NTAtvc J of Comm. June, 2020;4(1)

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Agenda Setting Between Traditional Media and Social Media: A Discourse

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Abstract

The mass media, which include print and electronic media, for ages have played the traditional role of agenda setting on issues of national and international discourse. However, with the emergence of the social media, which has facilitated and encouraged citizen journalism, the traditional agenda setting role of what has come to be termed the traditional media has become challenged by the emerging new media. The paper employed a historical approach to explore the role of traditional and new media against the backdrop of the agenda setting theory. This paper explores the impact that social media now has on the traditional media in terms of agenda setting, which hitherto has been the exclusive preserve of the traditional media. It concluded that in order to remain relevant before the people who now seek for information based on immediacy, traditional media will have to up its game in the business of setting the agenda for national discourse.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Inter-media, Social media, Traditional media, Two media

Introduction

Ever since the emergence of social media in the 1990s, communication scholars and professionals alike have sought to understand the impact of the social media on traditional mass media of communication. Of particular note has been the concern that social media (and user-generated content) could supplant traditional mass media as the leading information source and agenda setter for audiences in the digital age (Borde, 2015).

The social media continues to play an ever increasing role in the lives and the attention of its audiences. A recent survey conducted by Pew (2019)revealed that a record number of Americans are turning to the Internet both for social and informational reasons with ever increasing frequency. In Nigeria this is also reflecting in the day-to-day activities of information seeking by the people, the recent being on the happenings around COVID-19. On the 28 of March, 2020 the Governor of Oyo State, Seyi Makinde, had a 'tweetchat' where he discussed the state's preparedness to address the pandemic.

During the session, the communication flow was very mutual as the governor provided answers to every tweet directed at him where as the moment the session ended the discussion became headlines and breaking news for both local and national traditional media like newspapers, radio and television. The following day, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, had a national broadcast on the actions and decisions of the government of Nigeria on COVID-19. Few minutes after the broadcast, the copy of the speech was uploaded on his twitter handle. The same version of what was posted were mostly reported by the traditional media without addition or subtraction as headlines and breaking news.

Also the governor of Kaduna used his twitter handle to announce his positive status of the Covid-19 and made it a breaking news for the traditional media, especially television (TVC news, Channel TV, NTA and AIT) for their next news schedule. In the United States of America, President Donald Trump usually uses the social media especially Twitter in updating the world on the state of affairs after which such becomes headlines for both BBC and CNN. So far President Trump has really enjoyed this system of communication, which appears to suit his nature, more especially after he had also used the same platform in his campaign that brought him to White House.

The agenda setting theory was developed by McCombs and Shaw taking a stand from their research on the 1968 American Presidential election. The theory describes the ability of the traditional media to influence the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda. In 1959 Chief Obafemi Awolowo took this advantage to establish the first television station in Nigeria, the Western Nigeria Television(WNTV) which played a significant role in beaming taped Yoruba traveling theatre productions to households (Malu, 2016).

After its establishment the platform contributed greatly to the educational sector of Nigeria as an agenda setting tool. However, from the 1990s this tool of agenda setting is changing as the people who hitherto protested or clamoured for change using the radio or television (the 1993 general elections, Jos crisis and the like)have taken to other means in the 21 Century to give expression to their views.

An example of this was the clamour for the President of Nigeria to address the nation on the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, this even involved some foreigners and a noticeable foreigner with a twitter handle "#Imam of Peace" who is a popular world peace ambassador and an ordained scholar. For over one week the 'streets of twitter' were flooded with '#Presidentcovik, #Buhari Ressign and #whereisyourpresident'. Few days from this the President of Nigeria addressed the nation and their questions posed on twitter were answered.

Furthermore, in attestation to the increasing growth in the strength and power of social media, its grip on the traditional media and its stranglehold on the populace, careful cogitation about the case of Major General Olusegun Adeniyi of the Nigerian army must come to the fore in introspection of the aces the social media holds in deciding what the populace angst or agitate for. In a leaked video published by *Sahara Reporters* a fully online newspaper, he was seen giving his candid opinion on the losses of men and material suffered in the hands of the insurgents while on national duty with his men, detailing on how wrong intel led his men to their abrupt end.

The video eventually got published online which led to sympathy from Nigerians towards the nation's troops. However, he was redeployed by the Army HQ, a move that drew the ire of Nigerians who trended his name, plight and heroics online. The traditional media quickly joined the hype train by centralizing discussion and programmes around the leaked video and its implication on national security, the legality of his actions, and punishment therein, which included court martialling.

From a singular leaked video by an online newspaper the traditional media adopted diversification and convergence of thoughts, its major counter to the speed of delivery the social media boasts of, to carve a niche for itself in an era where news has been muddled up with information in order to keep up with the trend of regulating the opinions of the populace. To this end, there is an observable change where "communication is self-directed in the elaboration and sending of the message, self-selected in the reception of the message, and self-defined in terms of the formation of the communication space" (Castells, 2008, p.2).

The foregoing has necessitated this paper which aims at examining concept of traditional media, concept of social media, inter-media agenda setting theory, who sets the agenda in the 21st Century, the agenda setting role of traditional media and social media, and influence of social media on traditional media.

Concept of Mass Media in Nigeria (Traditional media)

The Nigerian mass media has a history that is linked to colonialism under the British Empire. In 1917, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) started a periodic publication known as *In Leisure Hours*. Its Yoruba translation which was published regularly was known as *NiGba* Ti*OwoBaDile*. In 1919, *African Hope* came into existence. This was followed by the *Nigerian Baptism* in 1923. The Methodist Mission floated its own publication in 1925. *African Church Chronicles* came into existence in 1931 while the *Muslim Chronicle* came into being in 1947. Rev A.W. Howells established *The Lagoon*

in 1948.

The Ahmadiyah Movement started its own newspaper called *The Truth* in the 1930s. The *Christian Comments* started in 1950 while *Celestial Chronicles* came in 1986. All the publications mentioned above were established to spread the Christian and Islamic gospel and also as a tool of evangelism by various denominations in Nigeria. They were published to increase the knowledge based on Christian and Islamic ideologies. It should be noted that these publications could not be fully regarded as newspaper in the real sense of the word, though they carried information that are newsworthy. However, none of these publications is in existence today.

Radio broadcasting started when the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] setup an experimental radio receiving station in Lagos to pick the shortwave transmission from the British Empire Service in Davenport, England. This method called re-diffusion was based on piping programmes by land line to loudspeakers in the homes of subscribers in Lagos, Ibadan and Kano. These subscribers were Briton or Nigerian elites who could afford to subscribe and pay for it. In the 1950s the method was extended to other towns in Nigeria so as to enhance the economic, political and social development of Nigeria. In 1956, the Ordinance [law] for the establishment of a broadcasting corporation to be known as Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) was created. This ordinance was known as Ordinance number 39 of 1956.

Television broadcasting in Nigeria can be traced to October 1st 1959 when the Western Nigerian Regional Government, under the premiership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo established the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV). This was based on a development in 1956 when the 1956 Ordinance was enacted. This ordinance made provision for the national broadcasting company to operate as a public service, independent and impartial broadcasting services by means of wireless telegraph and by television for general reception within Nigeria.

The principal aim for the establishment of the television service was to educate and inform the people about governance and make them part of the process of governance. In 1960, Eastern Region established the Eastern Nigeria Television while the Northern Region Television Service known as Radio/Television Kaduna was born (Busari, Ajibola, & Busari, 2020). In April 1962, NBC TV known as Nigeria Television Service Channel 10 Lagos started transmission. The creation of more states in Nigeria led to the establishment of more television stations. In 1977, Nigeria Television Authority was established leading to the fusion of all state-owned television stations under the conglomerate (Busari & Oyewusi, 2017).

Concept of Social Media

Social media developed through Web 2.0, a term coined to describe a new wave of Internet modernization that enables users to publish and share contents online. Social media involve a wide range of electronic fora, including blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), creative work-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube), business networking sites (e.g., LinkedIn), collaborative websites (e.g., Wikipedia), and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life). Among these social media, social networks and microblogs are the most popular, accounting for 22.7% of all time spent online in the United States – ACNielsen (Kaplan & Haenlein cited in Amedu & Busari, 2020).

Web 2.0 is the idea of a second generation Internet that is highly participatory, allowing users to advance it as they use it. Social media contents are primarily written and published by their users and not owners or employees of the site. For instance, most advertisements, videos and pictures on Facebook and Twitter are uploaded by visitors of the sites. Web 2.0 has been growing enormously as it facilitates the production and dissemination of information, allows for the involvements in participatory culture to share individual expressions or creations and bring people with similar interests and goals to connect with each

other on blogs, social interactive sites and others (Dominick, 2009).

Dominick (2009, p.283) further notes that "the users go to web pages and look at content provided by the website owner" whereas today, users have become producers; which means that they simultaneously consume and produce information (Stagno, 2012, p.1). The first exploitation of the potential of the social media, especially to spread a candidate's message, gain support and get the public engaged was through the 2008 presidential campaign by the then Senator Barack Obama who eventually became American president. The Obama campaign reached five million people on 15 different social media platforms. As at November 2008, Obama had approximately 2.3 million Facebook supporters; 115,000 Twitter followers and millions of viewers of his YouTube videos (Nyekwere et al., 2013, p.15).

Inter-media Agenda Setting Theory

Inter-media agenda setting theory is concerned with measuring the extent to which news content(s) is transferred between different media houses both print and broadcast (Atwater, Fico, & Pizante, 1987). The assertion is that journalists tend to let their reporting decisions be guided by the coverage of their peers at other news outlets (Breed, 1955),especially highly regarded media such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* in the United States and *Punch* and Channel TV in Nigeria are assumed to influence the contents of other media.

This 'co-orientation' between different news outlets has economical as well as socio-psychological origins. Obviously, following up on, or simply replicating others' content ('churnalism') requires less resources and is therefore more cost-effective than seeking one's own leads. Alongside this blunt economic reason, the occurrence of co-orientation has socio-psychological origins, too. From a social-constructionist viewpoint, no single event is inherently more worthy of coverage than the next one.

Hence, journalists have to deal with the question of noteworthiness on a daily basis, often implicitly. Professional training and socialization in the newsroom equip journalists with 'news values' (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016) as one set of criteria for these judgments, but this still leaves room for doubt as the decisions remain in the hands of a single journalist or journalists within one news house. Looking to other media outlets' coverage, then, can be a valuable source of guidance about which topics are of importance on this day or in this period of time.

Obviously, social media as we know it today was yet to be developed when the theory of intermedia agenda setting was propounded. Gaining ever more territory in the latest decades, its influence on the news industry is profound. Not only has the business side of news been affected, but also the ways in which news is made, presented, and circulated have dramatically changed as a result of the introduction of news websites, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and mobile internet. The resulting contemporary news environment has been characterized as 'hybrid', 'ambient', and 'liminal' (Hermida, 2014; Papacharissi, 2014; Chadwick, 2013) – terms that refer to the diminished possibility of assigning fixed properties to different media platforms and their contents. Properties that were originally typical of one medium are now also featured by others. Video clips, for example, originally typical of television, are embedded in news website articles.

In similar fashion, journalists nowadays have to share their role as information gatekeepers with people 'formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006), who are able to produce and share their own contents via Facebook and Twitter. Their contents may be and are, in turn, used in journalists' reports, making citizens co-producers of news, considering recent activities in the media (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). Journalists anticipate audience feedback on the news they cover and incorporate it in their follow-up reports (Beckers & Harder, 2016).

Also, the breaking news genre is not exclusively a matter for television or radio any longer, nor is news always reported first by journalists (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). Being largely preoccupied with

'the now', social media have keenly adopted this style of reporting and made it one of their core news genres (Kwak et al., 2010). Thus, we see that media become more fluid, their different "technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organizational forms" (Chadwick, 2013, p.4) blending together to form the contemporary news media landscape.

In this setting, the notion of time has obtained a different connotation. With news websites, live blogs and social media platforms, the publication of news depends much less on fixed schedules (Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010). Nor does news need to be communicated as a 'finished' product again! Journalists can float snippets of news via social media channels as events unfold, only to follow them up later with a full article on their medium's website. Even when news workers are not physically present on the location of an event, they may cover it by embedding audience-constructed material supplied in real time, be it in text, image, or video (Hermida, Lewis,& Zamith, 2014). These developments imply a vast reduction of infrastructural requirements for news reporting compared to television and radio. Thus, a 24/7 news cycle is enabled not only technically, but also in practice.

Who sets the agenda in the 21st Century?

With but a few keystrokes and mouse clicks any audience may initiate a new discussion or respond to an existing one with texts or audios, or perhaps images and even videos. Transmitting requires minimal effort, and once one is digitally equipped, it is virtually costless. To posit that the power of the public agenda has swung from media elites and establishment institutions to the citizenry would be inexperienced. But the foundational conceptions of self-evident media agenda-setting may benefit from some fresh rethinking.

The fundamental question may best be characterized as this: Under what conditions do digitally connected populace respond and when do those responses meaningfully impact the broader populace and media agendas and the framing of public issues? Before the reintroduction of the term (Kim & Lee, 2006 cited in Neuman et al., 2014), the notion of reverse agenda-setting meant simply that journalists may be responding to actual or perceived populace interests and thus the public agenda could be seen as preceding and influencing the media agenda (Neuman et al., 2014).

Influences on the formation of the media agenda are outlined by Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) five-tier conceptual model. The five factors contributing to the media agenda include individual journalist, media routines, organizational factors, social institutions, and cultural/ ideological considerations. Although this model acknowledges the possibility that individuals, such as government officials or public relations practitioners, may affect the media agenda and that the cultural factors may simultaneously influence both journalists and their audiences, the general public was not identified as a significant influence in the model and the notion of reverse agenda-setting was not raised.

Another related literature focuses on the concept of intermedia agenda building, which refers to the effects of institutional media agendas on each other (Golan, 2006). A number of studies attributed intermedia communication processes to common interests and sources among journalists (e.g. pack journalism) as well as news organizations' willingness to "report on a report" (Denham, 2010, p.315). Especially when reporting sensitive issues that might offend interest groups (e.g., advertisers), news agencies often cover the issues by citing the original report to make themselves appear relatively neutral. Research has demonstrated this intermedia agenda building in the correlation of the agendas of three evening television programmes with that of the New York Times the following morning (Golan, 2006). Other studies have observed the parallels between online "buzz" and mass media content (Karpf, 2008; Lee, 2007; Wallsten, 2007).

The emergence of social media has generated renewed attention to the reverse agenda-setting idea. Interpersonal conversations about public

issues have always been an important part of the dynamics of the public sphere (Neuman et al., 2014). But now they are increasingly empirically accessible for analysis. Given the technical opportunity and most often the absence of enforced censorship, citizens of the industrialized and developing worlds, it appears, are ready and willing to speak out. The statistics here represent a moving target, but even a sampling from recent years creates a compelling picture.

Blogpulse (2011) estimated that there are more than 172 million identified blogs and more than 1 million new posts being produced by individuals each day. Twitter has more than 100 million active users logging in at least once a month and 50 million active users every day (Taylor, 2011). So, given the tremendous size of this electronic conversation, even if cats playing pianos seem to be the most popular, there is extensive and diverse political conversation and commentary as well.

It would be problematic, of course, to simply equate online tweets, blogs, and comments to "public opinion" in general. Social media users are not demographically representative and diverse social media platforms undoubtedly develop local cultures of expressive style which will influence the character of what people choose to say. But in-person, telephonic, and online surveys of multiple choice self-reports also fail to capture this elusive gold standard of public opinion without bias and distortion. The social media represent an important, perhaps increasingly important, instantiation of public opinion just as the outcomes derived from those who choose to answer surveys and those who choose to vote do.

From the standing question, who set the agenda, it can be said that the social media set the agenda with the following examples: Asch paradigm explains why the bandwagon effect is a great proponent of setting agenda on social media. Online mob mentality has been a tool to coerce or convince online users like minions to hop on a bandwagon and get steamrolled by various biases. Even literates may find themselves drowned in such agenda because it is generally accepted; deductions can be made from conspiracy theories circulating on social media about how 5G network could aid the spread of Covid-19. Without proper research most people fell for the charade and went on a destruction spree of telecommunication towers, because it was an agenda set online and reputable people lent their voices to it.

But for the traditional media that stood its grounds and delved deep into the roots by setting up panels between leading virologists and physicists globally to restore sanity into the minds of all, the agenda set by keyboard enthusiasts would have compounded the current global chaos. When the Ebola virus broke out in Nigeria six years ago, misinformation was set as an agenda. It crept into individual minds and ended on a sad note as more people died from ingestion of salt used indiscriminately based on several proposals dispersed online and gobbled up by gullible individuals who regarded such agendas as the modern day gospel, to fight a virus they did not have.

The Agenda Setting Role of Two Media

A vast literature has analysed the agenda setting power of the mass media (e.g. Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Scholars claim that the news spread by traditional media affects the degree of attention paid to certain issues and frames the debate on selected topics. Theoretically, by adjusting the policy agenda (Walgrave et al., 2008) and shaping the opinions of citizens and policy-makers (Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014; Walgrave, 2008; Dearing & Rogers, 1996) the media can also wield, directly or indirectly, a policy change (John, 2006). Other scholars, however, tend to report only modest evidence of media effects suggesting that media exposure does not convey a huge change in attitudes.

On the whole, there is conflicting evidence also on the political agenda power of the media on governments and legislatures (see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006 for a review). Conversely, the ability of mass media to shape public debate and public

opinion, by driving the attention to certain issues, is much less undisputed (Mc- Combs, 2004; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1993) as is confirmed by a meta-analysis of the existing literature (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Since "the public learns the relative importance of issues from the mass media," Wanta and Hu (1994, p.92) suggested that the journalists' choice to cover some issues more than others can influence what issues are taken as important by the wide public (Parmelee, 2013). Hence, the media contribute to building a public consensus on the issues of the day, altering their perceived salience in public discussions (McCombs, 1997, 2004;Lippmann, 1949).

This stream of research then links the public agenda with the media agenda showing that the citizens' perception about the salience of certain issues is related to the media salience, i.e. the frequency in which those topics are mentioned in mainstream media (Kiousis, 2004). Things, however, could have changed after the advent of social media in the Web 2.0 era. While traditional media have owned the tools of content creation and content distribution for a long time, the rise of social media has come to break this dominance.

Social media, in fact, dramatically reduce the transaction costs typical of old media technologies and build a new bottom-up style of communication (Benkler, 2006;Gillmor, 2004), providing egalitarian access to the production and the consumption of news (Prat & Stromberg, 2011) that are no longer elite-biased (Woodly, 2008). Social media can directly affect public debate and the salience of policy agenda issues within the large community of social network users, raising the question whether traditional media still affect the public agenda or, conversely, the media are now being influenced by the citizens' conversations on social media. Social media could have held an agenda-setting power being able to affect the salience of traditional outlets.

In fact, they become relevant for spreading news up to the point that users often rely on online networks, instead of professional broadcasts, to acquire information (Bakshy et al., 2012; Baresch et al., 2011). Sometimes social media only amplify news coming from traditional sources, while in other cases the diffusion of information is endogenous, and they act as primary sources of knowledge anticipating the mainstream media.

We know, in fact, that journalists tend now to use social network sites, particularly Twitter, as a basis for breaking emerging stories (Parmelee, 2013) and claim that this user-generated content is desirable and judged authentic by their audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010). The public consumption of tweets makes them more influential on media coverage than traditional press releases up to the point that journalists face the need to cover the issues reported by political tweets in order to appear current in the eye of their readership and to avoid being scooped by other competitors (Parmelee, 2013).

After some anecdotal evidence on the agenda-setting power of social media (for a review: Neuman et al., 2014; Wallsten, 2007), scholars started to investigate more systematically the impact of blogs and interactive social network sites on the media agenda (McCombs, 2005; Meraz, 2009) to assess whether social media have replaced traditional mass media as a source of first-level agenda-setting, holding the ability to influence the (public) attention devoted to a certain issue of the policy agenda.

Several studies showed that mainstream media still affect the salience of issues discussed online. Traditional media seem to set the agenda of Internet-fuelled communication tools, such as bulletin boards and chat rooms (McCombs et al., 2005; Roberts et al., 2002), weblogs (Lee, 2007), and online information-seeking (Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2011; Weeks et al., 2010). Equally, Scott (2005) pointed out that bloggers tend to rely on established media outlets for their information and link to news articles more than to other blogs (Adamic & Glance, 2005). Scharkow and Vogelgesang (2011) resorted to Google Insights for search to measure the public agenda. They highlighted the potential of such data, suggesting

that can even be used in 'forecasting tomorrow's news from today's recipients' information seeking' (Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2011, p.111).

Along this vein, another work explores the relationship between mainstream media and online search activity, showing that media coverage influences Google Trends' public salience of a particular topic (Weeks et al., 2010). Vargo (2011) focused on Twitter to analyse the reciprocal influence between new and old media, but failed to support the 'hypotheses of a transfer of public salience to media salience' (Vargo, 2011, p.18) showing instead that traditional media affect public conversations while Twitter only play a limited effect. Conversely, other scholars provide evidence for the agenda-setting power of social media, particularly blogs (Lewis, 2009; Lloyd,2006; Hindman, 2005;Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Woodly (2008) argues that blogs affect the selection and presentation of news stories and set the agenda for political elites like journalists and politicians while Parmelee (2013) indicates that political tweets too play a role in agenda building.

Other studies highlight that social media and traditional media are now sharing the agenda setting function but none of them is the dominant actor in this process. For instance, Meraz (2009) focused on the inter-media agenda setting dynamics between traditional elite newsroom blogs and top independent political blogs and confirmed that traditional media still retain a strong agenda setting power, but this power is no longer universal since independent blog platforms redistribute it between mainstream media and citizen media.

In fact, traditional media agenda setting is now just one force among many competing influences (Meraz, 2009) and social media seem to enhance citizens' influence in setting the agenda of media. Analogously, Wallsten (2007, p.567) found evidence of a 'complex, bidirectional relationship between mainstream media coverage and blog discussion rather than a unidirectional media or blog agenda-setting effect' and YouTube too was found to follow and lead mainstream media salience (Sayre et al., 2010). Along the same vein, Neuman et al. (2014) analysed Granger causality in a variety of issue areas but found mutual and reciprocal causality between traditional media and social media. Jungherr (2014) found contrasting evidence as well, given that Twitter messages follow the same logic of traditional news media only in some cases, even though not everything that receives media attention leads to equal attention online.

Conclusion and Implication of Social Media on Information Seeking

In this era of global pandemic, information seeking becomes priority to the masses wanting to know the latest about Covid-19 in their localities, the nation and the world at large. Nigerians wake up every morning to seek information because their lives have been affected, and will want to know when things will get back to normal. When the world was faced with malaria and other pandemic or epidemic, the traditional media like television and radio served as the platforms for information seeking but looking at the Covid-19 pandemic breaking news pattern, news from the traditional media becomes stale news because the social media breaks such news hours before the traditional media, especially newspapers, get to report them.

Traditional media, more than ever now, face the challenge of financial survival so that they are not run out of business due to the avalanche of access to information, which was hitherto sought through purchase of newspapers, now just available at the press of a few buttons either on a computer or handheld devices like the smartphone. Traditional media now rely on online version of their media outlet to retain audience and sustain their relevance as sources of information to an audience that have become savvy about sourcing for its information needs.

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