Diaspora Media and Citizen Engagement in the Digital Age: Analyzing the Impact of

Transnational Journalism on Democratization

Uchenna Ekwo, Ph.D.

Center for Media & Peace Initiatives

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Abstract

Literature on Diaspora media clearly shows that the media plays a crucial role in the construction of migrant identities. The capacity of Diaspora media to initiate change in undemocratic societies has vastly increased, creating new sources of information, and platform for scrutinizing home governments by orchestrating international pressure against unpopular policies. However, little is known as to the potential impacts of Diaspora media on democratization processes. The goal of this research is to examine how the emerging transnational media environment and digitization of information are influencing unfettered exchange of ideas, culture, and openness, as well as creating a world without borders.

Interviews of a purposeful sample of 15 respondents and a 5-member focus group drawn from different immigrant communities in New York, academics, editors, and proprietors of Diaspora media networks including online editions, and civil society will seek to illuminate the extent to which media consumption and communication technologies have become increasingly important in the formation of shared identities for immigrant populations. Structured interviews will investigate 5 topical areas derived from the literature including globalization, media convergence, advocacy, democratization, and transparency. Emergent themes regarding citizen empowerment will be extracted from the interview data and then triangulated with those themes that will be identified from the focus group. The results from this study will provide a significant framework for governments in democratic transition, policy makers, civil society, students, and researchers interested in media, democracy, and open society. Also, the study will add to the body of knowledge about journalism practice across borders. The findings will potentially impact positive social change by addressing key issues relevant to transnational cultures, multiculturalism, and improvement of community journalism.

Introduction

Let us preface this discussion by considering how important or should I say how indispensable journalists and all those involved in information dissemination are to modern democratic societies. My favorite anecdote is the one provided by William Taft, the 93-year-old alumnus of the first journalism school in the United States — Missouri University School of Journalism — In September 2008, William Taft told his guests who gathered for the school's centenary celebration how indispensable communication is to human beings (University of Missouri, 2008). In a metaphorical sense, Taft speculated that in Heaven, no one will need doctors and lawyers, because no one will be sick and there will be no dispute; no military or police because there will be order and no war; no need for architects or civil engineers because everyone will be accommodated in God's mansion; indeed no other profession is needed. But journalists, he said, will be in high demand, because the people on the east and the north sides of Heaven will want to know what the people on the west and the south sides are doing (University of Missouri, 2008; para.4).

Although Taft's view may seem naïve, it nevertheless, underscores the importance of journalists in every society and that information is the heartbeat of all democratic societies. Taft's analogy where people are dispersed in different parts of heaven cannot be more appropriate than today that migration has resulted in people emigrating from their homelands to settle in different regions of the world.

In my quiet moments, I often thought about how the world would have been if there was no colonialism and slave trade. Think about this for a moment. As a person of African descent, I recognize the evils of colonialism and slave trade but it changed the world irreversibly. That we

are discussing diaspora issues is partly because of political decisions taken by political leaders in the past. Wobst (2010) traced that the history and frequency of migration of different peoples from their homelands to other areas to the colonial era. Increased migration also means more dispersal of human beings in parts of the world and information and communication are critical in providing a bridge for migrants all over the world (Ciumasu, 2010).

Media research is inundated with studies focused on the flows of media products and services throughout the world with lesser attention on the flows of people which the media tend to follow.

Today, the Diaspora community notably migrants, refugees, sojourners, exiles, expatriates and especially all the people who are living outside their actual or imagined homelands have become important consumers of media fare and therefore make use of the media in different ways. It is therefore not surprising that some entrepreneurial immigrants establish news media networks and institutions that engage in the production and distribution of content that reflects their cultural experiences and identities. This fluid, adaptive relationship of media and people on a global basis has implications for national media and cultures, international cooperation and solidarity, good governance and evolution of global citizenship.

In this paper, I shall attempt to explore the important function of diaspora media in the digital age especially its crucial role in promoting effective democratic governance, transparency, civic engagement, and cultural identity.

Globalization, Immigration, Advocacy, and the Media

The media is described as a significant vehicle for globalization and mirror that reflects the cultural diversity of different peoples of the world in terms of preferences, attitudes, and

beliefs (Appadurai, 1990). The movement of people worldwide often referred to as migration has been the subject of attention to governments, multinational institutions, civil society, and researchers. According to the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute, different diaspora organizations, communities, and individuals have become strong advocates of positive social change.

These groups are more determined to influence government, media, private sectors, and other prominent groups in their countries of origin. As unfolding events have shown in a globalized world, distance or isolation is no longer a barrier to diaspora communities determined to effect positive change in their motherlands (Newland, 2010). Through money transfers and agitation for change facilitated by international pressure, diaspora communities demand change in their countries of origin and of settlement. The media is obviously the indispensable platform to mobilize citizens for action.

Globalization, migration, and increased media consumption and communication technologies present interesting dynamics in trying to understand the shifting mediascape of communication among diaspora communities, their homelands, and countries of settlement. While the concept of globalization is understood from different perspectives, it is important to focus on its impact on the media especially media content targeted to influence migrants, refugees, sojourners, exiles, expatriates and especially diasporas of people who are living outside their actual or imagined homelands. Levin Institute (2010) defined globalization as "a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology" (para.1) while Anderson (2006) described diasporas as "imagined communities." The underlying assumption in the views of Levin Institute and Anderson is that globalization fosters

contact and communications among people of different cultures and experiences with tremendous consequences on the future of all societies in terms of tolerance and mutual coexistence. It also underscores the emergence of the global village predicted by the legendary Marshall McLuhan more than 50 years ago. So, in a sense, the citizens of the global village are kept in touch with one another through sharing of experiences through the media. The role of the media in forging relations, partnerships, and community is fundamental (McLeod, 1996).

Consequently, the production and consumption of information through both traditional and new media have become increasingly important in molding public opinion across the globe. The creation and dissemination of media content across national boundaries fosters a world without borders thereby challenging established thoughts about nation states, cultural heritage, and citizenship. In its 2010 Diasporas and Development Policy Project entitled "Voice after Exit: Diaspora Advocacy," the Migration Policy Institute captured the notion of a world without borders where humanity makes use of different platforms including the mass media to advocate for positive social change across the globe regardless of nationality. It is in this context that the involvement of diaspora communities in bringing change to their homelands through transnational journalism practice can be understood. Karim (2003) argued that the media are central agents for diaspora, identity, and community. Karim noted that cosmopolitan cities such as New York and London offer a unique transnational and transatlantic contribution to the understanding of globalization, diaspora, media, and identity. New York City in particular which is home to a broad range of immigrants offers a unique transnational platform to examine the impact of diaspora media on every day lives of immigrants in New York and the United States.

A combination of globalization and innovation in technology is shaping the way the mass media interact and connect with media audiences (UNESCO, 2009). In the era of media

convergence, there is increased access to content production and distribution of information with potential for intercultural dialogue among different regions of the world. The digital environment in the United States under which most diaspora media operate, media consumers have become critical participants in content creation and dissemination, a trend that potentially encourages plurality of voices and interactive exchanges among audiences from different backgrounds including the underprivileged members of society. The availability of diversity of views is useful in the formation of public opinion on a wide range of issues.

It is therefore not surprising that governance activities dominate the media content of most diaspora media outlets located in major cities with strong immigrant populations such as New York. Karim (2003) maintained that homeland politics occupy the attention of diaspora media because of strong ties of most immigrants to their countries of origin. In this regard therefore, the media outlets established by diasporas become veritable platforms for current information especially during crises. For example, recent political crises in the Middle East and Africa were featured in different diaspora media organizations in New York and most immigrants from these regions resort to these media outfits for language specific analysis and interpretation of events that mainstream media do not provide.

There is increasing evidence that demonstrates the political influence of the Diaspora especially in the area of shaping public policy in both their host countries and their native countries (Mallet, 2011). In Africa for instance, 17 presidential elections are taking place this year. As the continent gears up for the polls, candidates are taking note of the Diaspora and making greater efforts than ever to reach out to voters in distant lands. To underscore the power of the diaspora, the Nigerian president who is seeking re-election was in New York in March to campaign for the votes of Nigerians in the US estimated to be about 7 million (US Census

Bureau, 2010. Already, Cameroon, a central African country has approved the participation of their citizens in the diaspora to future polls in the country (Ajibade, 2011). In Ghana, politicians are said to be jittery over plans to include diaspora votes in future elections (Sarpong, 2011). The critical question is how can the diaspora take advantage of these changing dynamics in international politics and decision making?

In a recent article: *Turning brain drain into brain networking,* Ciumasu (2010) analyzed the integration of Romanian Diaspora with their homelands and concluded that Diaspora networks possess different degrees of "diversity, connectivity and density of agenda"(p. 4). Ciumasu used the term "brain networking" to describe collaboration among different professionals especially through the Internet. The digital age therefore presents opportunities for diaspora media outlets to play significant roles in connecting people of different backgrounds, talent, and motivation by supporting information sharing and mobilizing of immigrants to participate in shaping domestic policies in their home countries. The exchange of information that occurs in the media among the diaspora will culminate in what Ciumasu described as moving from discussion to action.

Besides, diaspora media organizations are well positioned to utilize digital media networks to spread information with unfettered freedom and at minimal cost. Shirky (2011) noted the frustration of citizens in undemocratic states whose governments repress media freedom and free expression for fear of a mobilized citizenry that could challenge their arbitrariness. Shirky insisted that digital technology makes it possible for citizens including those in the diaspora to compromise efforts by authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent and alternative views. The collapse of President Joseph Estrada of the Phillipines, the ouster of the Peoples Party in Spain, the Green Movement in Iran, and The Red Shirt protests in Thailand (Shirky, 2011),

and recently in Tunisia and Egypt are clear examples of the efficacy of what Schmidt and Cohen (2010) referred to as "connection technologies." The convergence of media platforms notably the old and new media has become a strategic asset to diaspora communities in their determination to forge cooperation and understanding between their countries of origin and domicile.

The Health of Diaspora Media in the United States

There has been an exponential growth of diaspora media organizations in the United States in both numbers and influence (Allen, 2009; Mogol, 2003). The phenomenal increase reflects the diversity of United States where the audience share of ethnically oriented TV, radio, newspapers, and Web sites, (many of which are published or broadcast in languages other than English) has shot to 60 million people or one-fifth of US population (Allen, 2009). In New York alone, more than 200 diaspora media outlets exist (Mogol, 2003). Many reasons account for the popularity of diaspora media in the 21st century.

As noted earlier in this paper, the proprietors of these media outlets attract more audiences because they offer cultural or language-specific content, both from global and local sources. Some publications also provide translations of their content into multiple languages including English. Chinese NYSingtao, La Voz de Mexico, Hoy, Nordstjernan, Weekly Bangalee, Weekly Pakistani News USA, Senegambianews.com, Hamdard Weekly, VECHERNIY NEW YORK, Russian-American Newspaper, and Korean Times are few examples of diaspora media outfits that provide content with specific language familiar with their target audience.

Mogol (2003) identified immigration and information and communication technologies to be among the major catalysts propelling the growth of diaspora media organs in the United

States. The increase in the number of immigrants in the United States (US Census Bureau) meant more audience for different diaspora publications, radio, television or web-based organizations. In addition, technological progress made in the area of information dissemination has equally enhanced the prospect of diaspora media organizations' capacity to reach more people in minimal time and space. The digitization of information and communication makes it easier for both content creators and consumers to interact in a fashion unimaginable in the past. The implication is the presence of an active audience within the diaspora communities which in turn challenges the competence, credibility, and capacity of diaspora media proprietors. Unlike the passive audiences of the past, today's media consumers experience new media ecology characterized by connectivity, "interactivity, and convergence" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 137). The participation of media audiences in generating content through the Internet and other digital devices goes a long way to connect diaspora audiences with both their homelands and country of settlement.

Another important factor that accounts for the growth of diaspora media is the seeming marginalization of immigrants from the so called market place of ideas. The exclusion of diaspora communities in the exchange of ideas within the American polity is documented extensively (Allen, 2009; Best, 2011; Kessler, 1984; Mogol, 2003). The whole concept of market place of ideas is often associated with free speech, diversity of media content, and respect for alternative voices (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). As a beacon of democracy, advocates of marketplace of ideas believe that truth and effective public policy emanates from open debates often moderated by the news media. The turn of events in the United States in the last century and beyond showed that the diaspora community lacked a sense of belonging and participation because views and issues significant to them were often not reflected in the mainstream media.

The stories that have the potential to attract the attention of most immigrants include those dealing with local employment and businesses, immigration law, and cultural readjustment. These issues are not covered by the mainstream media that are basically fixated with negative news about crimes, profligacy, and flamboyance among the diaspora community (Mogol, 2003).

The neglect of the mainstream media informed Kessler's (1984) contention that the American marketplace ignored the plurality of viocess in the country thereby creating opportunities for popular dissent especially among the immigrant population that led to the establishment of communication platforms that guaranteed diversity of ideas. According to Kessler many immigrants unable to gain attention for their opinion in the popular media outlets of their time decided to set up their own newspapers and periodicals. The trend towards inclusiveness has continued until today and has in many ways encouraged the establishment of more channels of communication and information for sharing of experience among immigrants in America.

Indeed, diaspora media in the United States are vibrant and booming (Allen, 2009). It appears that while the mainstream newspapers and cable news channels in the United States are losing more money, readers, and viewers each year, ethnic media appears to be robust in their engagement with their loyal audiences (Allen, 2009). While it is arguable that diaspora media organizations are doing better than the mainstream media, it may be because of economies of scale as most of the diaspora media outlets are small business enterprises with considerably low business budget outlay. Some of them even circulate for free and depend on advertisement, generous donations, and goodwill of their audience.

The Future of Diaspora Media

The prospect of a successful diaspora media environment is dependent on how proprietors and consumers wrestle with the changing dynamics in the media sector. It also depends on how the diaspora media organizations cope with the responsibilities and challenges posed by emerging developments in the sector such as digitization of information and what UNESCO (2009) called "tribalization of cultural consumption" (p. 138) . The concept of tribalization of cultural consumption refers to a situation whereby each diaspora media outlets communicate to its audience who share the same cultural milieu to the exclusion of others and thereby shutting the doors to intercultural exchanges and global understanding — an important function of the media in the 21st century.

It is not known however, if these media outfits are able to empower their audiences with the ability to question, analyze, critique, and deconstruct messages they encounter in the media. This is a major challenge for the diaspora media. To what extent are media practitioners able to engage in information or media literacy to educate their audiences on a wide range of issues such as public policies that affect them and sharing of information that could minimize stereotypes in societies made up of different cultures? Also of interest should be an examination of the degree to which audiences of diaspora media utilize information to participate in democratic governance of their native countries? Answers to these and other questions will further illuminate communication research that emphasizes communication and cultural products as powerful tools of non-formal education.

Perhaps another critical challenge to the future of diaspora media organizations is to figure out how to survive in the face of economic difficulties especially the discrimination in

attracting adverts from corporate America. Best (2011) noted the imbalance in the allocation of state and city agency advertising to diaspora media organizations in New York. He maintained that the large newspapers had a virtual monopoly on advertising budgets, thereby fostering a perception of discrimination in a city consisting of diverse ethnic populations. Obviously, it is difficult for any news organization to thrive without substantial advertising revenue and thereby makes it more difficult for diaspora media outlets to serve its audience professionally and responsibly. It also undermines their capacity to challenge the negative portrayal of diaspora communities by the mainstream media institutions.

There are some diaspora media outlets that are yet to take advantage of web technologies. Understandably, a great number of their audiences are not familiar with the Internet, especially as most them emigrated from emerging countries of the south where the digital divide holds sway. But, the reality is that majority of media audiences notably the younger generations are more likely to source information through the Internet, mobile devices, and PDA's. The challenge therefore is to strike a balance between those audience members who are computer illiterate and the growing number of readers, viewers, and listeners who computer savvy.

Summary

As found across the literature on diaspora media and changing patterns of media use by diaspora communities, it is clear that proprietors of diaspora media outlets have important and challenging responsibilities to their audience in an era of globalization and digital networks of information gathering and dissemination. Diaspora media should be able to fully inform its audience on global issues by providing them with alternative and diverse views and perspectives.

This study seeks to explore whether and how the theoretical concepts are manifested in journalists' perception of the efficacy of diaspora media in terms of democratization and mobilization of audiences. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions associated with diaspora research:

Research Questions

1. What is the perception of Diaspora journalists in the United States regarding the effectiveness of transnational journalism in terms of supporting positive democratic change in their homelands?
2. How do diaspora media influence immigrant communities in the United States?

Methodology

A purposive sample of 15 journalists in New York who practised in diaspora media outlets was chosen because news media professionals are often regarded as defenders and midwives of democracy (Gregorian, 2010; Okigbo & Hyden, 2004; Okonkwo, 1990). It is assumed that the sample would be able to analyze the effectiveness of transnational journalism on democratic change and mobilization of citizens.

Data generated from personal stories, experiences, and in-depth interviews (McNabb, 2008) of the journalists will illuminate the understanding of the potential impact of transnational journalism on democracy and diaspora communities. Interviews of experienced journalists yielded abundant information on the subject of inquiry.

Participant Selection and Rationale

I interviewed 15 journalists from the eight news organizations including reporters, editors, anchor persons, directors, and chief executives/owners of diaspora media organizations.

Questions addressed such issues as citizen engagement, digitization of information, sound policy formulation, and democratization. The extent to which diaspora media organizations effect positive social changes among immigrants in the United States and citizens of their native countries featured in the questions asked to respondents.

The interview also featured questions that were designed to ascertain respondents' of assessment of the influence of digitization of information notably the growing popularity of the Internet, cellular phones, and other mobile devices in emerging countries. The interviews gave the participants freedom to question my assumptions about transnational journalism and also provided instant feedback regarding their evaluation of the importance of the study.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential impact of the integration of different communication platforms on democratic governance in terms of how it influences freedom of expression, openness, accountability, and political participation. The convergence of different channels of communication notably the traditional media (radio, television, newspapers, and magazines) and the new media such as the Internet, hand- held wireless devices (mobile phones, PDA's, etc.), and social media (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, RSS feeds, etc.) has broad implications for governance, media freedom, citizens' access to the media, freedom of expression, transparency, accountability, and political participation. The study model proposes that there is a strong connection between unfettered information flow and effective democratic governance. The study model also proposes that democratization of information and

communication in the forms of citizen participation and access to the news media was central to the growth of democracy in emerging countries of Africa.

This study examined the perceptions of Nigerian journalists about the status of media convergence in Nigeria and how it is influencing democracy in terms of transparency, freedom of expression, and political participation. As purveyors of information and midwives of democracy (Gregorian, 2010; Okonkwo, 1990), journalists have enriched this study's outcome by sharing perspectives that illuminate information processing, packaging, access, delivery, and dissemination in an era of information fragmentation. The vast majority of studies on media convergence focused on the influence of technology on the media industry (Carr, 2009; Lowrey, 2005). Others examined the changing landscape of journalism practice, and citizen empowerment in terms of information sharing in mostly advanced democracies (Bunch, 2008; Silcock & Keith, 2006). A common thread among most of the studies is an insufficient evaluation of how these changes are affecting emerging democracies and countries in democratic transitions in Africa. The purpose of this study was specifically to explore the potential impact of media convergence on Nigeria's nascent democracy. This study investigated whether information sharing on various communication platforms such as radio, television, newspapers, mobile phones, face book, the Internet, and especially mobile phones, will produce fundamental changes in democratic governance, increase level of transparency, ensure the conduct of free and fair elections, enthrone pluralism, and achieve freedom of expression.

In this chapter, I present the data analysis procedures and findings. The chapter offers insight into the context of the study, description of the study participants, the coding process, demographic summary of the sample, analysis of the research questions, and the results.

Participants in the study were Nigerian journalists employed by media organizations in Nigeria. Fifteen journalists purposively selected from government owned and privately owned media establishments participated in the study. In other words, I conducted interviews with 15 people. The initial sample size was 25, but after 15interviews, I noticed series of redundancy and repetition, an indication of data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). I discovered that no more new information was forthcoming.

Participants interviewed included reporters, editors, political correspondents, editorial page editors, online editors, news managers, media owners, columnists, and anchor persons who work in radio, television, and newspaper organizations.

Interviews were semi structured with open-ended questions. Ready-made questions guided the interviews, but some questions were adjusted to conform to the responses of interviewees. All the interviews were conducted in English language and, tape-recorded and verbatim responses to each question were transcribed using a standardized transcription protocol (McLellan, MacQueen, & Niedig, 2003).

Summary and Discussion

Conclusion

As most analysts would readily admit, the mainstream media mainly report about the United States with little or no reporting of other regions of the world. The power of the mainstream media and corporate America has led to the diminution of diversity of thought and critical analysis of issues important to the lives of the diaspora communities and indeed to ordinary Americans. The mainstream media is obsessed with ideological differences of liberal versus conservatives; right versus left, inanities, entertainment, and advertising.

In the course of reporting events and analyzing issues that affect different immigrant communities, editors and reporters in diaspora media organizations are likely to develop more cultural and emotional intelligence. Because they generate stories of cross-border significance these organizations become more culturally and internationally astute. Such experiences will definitely give editorial staff of the different diaspora media organizations a more nuanced understanding of how different cultures interact. The unique experience in inter-cultural learning also helps in the most effective use of a workforce with very different backgrounds. Consequently, diaspora media organizations have the potential to become high-performing organizations with the least possible disruption.

From a management perspective, diaspora media outlets need skills such as effective communication, empathy, collaboration, and trust building. The ability to elicit public trust as the face of your organization should be a top priority. Any business enterprise requires the confidence of the public to survive and earn a measure of legitimacy. Proprietors of diaspora media organizations in the United States should take the issue of public trust very seriously

especially in the wake of the 2011 Trust Barometer released by Edelman Public Relations Agency that suggested that trust in business in the US and UK was 45% compared to 61% in China, 70% in India, and 81% in Brazil (Barton, 2011). In order to build and sustain public trust, it is advisable to embark on socially relevant initiatives for the diasporas in your location or target audience. Besides providing information and news, media organizations should be part of the community in which they operate. It will be a great idea to offer scholarships, participate in cultural affairs of immigrants, organize beauty pageants, career counseling, and mentor students.

Finally, the fast changes in the media industry require that managers in this sector must be alert to identify immediate opportunities and risks. For example, what opportunities exist in collaboration with similar organizations? If disruption from new technologies becomes a handicap to an organization, it could reach out for consolidation. Mergers of small diaspora media organization targeting the same audience could be a strategic way of rebutting the system towards better performance. That is one way to look at the big picture. I will be the first to admit that merging organizations is not easy. There are such considerations as ego, money, and influence which hinder business leaders to give up their turf to another person. In the final analysis, what is critical is the capacity to deliver efficient services to society. This mindset should trump every consideration.

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