

Rethinking International News Flow in the Era of Social Media

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Abstract

This paper discusses current trends in international news flow and communication, which have emerged because of the impact of social media on international communication. Our argument here is that the international communication scene, especially in areas highlighted in this paper, has undergone dramatic changes in the later part of this century because of the unpredictable consequences of social media on the processes and procedures of communication. We further argue that the future of international communication remain fluid because of the further sophistication in New Media technology envisaged. Using a recent profile of news coverage by the traditional media in comparison to Social Media coverage as a prototype of a typical situation in developed and developing societies, this paper argues that Social Media have altered the international communication arena substantially leading to people journalism. The paper also argues that the traditional debates of who sets public agenda amongst the Government, the media, and the people as well as the gatekeeping notion have all been rearticulated with the current realities posed

by Social Media Networks.

Keywords: International communication, News Flow Debate, Social Media Networks, People Journalism, Agenda Setting,

Introduction

The pattern of news flow and information globally, again, has attracted scholarly attention and research in this decade following the emergence of Social Media Networks (SMNs) like *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *Twitter*, and *Hi5*. These SMNs have revolutionalized international news flow and communication in ways unimaginable. No study or literature seems to suggest that any international communication scholar or study ever predicted the very outcome and nature of the emergence of SMN in the sourcing and dissemination of news globally or within countries.

However, the Marshall McLuhan's concept of a Global Village was very close to what now exists in the international communication scene. The concept, which saw possibilities in the way New Communication Technologies will define communities and relationships, is now more real than ever before. McLuhan was obviously on point to imagine such possibilities. However, he was particularly interested in the potentials and threats posed by the continued sophistication in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) than how the content will define or redefine international news flow patterns. So, our argument that SMNs have really revolutionalized the international communication scene in the 21st century is corroborated.

This paper, therefore, discusses current trends and patterns in international news flow and communication, which have emerged because of the impact of social media on international communication. Our argument here is that the international communication scene, especially in areas highlighted in this paper, has undergone dramatic changes in the later part of this

century because of the unpredictable consequences of social media on the processes and procedures of communication. We further argue that the future of international communication remains fluid because of the further sophistication in New Media technology envisaged.

To support the above claims further, the authors used a recent profile of news coverage by the traditional media and compared this to social media coverage to determine if a relationship exists between what the traditional media are focusing on and what SMNs are focusing on. In essence, are there changes, because of the emergence of SMNs in the international communication scene? In the traditional debates of who sets public and media agenda amongst the Government, the media, and the people, are changes noticeable and impactful? Is the gatekeeping notion undergoing reassessment following the current realities posed by Social Media Networks? Are there other perceived influences of SMNs on international news flow and communication beyond content and setting agenda? Will SMNs finally nail the coffin on the Global News Flow Debates?

The nub of this paper lies in these posers and the attempt to find answers to them. To do this effectively, the authors again evaluated the now comatose debate on the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) but with emphasis on the identified flaws in the international flow of news. Following this important evaluation, we considered the literature along the lines of a New Debate provoked by the emergence of SMNs. This analysis will obviously bring out the impact of Social Media Networks on international news flow and communication, generally.

The Old Debate: NWICO and the Flaws in Global Information Flow

The New World Information and Communication Order, popularly referred to as NWICO, is a conceptual framework that attempted to spur the debate which was provoked by the cries of

marginalization by developing and third world nations on how global communication resources are being managed and distributed. According to Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012) citing Sreberny-Mohammed *et al* (1984), Ekeanyanwu (2006 & 2008), and de Beer (2010); the News Flow Debate (NFD) refers to the way developing nations demanded for change in the early 1980s in the pattern of news flow between them and the Western industrialized nations. This debate was a core issue in the now stalled discourse on the New World Information and Communication Order. The debate was about free flow or free and balanced flow of information between the Western developed nations and the developing societies in the Southern part of the world, popularly referred to as the Third World nations.

Okigbo (1996) argued that even though the world is a free marketplace of ideas where information flow should not be hindered, the West's reluctance to recognize that the saturation of the underdeveloped African nations with news reports and cultural artefacts from the West was a concern to the stability of the Third World's cultural heritage and progress. The argument was that whatever the West called global free flow of information and news was, in fact, a euphemism for the economic, political and cultural domination of developing nations. This is made possible by the independent and well-established international news agencies that exist in the industrialized western nations.

The major focus of the developing nations' grievance was that there is a deliberate attempt by the developed countries to establish and perpetuate domination in mass media systems over the developing nations both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative imbalance is about the amount of news flowing from industrialized nations to the developing nations and vice versa. Ekeanyanwu (2007) and Ochogwu (1987) argued that developing nations are covered in the Western media only when some bizarre incident or disaster/crisis oriented event occurs. In a similar study, Ekeanyanwu (2005) also noted that of the ten percent news stories that the non-industrialized nations get from coverage in the global

news media, 90 percent of those stories are about events that negatively depict these countries. This is qualitative imbalance (Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters, 2012).

The implication of this is that news about the Third World's poverty, hunger, political struggles, diseases, wars, coup d'états, disasters and other forms of crises are heavily reported in the Western media to the annoying neglect of other good or positive oriented news stories. This qualitative imbalance in the coverage of the developing nations is what Chimamanda Adichie called "*The Danger of a Single Story*", noting that the problem with single stories is that they may not be false but at the same time, they are not the entire story. A certain part has been selfishly left out to support the propaganda intentions of the storytellers.

Egwu (2001) highlighted the developing nation's predicament by juxtaposing its situation to the media saturation in the United States: The United States has over 25,000 periodicals; over 1,200 book publishers; over 10,000 radio stations (AM & FM); over 1,000 television stations; and some 26 million other types of (e.g. citizens band) radios. There is therefore a situation of media monopoly by the North, not only in hardware, but also in software. News Agencies also abound in the North... to the annoying neglect and marginalization of the South, especially Africa.

Despite the establishment of national and regional news agencies, this situation did not change in the 1990s and 2000s as much as it was necessary. In Africa, for instance, there is still increasing concern among African countries that the news coverage of their affairs by foreign news agencies is grossly inadequate (Golan, 2008; de Beer, 2010). While most media houses in Africa have regular slots and spaces for news originating from the developed world, Kalyango (2010) cited in Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012) argued that African countries were neither quantitatively covered in the traditional media of the Western world nor qualitatively covered in the traditional media with predominantly positive developmental news.

The MacBride Commission, which was set up in December 1977 by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to study communication problems globally states in its final report that:

While there is a flood of news on the East/West axis between North America and Europe, as well as, although on a lower level, between socialist and Western countries, the much lesser one-way flow between North and South can hardly be called an exchange due to the excessive imbalance (MacBride et al, 1981).

This leads us to one of the major issues that was critically analyzed in the NWICO debate. This issue is the existence of flaws in the global flow of world news and communication messages. Some of the problems or flaws identified in global information flows are discussed below:

Free Flow

The free flow of information ideology is a sister to the freedom of information doctrine being canvassed for by the developed, western capitalist nations. To really understand the free flow doctrine and why it has come to be regarded as a flaw in global information flow, we need to understand first the basic principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1946. This Declaration states, inter alia, that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

The free flow of information concept, therefore, came about in the quest to implement the basic principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as quoted above. This free flow, without sounding simplistic, is the movement of mass media messages and cultural products, etc, across boundaries or from one nation to the other without any form of restriction or inhibition. Free flow of information, ordinarily is a positive oriented concept because it allows for the expression of opinion

and the dissemination of such opinion (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

However, it became a problem or a flaw in international communication flow because overemphasis was placed on one of the components of this flow to the disadvantage of the others. We must state clearly here that if people or nations have more possibilities to receive information, the same is not true for other main components implied in the freedom of information doctrine. Two of these components – “the right to seek” and “the right to impact” information have been widely and frequently neglected. Only the “right to receive” has been given undue emphasis. This is not supposed to be so as it has made developing nations to become mere consumers of information in whatever taste they are produced. In the same vein, it has also made the developed capitalist nations (the West) the major if not the only producers, and therefore, distributors of world news and information. This consequently led to a conflict between the developed and the developing nations over the ideal type of flow to encourage. While the developed nations are rooting for the “free flow” ideology, the developing nations are against it. In its place, they demand for a “Free and Balanced Flow” principle (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

One-Way Flow

One-way flow is also known as “Unidirectional Flow”. This type of flow resulted from the implementation of the free flow principle discussed above. One-way or unidirectional flow is an imbalance in global information sourcing and distribution. This flow is directed basically from developed to developing nations; bigger to smaller countries or from those countries with power and technological superiority to those less advanced in technology and know-how. The one-way flow historically is traceable to cultural and linguistic patterns between the developed and the developing nations, which was established during the colonial era. The former colonial powers used this means to maintain socio-political cum economic ties with their former colonies (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

The MacBride Commission (1980) reported this very clearly in the Final Report to the General Conference of UNESCO thus:

The one way direction is based on links from former colonial periods and surviving economic ties, as well as cultural and language influences. Historical links between former colonial powers and other onetime possessions produced a selection, both of editorial decision and interest among readers; Zimbabwe is a major topic in the British press, while the French press devoted far more space to the Central African Republic. The process can work the other way too, causing the Indian reader to know more about political developments in Britain than in France or Germany (MacBride et al, 1981, p. 145).

The one-way flow of global information is regarded as a flaw in communication flows because of the reasons stated above and because it tends towards a North–South direction and inhibits development of exchanges between developing nations, especially. This unidirectional flow between the North and South cannot be said to be a proper flow due to the excessive imbalance inherent in it. In addition, the problems raised by the one-way flow of information and the existence of monopolistic and oligopolistic trends in international communication have been widely and variously discussed at many international conferences, seminars and symposia. Broadly speaking, however, the one-way flow is a reflection of the world's dominant political and socio-economic resources and structures, which tend to reinforce the dependence of the 'have-not' nations in the 'have' or rich nations. Because of this, the 'have' or rich nations have structures and resources to support their domineering role in international communication. Thus, the world receives or gets about 82 percent of its news from New York, Paris and London (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Vertical Flow

Vertical flow tends to explain the movement of news and information resources and messages from top downwards. There is little difference between vertical flow and one-way flow. Vertical flow is from top downwards and is usually unidirectional like one-way flow. Vertical flow is a problem in communication because it does not encourage access and participation of the public. It is highly dictatorial in the sense that a country or some few countries dictate the content of the flow and are always the producers and distributors, while the majority of other countries are just mere receivers/consumers that are influenced by this type of flow to remain so (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Jean d' Arcy (1980, p. 125) cited in Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012) describe vertical flow in the following words:

Over 50 years' experience of the mass media – press, film, radio, television – have conditioned us, both at the national and international levels, to a single kind of information flow, which we have come to accept as normal and indeed as the only possible kind: a vertical, one-way flow from top downwards to non-diversified anonymous messages, produced by a few and addressed to all. This is not communication.

Vertical flow is intended to produce an efficient and smoothly functioning society. Even if this objective is realistic, it will be for a short time especially when society would be insulated from outside and outer influences. In the end, however, vertical flow will surely lead to social or societal breakdown. Communication based on free response and free exchange is not only more genuine and more humane, but is also a better safeguard of social harmony. In addition, vertical flow produces in advanced societies, a large volume of information. However, the information is offered indiscriminately, is not addressed to distinct and separate

audiences, and is not conceived in response to human needs and demands. This has led some observers to point to “information overload” – a situation or phenomenon that can lead to mental confusion, alienation, or withdrawal into passivity (MacBride *et al*, 1981, p. 151).

Again, the recommendation of the MacBride Commission on this issue will form our conclusion on the matter. According to them,

The predominantly downward flow of communication is one of its major flaws. A trend towards broader horizontal exchanges would liberate many more voices for communication and open up diverse new sources. However, more freedom to communicate is not synonymous with everyone having the opportunity to say whatever he wishes to whomever he wishes, at any time and in anyway. Obviously, each person will never have the possibility or the means to communicate with everyone. But increased participation by more people in communication activities should be accelerated to advance the trends towards the democratization of the communication process and expansion of multidirectional information flows – up, down and across – from a multitude of sources. Full development of such trends will depend on the extent of popular demand and participation, as well as on public support and encouragement.

Marketing–Oriented Flow

Today, media products and the content of communication are treated as commodities meant to be sold in order to make profits. The sourcing of the content of communication as well as its distribution is based on set commercial interests, which determine how, when, what and how global news and information are sourced and distributed. The type of flow, which results in the

scenario described above, is called market-oriented or market-dominated flow. This flow defines the type of flow which occurs in the flow of international communication when the major and, in fact, the only determinant in what constitutes the content of communication as well as the manner of its distribution is a set commercial interests. In essence, marketing-oriented flow explains the commercialization of the broad field of communication and, in this instance, international communication (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

This flow is regarded as a flaw in communication flow because it treats the content of communication as mere merchandise and the operations of communication are also treated as mere commercial activities. This implies that the field of international communication only deals with buyers and sellers of communication wares or commodities. The sellers package their commodity in a way to attract the buyers to fulfill a commercial need. This situation may not be entirely wrong but its emphasis has changed the concept of communication. The social service aspect of many communication media and vehicles has diminished considerably, just as the quality of a large portion of information and messages have decreased their value as a social good (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

We are not against commercial considerations in the field of communication and do not argue that business considerations are seldom absent from decisions which affect choices and priorities in the communication field. Our concern is that the content of communication should not be treated as a mere commodity and the flow should not reflect such wrong perception. Ultimately, the content of communication should be chosen because of genuine need or in response to public interest. Creativity, originality and factors of cultural promotion and tastes should also play their different roles in the selection. The marketing-oriented flow, which results when undue emphasis is placed on commercial interest, should be fashioned out in order to give way to a more equitable, horizontally and balanced flow of

communication. This will make international communication to take its place as an effective tool in international relations and diplomacy (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

The New Debate: Emergence/Influence of Social Media Networks on International Communication

Social Media Networks could be classified as the ninth Wonder of the world because such media platforms are becoming increasingly connected, interactive, participatory, integrative, community based, ubiquitous, and digital! According to Mitu (2012, p. 618), “Social network sites, such as *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *Hi5*, *Twitter*, have attracted millions of users since their introduction. Many of their users have integrated these social networking sites into their daily practices. The social networking sites are diverse; some of them support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks while others help strangers get in touch based on shared interests, political views, or activities.”

Ellison (2008, p. 211) cited by Mitu (2012, p. 618) also note that social networking sites are “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

Mitu (2012, p. 619) attempted to trace the history of SMN thus:

The first social network site was *SixDegrees.com*, launched in 1997. It was the first site which combined the feature of having a profile and friends list, compared to *Classmates.com* that allowed people to connect with high school or college classmates but the users could not create profiles or have friends' lists. In 2000, *SixDegrees.com* service closed. During 1997-2001, another social network sites developed, such as *Asian Avenue*, *BlackPlanet*, *MiGente*,

LiveJournal, *Cyworld* (1999), *LunarStorm* (2000), all of them followed by *Ryze.com* (2001), *Tribe.net*, *LinkedIn*, *Friendster*. From 2003 onward, many new social network sites were launched but not all of them survived. *MySpace* (2003) and *Facebook* (2004) are still in use.

In an attempt to support the thesis that SMNs have revolutionized the use of Internet for communication and other purposes, Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2012, p. 302) citing Marwell & Oliver (1993) observe that “social network sites have several affordances for promoting participation, particularly protest behavior among youths. They facilitate access to large number of contacts, thereby enabling social movements to reach critical mass.” They further observe that by “allowing multiple channels for interpersonal feedback, peer acceptance, and reinforcement of group norms, these sites also promote the construction of personal and group identities that are key antecedents of protest behavior.”

Continuing, Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2012, p. 302) citing Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela (2011), Kobayashi, Ikeda & Miyata (2006) note thus:

Social network sites function as information hubs that allow users to remain in contact and exchange updates regarding their activities with others that share their interests. Those who belong to social movements and political groups can thus build relationships with one another, receive mobilizing information that they may not obtain elsewhere, thus expanding their opportunities to engage in political activities.

Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zuniga (2011) cited in Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman (2012) also opine that social media are effective means of interaction because they help participants and users find a place and a basis for conversation and social communication. They also help users find family, lost and

new friends, social groupings and alignment according to certain primordial interests.

Concerning how the emergence of SMNs has changed the debate on international news flow and communication, the following question becomes pertinent. How do the contemporary social media and other online *World Information and Communication Order* stack up with UNESCO's debate and mantra that it championed in the 1980s as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)? Very obvious indeed! The emergence of SMNs into the international news flow controversy added a unique twist into the global News Flow Debate. It may have led to the deconstruction of the structure of what was considered then as a unique domestic newsgathering and dissemination process. de Beer (2010) who argues that informal news institutions, which serve as pervasive agents of globalization and universal alignment, now tend towards democratization, further supports this. On the other hand, Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012) also note that social networking sites support the human need for social interaction at the global level, using Internet and web-based technologies to transform the electronic media monologues into social media dialogues.

Facebook, for example, is one of the most popular of the social media networks from the West, and one of the most visited social networking sites with more than 21 million registered members generating 1.6 billion page views per day. The site is tightly integrated into the daily media practices of its users. By 2005, a typical user spent about 20 minutes a day on the site and two-thirds of its users logged in at least once a day (Cassidy, 2006). Current literature seems to suggest that these figures have since doubled. According to Mitu (2012), today, *Facebook* is the most popular social networking site, with more than 175 million active users. Therefore, we can state that in order to exist today people and events have to embrace social media.

Social Media Networks have created unique relationships and virtual communities of sorts. According to Ekeanyanwu,

Kalyango and Peters (2012, p. 146):

The online or virtual community created by the social networking sites is one of a kind. It is an active community and quite inquisitive in its web surfing habits about issues around them. It thrives on interactivity, open conversations and mass participation. Before their emergence, traditional or formal media channels seemed to have been weighed down by economic, political and other nonprofessional considerations in the coverage of world news. The social networks thrive on citizens or civic journalism whereby the liberalization of the new media, accessibility, production of content, and its delivery on the World Wide Web have made a myriad of news and educational information available to more persons at a marginal cost than ever before.

Continuing, the authors compared information flows between social media networks and mainstream media in the United States to ascertain that global news flow pattern has not really changed much in terms of social media participation in the news flow process. In essence, both the mainstream media (traditional media in this instance) and the SMNs (New Media in this sense) are talking about the same or similar issues. See Table 1 below:

Table 1: News Topics across Media Platforms

News Topics Across Media Platforms				
January 19, 2009 – January 15, 2010*				
	Blogs	Twitter	YouTube	Traditional Press
	(% of stories)	(% of stories)	(% of videos)	(% of newshole)
Politics/Government	17%	6%	21%	15%
Foreign Events (non-U.S.)	12	13	26	9
Economy	7	1	1	10
Technology	8	43	1	1
Health and Medicine	7	4	6	11

* Twitter was tracked from June 15, 2009 – January 15, 2010

Source: Pew Research Center (2010)

Furthermore, Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012, p. 157) also argue thus:

In the same thinking, we are inclined to conclude here that traditional media are no longer setting the public or media agenda alone. The emergence of social media networks has reset the calculations, opened up the space and attracted more participation in what people think they should be talking about. It will be therefore, in our own interpretation of the recent results in news flow studies, wrong to still conclude that the traditional news media are the sole agenda setters. Social media networks are in this for real and it does not look like their popularity is about to wane.

This leads us to other characteristics of SMNs, which also leads to these specific influences in the international news flow scene.

First, SMNs have made international newsgathering and dissemination more mass participatory. Everyone feel the process because they are part of it. SMNs have encouraged the otherwise hitherto media audience to be part of the newsgathering and dissemination business. You only need to own a smart phone or computer technology with Internet connectivity to practically become a “journalist”.

Second, which follows from the first is the debate on who is a journalist and if the conception of journalism has changed. Media scholars and commentators are now engaged in controversial debates about redefining the concept of journalism as well as who is a journalist to accommodate social media users and others like Asange of the infamous *Wikileaks*. The troubling situation here is the commentary raised by this valid question: Carrying a smart phone and tweeting unconfirmed stories to followers and non-followers alike, make one a journalist? Opinions on this may differ. While acknowledging the fact that smart phones and other supporting technologies have liberalized

news dissemination and information sharing across national and international boundaries; professional journalism is still much more than that. For instance, news streams on social media networks still suffer credibility problem that is the hallmark of professional journalism. This is just one case scenario. Issue of feedback, source identification etc continue to remain problematic for those who rely on social media networks for serious newsbreaks and follow-ups. The stories usually come with different twists that an inexperienced consumer could be frenzied in the midst of it all.

Third, SMNs have made news more interactive, leading to open conversations. Newsmakers and news watchers alike can use the social media platforms to engage in open conversations about themes of common interests and by so doing further engage the audience. The interactive nature of such social media platforms also stretches the news a bit so that credibility challenges may be reduced as many different sources could confirm or refute an angle of the twist to the news. In other words, the open and interactive nature of international news streaming on social media networks could be a good source for credibility as persons who are familiar with the correct version also have that platform to engage.

Fourth, SMNs have also liberalized the sourcing, dissemination, and gatekeeping of news and news sources. This is perhaps where the idea to redefine journalism and who a journalist is comes from. The liberalizing process makes it possible for all manner of persons and sources to be involved in the news production business. We will not be surprised to soon hear bloggers call themselves media owners or news publishers. However, as we have argued earlier, professional journalism remains a serious business.

There is also the question of credibility, which comes from having multiple newsgathering and dissemination sources and platforms. Anyone can take advantage to circulate falsehood and damage journalistic reputation, which is the bedrock of sound journalism. Multiple sources could also lead the news consumers having unusual opportunities to check and crosscheck the facts of

a story from different platforms. So, it has both disadvantages and advantages.

Social Media Networks have enhanced citizen/civic/people journalism. People are very conscious that they can be their own newsmakers and creators. The 21st century media audience is more alert to this responsibility and so we have more persons actively engaged in the news production business. People now see the need to add their own voice, help clarify issues, as well as share their views and positions just to enrich the process.

Beyond the one-off purchase of required apps and computer/mobile technology tools, news gathering and sharing in Social Media Networks are relatively cheap when compared to the now “traditional” forms and platforms like subscribing to pay TV. In essence, one only need a smart phone and Internet access to be actively engaged in the production and distribution of news even at the international level. No taxes, no license fees etc to increase ones operational costs. This again makes the social media platforms very attractive.

One core creation of SMNs is the emergence of virtual communities with solid social relationships and network of other news relationships. Online communities are now looking stronger than we have ever imagined. The invisibility that is credited to the Obama Campaign in 2008 and 2012 is associated with a strong virtual presence. It is said that Obama built a solid virtual community of voters and volunteers in US election history. His victories at both elections were credited to such online efforts. So, whether we like it or not, virtual communities have become a closely-knit unit we cannot ignore. Marriages have been enacted over such platforms and people actually have a virtual life!

Rethinking International News Flow and Communication: Concluding Arguments

The features of social media networks, some of which we have discussed here, have no doubt changed the debate and focus of international communication experts when it comes to international news flow patterns. Consequently, the old charges of

news bias, slanted portrayals and claims that certain places and people are usually misrepresented, under reported or inaccurately reported are fast becoming moot, as even some research efforts about African technologies (Fuchs and Horak, 2008; Ekeanyanwu, 2008 & 2010; Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and Nyaki, 2004) show innovative ways to engage the rest of the world in international communication. The emergence of social media networks, citizen reporters, and other technological, mass communication innovations has made it possible for most societies to tap into the World Wide Web and other digital or online devices to aggregate, tell and produce their own news or personal stories and other pertinent information. We no longer expect any community to watch and do nothing when single unrepresentative stories make the airwaves or print forms. Such communities now have acceptable platforms in social media networks to refute the danger associated with single stories.

Some scholars argued that if news and other pertinent information continued to interest a large number of people, then the global structure of news gathering and dissemination will follow the economic and political centres of the world (Chang et al., 2000; Fuchs, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005). This is not a new phenomenon, even at the beginning of the news flow debate; for instance, Sreberny-Mohammadi et al (1984) observed that in the emerging socio-political order of that time, international news coverage had often had a very close connection to the prevailing attitudes toward international politics (even in societies with the “freest” media). According to Turan and colleagues (2009), the small/weak nations only get attention when the “bad” news happens, if the foreign policy attention or priorities and the international market forces dictate as such, support this theory.

The power structures are also not clearly changing. de Beer (2010, p. 596) noted that the concept of global news is under theoretical construction, especially as it relates to news flow studies: “News media content in a globalizing world is becoming increasingly de-territorialized, involving complex relations and flows across national borders and continents. Consequently, it also

becomes more difficult to categorize news in the traditional binary fashion as either national or international/domestic and foreign news as was the tradition in news flow studies”.

de Beer (2010) further observes that the globalization of news flows have shown that the concept, “global news,” could perhaps transcend the dichotomy between international and local news found in most news flow studies. Borrowing from his earlier views, de Beer (2009 and 2010, p. 596) posits that if global news could transcend the dichotomy between international and national, then these concepts are in need of more stringent definition. For instance, are news reports of the global swine flu pandemic, or “blood diamonds” mined in Africa to pay for foreign armaments from European manufacturers, or the recession starting to bite in African countries as the West's “Credit Crunch” spreads, national or multi-national news? Are these stories bound to specific African countries, or are they rather part of global news, affecting not only specific countries in Africa, but also the world at large (de Beer, 2009 also in de Beer, 2010, p. 596).

However, some news flow studies posit that the global flow of news follows culturally narrow and ethnocentric media mappings. For instance, according to Chang and colleagues (2000), the developed and industrialized Western nations dominated the global news flow in terms of what came in and what went out. In the new millennium, a mediated news map should provide indication of emerging trends in international politics and relations. In other words, international news flow has always been connected to international politics and relations. Such a situation showed geographic regionalism using notions of cultural or religious proximity, such as Christianity or Islam.

It seems reasonable to conclude that in some configuration of the new versus the traditional ways of newsgathering, some new news media organizations will emerge to devote some financial and human resources needed to adequately cover global news. This critical study also advances Livingston and Asmolov's (2010) arguments that technological, sociological and political trend demand new conceptual landscape to retool our

understanding of global journalism and international affairs. It is argued here that the news flow debate should be at the center of this re-evaluation. de Beer (2010) also argued that the definitions of global vis-à-vis international, transnational, national or foreign are now mired in eccentricity. de Beer's (2010) arguments are preceded by earlier works of other scholars like Reese (2001), De Vereaux and Griffin (2006), and Berglez (2008; 2009), who noted that such terms assume the nation-state as the basis of analysis of what is national news or international news (All references are from de Beer, 2010).

Summing up the above arguments, Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012, p. 152) state:

The argument so far is that the definitions of national and international are now debatable as they relate to news flow on a globalized world. Whichever way one considers these concepts, the center of global news flow debate is shifted and further research should investigate whether the U.S. media systems can maintain their status as the world's news leader within the parameters of the traditional media and the wire services. With the fading global economic decline and the slow-moving U.S. media industry, especially the newspaper industry, the rise of citizen journalism and the inevitable dominance of social media networks are opening up and rapidly expanding the media space for greater mass participation and democratization of the news business. The Western industrialized world may have fewer options in future than to re-evaluate the declining role in the global news flow scenario and perhaps acknowledge the emergence of other nation-state players in the NFD.

The news flow debate necessitates a re-conceptualization of global journalism because of the rapid growth of the independent new media scribes and photographers. Social media

channels are rapidly transforming the socioeconomic and political public discourse with cultural implications (Oloka-Onyango, 2005), particularly in Africa.

Oloka-Onyango (2005, p. 1251) further argues that: The cultural influences of globalization, whether presented in the global media or via the increase in consumerism, have profound implications for the protection and promotion of African cultures. When all these factors are taken into account, one can arrive at the conclusion that globalization has brought tremendous benefits by way of scientific and technological progress, enhanced dissemination, circulation of information, and the increased social mobility of people.

Citizens in the developing world who have access to the Internet through computers or the interactive 'smart' cell phones flock to social media networks because of their participatory, interactivity and noticeable costs. This does not mean that social media participants now qualify to be called journalists and they are not professionals. Yet, the current discourse pertaining to the interactive and mass participatory nature of social media refers to this generation of information gathering and dissemination as the New Journalism (See Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters, 2012).

This New Journalism will drive journalism in the last part of this century and even usher us into the 22nd century. It will be based on news media convergence. Set commercial interests will also play up but news as a social commodity may not likely die. In the New Journalism envisaged, the concept of journalism will definitely be redefined, as any attempt to ignore these self-styled journalists, online, and social media platforms will result in doom for the already emasculated media industry. The concern here is that the realignment of the content production and delivery by opening it up to the public should be of great interest to the traditional media, which flourished in the past three decades during the news flow debate.

Conclusion

The central questions posed here for critical analysis were: whether the news flow debate is still relevant with the emergence of social media networks that enable interactive mediated messaging, blogging, tweeting, and other electronic outlets, which provide easy free flow of information. In addition, whether the traditional media, especially from the United States, are still the dominant disseminators and gatekeepers of news and information—as earlier branded by the global news flow debaters—in this era of social media appeal or popularity.

Our contribution to this debate is that the global news space with particular reference to the emergence of SMNs has nullified the old conceptualization of the international news flow debate (NFD). Social media have made it easy for anyone to either generate or become a gatekeeper of global news and current affairs, as well as to seek information globally from traditional media and from peripheral citizen journalism. There are multiple sources for newsgathering and dissemination of news with greater access to online media channels and interactive digital platforms. The news production and distribution business has, become saturated with non-professional content generators and contributors. This implies that in the new millennium, citizens from developing nations in Africa and elsewhere can realistically mitigate some forms of news flow marginalization or domination, which existed in the 1980s and 1990s and primarily controlled by the Western cosmopolitan media.

With the increased engagement of social media platforms, citizens of the developing world will increasingly be in control (more than ever before) of how they are covered and what information they want to disseminate to the rest of the world. The danger of a single story as Chimamanda Adiche coined it will no longer be the order of the day. This is because social media platforms have liberalized the process, contributed to community organizing, and popularized civic participation and engagement in the news production and distribution business. There is also ample evidence of political mobilization of the masses across Africa, the

Arab world, South-East Asia and the Middle East to engage in the democratization process through popular revolutionary uprisings. The Arab Spring, as this is now popularly referred to, is a typical example of how social media galvanized interest groups to topple repressive governments and tilt towards popular representation and democratization.

In the words of Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012), the emergence of social media as part of New Media in the gathering and dissemination of international news has drastically altered the international news flow debates. It will be wrong, therefore, to conclude that the traditional news media are the sole agenda setters, builders and gatekeepers. Social media networks have secured their place in the sphere of mass communication and social mobilization and their popularity is soaring higher everyday due to some of the flexibilities already highlighted in this paper. It is our expectation, therefore, that international communication scholars, media experts, and other concerned parties within civil society should revisit the literature and theoretical arguments that supported earlier positions on the international news flow debate. This could help to redefine its utility to the developing world in the wake of the current phase of democratization and popular revolutionary uprisings especially in the Arab world.

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