairs reporting and examine it against the global trend and the state of reporting public affairs as shaped by ICTs and the challenges this pose to the business of public affairs reporting.

Conceptual Framework
The Digital Convergence: The marriage of Information and communication to technology is a relationship of mutual importance that has heralded today's information revolution. This revolution is the fusion of several important industries in three broad areas a phenomenon called **Digital Convergence.**

Digital Convergence is the technological merger of several industries through various devices that exchange information in the electronic or digital format used by computers. The industries are: computers, communication, consumer electronic entertainment and the mass media.Computer provided the capability for processing and storing information. Telecommunication provided the vehicle for communicating it and video provided high quality images. The convergence of computer and telecommunication technologies has made possible the emergence of a global telecommunication network. Thus, the products of this convergence, which form what we today called Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), range from physical devices like digital cameras, tape recorders, computers, sensing devices, scanners, mobile telephone, fax machines, video phone, camcorders projectors, high definition television (HDTV), to those in cyberspace – the Internet, e-mail, internet telephone, teleconferencing etc.

The application of modern ICTs is expected to contribute massively to the growing of the media houses. Through the diversification and multiplication of methods of gathering, processing and transmitting news and knowledge – including knowledge hitherto inaccessible – ICTs will have increasing effects on daily life. ICTs have revolutionized the news/information sourcing, gathering, processing and distribution of media products for the past decade in industrialized nations. Those countries because of the benefits or the need for perfection have invested in additional research aimed at making ICTs more efficient so as to cope with the demands of consumers in today's information driven-world. In Nigeria, the public affairs reporter can be said to have a more theoretical familiarity with these ICTs than practical knowledge as most media houses are in the process of conversion or application of ICTs to their operations.

Mediamorphosis: This is a communication concept coined by Roger Fidler in 1990. The term refers to the transformation of communication media brought about by the interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures as well as social and technological

innovations. Instead of studying each new media form independently, mediamorphosis advocates that all forms should be examined as members of an interdependent system and to note the similarities and relationships that exist among past, present and emerging forms. Fidler (1997:20) defines mediamorphosis as" a unified way of thinking about the technological evolution of communication media" The principle of mediamorphosis is developed from these concepts: coexistence and coevolution, convergence and complexity. All forms of communication are tightly woven into the fabric of the human communication system and cannot exist independently from one another in our culture. As each new form emerges and develops, it influences over time and to different degrees, the development of every other existing form. Coevolution and coexistence, rather than sequential evolution and replacement have been the norm. This means that each new medium does not come into existence as an entirely new technological innovation but is developed from an existing medium or an improvement of an existing medium and instead of replacing the old medium, exists side by side with it.

Public Affairs Reporting: The theories of normative journalism suggest that the proper goal of news reporting is public enlightenment so that the citizenry can engage in effective self governance. These theories assume the news media will emphasize public affairs coverage including stories related to government, as well as community and foreign affairs in an effort to create a "world community by giving men everywhere knowledge of the world and one another …" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947:4). Public Affairs Reporting (PAR) according to Udoakah (2005) revolves around policies and actions deliberately targeted to impact on national life or the life of the citizenry in the state or local government areas. Where such actions or policies innocently impact negatively or have a negative fallout in the country, state and local government areas, these policies or fallouts are supposed to be reported. PAR also covers issues which do not demonstrate negative impacts, yet elicit reactions from the citizens like the violation of human rights. Issues bordering on the interest of the ordinary citizens, rich and the poor, artisans and professionals in various fields are also of interest to the public affairs reporter.

By Public affairs, we refer to those issues that are of interest to the constituencies of those in the ruling group and how their policies may influence their actions and policies and impact on the everyday lives of the people. Public affairs reporting is also an evaluation of the social, political and economic progress in a country, state or local government using information gleaned from a variety of sources. The public affairs reporter is expected to alert the public to what the elected officials and political appointees are doing or are failing to do on their behalf. This is intended to improve their decision making, make them more accountable and responsive on issues of public interest. Public affairs reporting are deliberately involved in development in every facet of life. It is a mirror reflecting the images of the inter-play of policies, actions and declaration back to the authors and the observers.

Specific Activities Which Constitute Public Affairs
With the advent of ICTs, scholars have closely examined important facets of public affairs reporting. Most notably, the coverages of political campaigns, legislative debates and special commission hearings today are gravitating. They have determined, among other things' that

campaign stories are more likely to be episodic than thematic (Iyenger, 1991) Legislative stories are more likely to be framed as "horse races" than debates over issues (Johnson, 1993; Petterson, 1973). The changes are noteworthy in light of recent developments that show that television news is emerging as a consistent source of knowledge about public affairs and government position on issues (Chaffe, Zhao and Leshner, 1994, Leshner and Mckean, 1997).

To situate the main focus of this paper, attempt is made here to highlight some activities and beats which constitute public affairs. This exercise is not however exhaustive but will provide a beginning familiarity with the business of reporting the affairs of the public.

The **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)** have their watchdog duties and roles tailored to a specific professional issue or department, which they report, from time to time. They investigate, interpret and report issues, which the media traditionally may overlook. For example Amnesty International reports on prison life and human rights violation, Transparency International reports on corruption index of countries on a yearly basis. In Nigeria, the Civil liberties Organisations (CLO) reports on major human rights issues and elections. The public affairs reporter is expected to investigate their findings and report them in the media. Foreign relations with other nations in the area of economic relations, trade agreements, economic assistance, defence pacts and joint military maneuvers, emigration – all these fall within the purview of public affairs reporting. **Defence policies, budgets** and arms development, sales and control and involvement in conflicts. **Domestic issues** of a country, human resources, environment, energy, transportation, health policies, agricultural development, science and technology. **Civil rights and liberties, laws** and practice, social control mechanism, law enforcement, drug control, economic control, economic reforms, taxation, banking etc. **Government institutions** like the presidency, National Assembly, the judiciary, state and federal legislatures, the Police, Army, parastatals etc. **Government Earnings**; Budgets, relations with world financial bodies – IMF, World Bank, Paris club, G8. etc. (Udoakah, 2005).

It must be noted however that the sphere is a relatively large one and development in one area is very likely to impact on the other and trigger a chain reaction. Hence, they must be diligently investigated, analysed interpreted and presented to the public.

ICTS ane New Reporting

Since the invention of the printing press and in more recent times of a multitude of communication forms including telegraph, telephone, telex, facsimile, camera and film, phonograph, radio and television, and video camera, the world of news reporting has been tremendously transformed. The changing face of media technology has always implied a changing role, demanding greater acumen and skill from the public affairs reporter. In the 80s the introduction and use of computers, data banks, satellites and facsimile transmission was to create what UNESCO called the new science of "informatics" (UNESCO, 1981:12).

Developments in the area of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the 90s have been tremendous. Distance has ceased to be an obstacle and the internet linking any point on the planet to another in split seconds has become rapidly cheaper and is by nature extremely flexible. Electronic communications which for long were restricted to communication between individuals are increasingly available for use in mass

communication. The contents of messages now are diversified, localised, individualized, customized and value-added to a large extent. These developments have been attributed not only to technological breakthroughs but "because there is a consciousness of opportunities and needs – social, political, economic, cultural or spiritual" (UNESCO, 1981). As the society and state become increasingly intermeshed and pro-active with government agencies and the media encroaching and mingling on what had been the domain of private life, the needs for contact, exchange of knowledge, reporting of events and developments, within nations and between nations became more imperative and demanding.

This is the challenge facing the public affairs reporter as he is expected to use available technology to provide news laced with interpretation, live reports, researched and transparent news to quench the thirst for news in today's information society. In meeting this onerous task, the public affairs reporter is expected to deal with the challenge of upholding the tenets of the media; create greater access to information, reports news to identify and strengthened social structure and solve societal and economic problems.

The Changing Tools of Public Affairs Reporting
Before now, the pen, news pad, pocket cassette recorder, still photographic camera and video camera were the traditional hallmark tools of the public affairs reporter. Today, many of the tools have been replaced by slim, fast, compact and connectable digital tools as the table below shows.

Traditional Public Affairs Reporting Tools	Modern Digital Tools
Fixed Telephone	Mobile phone, Satellite phone,Internet Phone
Fax Machines	E-mail, scanners
Micro Cassette Recorders	Phone Recorders, flash disc recorders, ultra slim recorders
Still Camera (Photographic)	Digital Camera, lap tops, scanners and printers
Walkie Talkies (Radio)	Satellite Phones
Teleprinters	Internet – Intranets (Networks)
Typewriter	Computer – (Laptops)
Video Cassette Camera	Digital Camera Recorder (Camcorders) Video Phone
Calculators, Logarithm books	Computers – SPSS Software
Questionnaire	SMS Questionnaire

Table 5.1: Showing Traditional PAR Tools and their Modern Replacements

Theoretical Framework
The changing face of media by the application of technology makes Marshall McLuhan's technological determinism theory with two relevant sub- theses appropriate for this paper. We shape our tools and they in turn shape us.The Electronic Age – the rise of the global village . McLuhan's theory of technological determinism postulates that inventions in technology invariably cause cultural change. This means that the changes in modes of

communication shape human existence. It also shapes human behaviour, attitudes, wants and way of doing things. This explains the need for new skills, new methods of reporting the news, all shaped by the new tools of technology applied in the media today. To be able to enjoy the profit of these tools and the shaping process, we must be able to access the ICT world which practically brings us in touch with everyone, everywhere instantaneously. Therefore, McLuhan pictured all of us as members of a single global village. Hence, McLuhan (1969:70) in an interview commented on the global village visionary reality thus:

The day of the individualist, of privacy, of fragmented or "applied" knowledge, of "points of view" and specialist goals is being replaced by the over-all awareness of a mosaic world in which space and time are overcome by television, jets and computers- a simultaneous, "all-at-once" world in which everything resonates with everything else as in a total electrical field

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

The need to embrace change in the business of reporting public affairs is an innovation for many reporters and needs to be actualised to make an impact in their output. Diffusion is defined as "the process by which an innovation is adopted and gains acceptance by members of a certain community (Rogers, 1995:10). According to Rogers, a number of factors interact to influence the diffusion of an innovation.The innovation itself, how information about the innovation is communicated, time and the nature of the social system into which the innovation is being introduced (Rogers, 1995).

Diffusion research therefore, in its simplest form, investigates how these major factors, and a multitude of other factors, interact to facilitate or impede the adoption of a specific product or practice among members of a particular adopter group. Rogers (1995) describes several ways that innovations can be characterized, but a particularly relevant insight in relation to ICT use is the recognition that sometimes multiple innovations must be adopted simultaneously. From this viewpoint, it is clear that ICTs should be seen, not as representing a single innovation, but rather an innovation clusters. Innovation cluster occurs when a group of innovations are adopted in some combination. In making an adoption decision, all members of the cluster do not have to be selected, but is like that some will be adopted together.

In addition to chacterising innovations, the diffusion of innovation paradigm maps out the adoption process. The decision process begins with knowledge of the existence of the innovation. This is followed by a persuasion period which ends with a decision to adopt or reject the innovation. If the decision is in favour of adoption an implementation phase follows. This is a critical period, as it requires overt action on the part of adopters. Rogers (1995:14) notes that "it is often one thing for an individual to decide to adopt a new idea, but quite a different thing to put the innovation into use". The last phase of confirmation therefore may see the innovation being incorporated into the culture of the user population or it may undergo changes (re-invention) or it may be discontinued. Diffusion of innovation theory therefore provides a powerful framework for understanding the innovation of using ICTs to re-engineer the business of reporting public affairs by media reporters. It will also provide a useful insight for exploring the challenges they faced in the adoption process.

Trends and Challenges in Reporting Public Affairs in Today ICT– Driven World

 The past decade has witnessed fundamental changes in the mass media environment. The format and innovations of contemporary media technologies have created new ways of communicating and reaching audiences. New actors, such as talk show hosts and tabloid reporters, have entered the public affairs communications environment, altering the rules by which journalists, leaders, and citizens negotiate the public sphere. The nature and trend of public affairs news have changed, becoming almost inextricably infused with entertainment and data content. According to Schudson (1998), political elites keep abreast of talk radio discussions as a gauge of public opinion. This involvement has been aided by media publicity and an interactive communication forum which allows people to express their opinions, ask for and obtain information quickly, and receive instructions about how to take action. There is already evidence that the general public is becoming involved in public affairs reporting and is becoming a greater resource for news stories, as reporters will go online to solicit ideas and reactions to events and issues. Researchers have also identified that the media are increasingly avoiding presenting complex world problem while reporting public affairs. While foreign news media coverage focuses on major domestic events, it also thrives on breaking stories which emphasize violence, disaster, and novelty while more significant long-range developments in foreign nations go unreported. Advances in technology such as portable cameras and satellite capacity are expected to result in greater geographical and topical coverage of foreign and international affairs coverage, will be boosted the potentials of the new technologies.

McManus (1992, 1994) argues that the changes in the nature of public affairs reporting can be explained by micro economic theory. He points out that the new trend in public affairs reporting is expected with the application of ICT and is likely to blossom in an environment of increasing competition among news providers. McManus argues that journalistic ideals have not triumphed in the United States because news is a commodity with the goal of profit maximization; a news organisation's primary customer is not the viewer as citizen, but rather the advertiser who pays for the delivery of an audience. In Nigeria, the ownership influence is gradually wearing off as commercial news organisations' goals have shifted from public education to public attention with each medium struggling to be the first to report what's news. This has left most government struggling to make an impact. Other trends and challenges are recorded in the sphere of:

Live Reporting: The challenge of reporting public affairs as they unfold or break is in much demand from the media houses and the public. The break-in came in 1993 during the Gulf War when CNN reported the war live and beamed life pictures into many households using mobile satellite antennas that linked them up with their base station in the US. Life reporting involves dangers, professional experience and a great mastery of the new ICTs. Each medium of communication sets new rules for effective live coverage of event. Each newsbreak requires a new set of equipment.

    The development of small, lightweight video cameras – Camcorders meant that pictures can be captured easily and much faster. Advances in satellite and microwave technology also made it possible to broadcast live from the scene of a major story. Because of the avalanche of technology used, live reporting is also called Electronic News Gathering (ENG) and Satellite News Gathering (SNG). ENG allows TV news to take advantage of

the immediacy of its live reports and adds another dimension to its coverage and a lot of leads for the print journalist. On the other hand, live coverage is unedited coverage and this raises the probability that inaccuracies might make it on the air. Also, live reports run the risk of violating the standards of ethics or good taste but for its high credibility value it has become the height of public affairs reporting and a challenge every public affairs reporter must meet.

Computer–Assisted Reporting: The computer is at the hub of modern ICTs and advances in software have made it a veritable gadget in the newsroom, apart from its traditional role of word-processing which makes the jobs of reporters and editors easier. With the arrival of spreadsheets and other statistical programmes, reporters are able to do a quick and detailed analysis of large bodies of data. Through analysis, trends and other findings that otherwise might be extremely difficult to detect are easily identified (Dominick, 1999). Reports on readers' opinion on a particular issue are produced immediately the data are collected and inputted into the computer system. With the availability of more data on disk or online databases about government and organisations in the world wide web domain of the Internet, the public affairs reporter in Nigeria is expected to be a very strong player and user of computer assisted reporting, which is the backbone of today's' precision journalism.

Terminology: Public affairs Reporting cuts across many spheres of human life and endeavour. The genre of reporting expects the reporter while offering the news in plain language, to weigh the effect and meaning of words and terminology used. Many public affairs events today are reported with language that fail to give understanding or terminology that render the story bland. There are great differences in meaning between the word "crisis" and "disaster" and a "riot" and a "melee" in describing a public scene or commotion. The public affairs reporter must meet this challenge by reviewing his repertoire of journalism terms.

Transparency: Transparency can be defined simply as openness. It refers to the willingness of government and the organized private sector to provide information about their actions to both domestic and international audiences (Greenwood, 2004).
Domestic transparency refers to the ease or difficulty with which a country's own legislature, plus the media, interest groups, civil society and the public at large can see what is going on. International transparency concerns the ease or difficulty with which other countries or media can observe the state's affairs. Media transparency is therefore the willingness of the media to report the action of personalities, government, developments and issues to the public. Although there is an awareness of the desirability of increasing levels of transparency, some constraints are still prevalent such as the media ownership structure which greatly influenced media transparency especially as the government and the actions of government constitute almost 80% of what is public affairs in Nigeria. In Nigeria, government is still the major media owner. Government style: Many democratizing states are now keen to develop a transparent culture of operation, but as a result of the damage inflicted by dictatorial governments of yesteryears, so many public servants are not granted access to certain types of information, nor are they allowed to discuss issues with the

press, as a result, the ability of Public affairs reporters to contribute to policy formation is severely restricted. Poor Information Sharing Mechanisms: In Nigeria, the clearance and classification systems vary from Ministry to Ministry and between ministries and command (either military or police) headquarters. This makes the day-to-day business of government far more difficult to conduct and conducting a survey or in crisis situation it becomes all but impossible to achieve a co-ordinated response or post an untainted data to support stories. In today's ICTs driven world, the PA reporter is expected to have these constraints in mind to be able to surmount such difficulties to be relevant in today's information society.

Precision Reporting: This is the application of social and behaviourial science research methods to the practice of journalism. According to Meyer (2004), precision journalism has demonstrated the applicability of social science research methods to the very real problems of newsgathering in an increasingly complex society:

> It produced work that both the researchers and the craft people
> could appreciate. The tools of sampling, computer analysis, and
> statistical inference increased the traditional power of the reporter
> without changing the nature of his or her mission – to find the facts,
> to understand them, and to explain them without wasting time

Precision journalism actually is not a new challenge to the business of reporting public affairs. But the development in these areas heralded by ICTs pose a new challenge to the average public affairs reporter. Before now reporters conducted their polls, designed their research, use charts, calculators and logarithm books to analyse and interpret data.   ICTs have changed all that today. The journalist does not only have access to information in databanks across the world but can get in touch with respondents in very relative time using the Internet. The increasing availability of computers makes large bodies of data available to journalists in a way that was not possible before. According to Meyer (2004:3) "the new precision journalism is scientific journalism. It means treating journalism as if it were a science, adopting scientific method, scientific objectivity and scientific ideals to the entire process of mass communication".

     The challenge facing today's public affairs reporter is that he should be computer literate and Internet savvy to be able to report, developments and trends precisely. He must strive to have a functional familiarity with the special package for the social science (SPSS) software, which has been accepted worldwide in analyzing social data. According to Meyer "today's journalists are in charge of the entire process from conception, through research design, to analysis and interpretation. The precision journalist does not hire a pollster to create a news event; the journalist becomes the pollster.

Electronic Publishing: The media fad now is the resort by the electronic and print media to publishing their contents or news online. The consumer now has access to information from different media with different angles and slants. The public affairs reporter therefore needs to develop the skills of digital technology and the Internet to enable him be involved in the production and accessing of websites for information, participation in

teleconferencing and online discussion and interview of news sources and personalities. This is a challenge the public affairs reporter must contend with as websites are becoming more sophisticated everyday as some contain original materials as well as links to related sites and search engines that allow users to scan their archives for material. Some other websites are interactive, some combining sound and video to complement words.

Recommendations

The potential of new technologies to foster economic growth, facilitate capacity building and knowledge sharing is particularly important to the public affairs reporter in Nigeria where reporting is hampered by a myriad of problems – lack of incentives, lack of new tools and equipment, unfavourable working conditions and influx of many people into the profession. ICTs can play a major role in facilitating new and efficient communication network for the reporter and increase the sense of identity and enhance professionalism.

To aid the public affairs reporter to meet the challenges of reporting news in the present ICTs driven world, this paper recommends practical training of reporters in the use and capabilities of new ICTs. This can be done by media houses or the journalist themselves. The focus should be in the development of new paradigms for reporting based on new knowledge about reporting, about analysis, self-esteem and intelligence. Every reporter should be encouraged to type his or her story in the computer and saves it. Reporters should be able to open their e-mail account, read and reply to mails and navigate the Internet. There is no doubt that, eventually, the norm will be that technology will make for flexible way of reporting public affairs. Curriculum Enrichment: The curricula of universities, polytechnics and journalism schools need to be either reviewed or enriched with aspects of ICT training. This is necessary to ensure that young graduates from Communication schools or departments are trained on the workings of new ICTs. This way, they will be equipped to handle the challenges of reporting public affairs today. This recommendation is borne out of the fact that reportorial posts are always the stepping-stone in the media industry. Provision of ICTs: An enriched curriculum will certainly make a lot of impact practically if these ICTs are provided in schools and media industries. .

Conclusion

This paper has delved into the problems facing today's public affair reporter in Nigeria. The business of the media is changing; hence the public affairs reporter must change with a commensurate speed. The workplace and journalism schools and departments are in a position to prepare the public affairs reporter for these challenges. But change must be embraced by all.

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