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**International News Discourse after the Emergence of Social Media**

<sup>1</sup>Job B. Guyson, <sup>2</sup>Chinelo Ude-Akpei and <sup>3</sup>Kasim Jibril

<sup>1</sup>Department of Television Journalism NTA Television College, Jos, (affiliated to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Television Journalism NTA Television College, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup>NTA Television College, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

Email: [bapyibijob@gmail.com](mailto:bapyibijob@gmail.com), [neloudeakpeh@yahoo.com](mailto:neloudeakpeh@yahoo.com), [Justice.kasim.kj@gmail.com](mailto:Justice.kasim.kj@gmail.com)

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**ABSTRACT**

The unidirectional flow of information on the international system favouring the positive portrayal of the North at the expense of the disadvantaged negatively portrayed South has generated a lot of controversy across the globe from time immemorial. However, this study examines the status of the flow of information particularly with the advent of social media networks which were none existing when this discourse was conceptualized initially to ascertain whether the flow of information is still unidirectional or has changed to bidirectional or multidirectional. The study reveals that the introduction of social media networks has changed the unilateralism in the flow of news favouring only the North at the expense of the South by giving everyone an equal space for participation. The study therefore recommends that the Third World Nations and Nigeria by extension who were crying foul against the inequality and imbalance should now rise and take advantage of the huge communication resources provided by the social media in articulating themselves within the committee of nations.

**Keywords:** News, Discourse, Information, Social media and International.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Information news flow or global news flow in this paper is the transmission of news stories across frontiers through the application of sophisticated satellite information infrastructure and disseminated either on global television, radio, or social media networks.

Social media networks here have been defined as every application or site hosted on the internet that can be used in the gathering and transmission of information on a large scale across frontiers.

This paper seeks to address the level of information equilibrium among the nations of the world particularly between the highly technological North through their control of massive communication resources and agencies such as United Press, Associated Press, Cable News Network, British Broadcasting Company and the less technologically developed South. The discourse especially examines if the use of social media networks has changed or not changed the flow of information internationally as all the findings of similar studies before the advent of the social media have revealed a unidirectional flow largely from the United States and the rest of the North to the less industrialised South.

### INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW

Ekeanyanwu (2007)[1] defined international news flow or global news flow as that arm of mass communication concerned with the gathering, dissemination, interpretation and analysis of global news. The news flow argument according to Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012)[2] is a conceptual framework whereby developing nations demanded for a change in the present pattern of news flow between them and the western industrialised nations. This debate was a core issue in the News World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which basically revolves around “free flow” or free and balanced flow of information between the western developed nations and the under developed or mostly put the developing societies in the southern part of the world. The argument here is that communication according to MacBride (1981)[3] has become an “exchange between two unequal protagonists without necessarily having to compete, but instead allows the predominance of the more powerful, the richer and the better equipped to continue to monopolize the flow of news”. Momoh (1988)[4] strengthened this view, when he states thus: “It is common knowledge that news from Third World countries usually make their appearance in the media of developed countries only when they are sensational and border on drama strong enough to arouse their sensibilities and sense of curiosity”. For instance out of the 103 issues selected for study on some two interesting (Economic magazines and Newsweek), it was revealed that only 16 reports were found to have been reported about

Nigeria. Annoyingly 9 out of the 16 stories consisting 56.3% were all unfavourable or negative in nature while only 31.3% of the reports were favourable looking on the brighter side of the nation. Mowlana (1997)[5] examined the motivation for this in his words as such:

The only third world coverage that does exist on the international scene is at best shallow or over simplified, and almost always focussing around political leanings and not accurate or comprehensive coverage or centred on elite and not the masses or worst Still portrays negative or “bad” news or catastrophe, violence, disease, hunger, poverty and, corruption rather than on developmental news education information.

This has further reverberated the findings of the study done by Nwosu (1987)[6] of four British and American newspaper’s coverage which showed that only 0.1% of the entire news space was dedicated to African news over a period of 4 months. This revealed a serious under- reporting of Africa and Nigeria by extension. According to Golan (2008)[7] this scenario is largely as a result of the ownership and control of the transnational news Agencies by the west on one hand and on the other hand their large pool in terms of resources, technology and trained personnel. Okigbo (1996)[30] also points out that “despite the fact that the developing countries account for about 75% of the world population less than 30% of world news coverage is given to develop them”.

Okigbo (1996)[30] argues further that this leads to a perpetual under covering of the regions, the ultimate result of which is lack of adequate information about these areas. Worried by this imbalance or inequality in the flow of commission, the United Nations through the McBride commission investigated these claims and released its findings which indicted the West’s’ handling of global flow of news (McBride, 1981)[3]. This position however has been debunked by western scholars who have argued that the world is a free market place of ideas where information/news flow should be free and unhindered.

Presenting the position of Third world journalist Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012)[2] explained that what the west calls global free flow of information and news is a euphemism for the economic, political & cultural domination of developing nations by the west with the aid of its big and powerful “Four” transnational news Agencies. Ekenyanwu et al. (2012)[1] have further submitted that the developing Nation’s grievance is that there is a deliberate attempt by the developed countries especially the western world to exploit the advantages of their industrial and economic superiority to established and perpetuate domination in mass media systems over the developing nations both qualitatively & quantitatively. That is why Okigbo (1985)[8] advances that the western world has impacted journalism training even after the creation of indigenous wire services such as the Pan African news agency, indigenous editors & reporters have not made substantial impact to break away from the inhumanity done to the Third world and Africa by the west. This Okigbo (1985)[8] has blamed on the kind of training received by them instituted in either British or American orientation which is lacking the needed impetus to pull out the Third world Nations from this cocoon of colonialism several years after independence. No wonder the study conducted by Okigbo (1985)[8] revealed that about 85 respondents constituting (39.99%) agreed that Nigerian journalist were not much concerned about the debate and this will not be unconnected with the America cum British orientation and training received.

However, it was concluded in the studies conducted by (Okigbo 1996; Chang, Luo and Hao, 2000; Nwosu, 2000; Robert, 1985; Stevenson, 1994; Masmoudi, 1979, Stevenson, R.L. 1992; Robert, and Ugboajah, 2000)[6],[30],[9],[10],[11],[12],[13] that the environment of an equal and balanced flow of information across frontiers will make the Third world Nations equal stakeholders in the global information question. But with more sophistication and the emergence of the social media networks for example what implication does that hold on the New world and Information Flow order.

This is imperative as the submission of Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango and Peters (2012)[2] has further thrown a fresh challenge to this study when they posited that “the entrance of social media networks into the news flow debate has added a unique twist into the global news flow controversy which has helped in deconstructing the structure of news-gathering”.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW DISCOURSE**

Social media according to Griessner (2012)[14] are websites and applications that enable users to create and store content or to participate in sound networking. This means that we deal with a whole branch of different models such as weblogs, internet, forum, wikis, podcasts micro blogging or social networks.

Griessner (2012)[14] adds that the most important of these platforms as of 2012 are Facebook (social media with over 1 billion users) and Twitter (mix of network and micro blogging) which has surpassed the 500 million user mark by early 2012. These developments also have an impact in today's world as it's not just used to communicate with friends and family but most importantly used by media organizations to communicate with their audience. Mowlana, (1997)[5] explains that the uses of social media and its usefulness in international communication lies in its ability to provide more sources of news than ever before which are not only high quality through any of its news aggregation like yahoo, Google and Facebook. Social media have redefined a new sense of urgency and speed with which sources are identified and stories transmitted. Fuchs and Appadurai, (1996)[15] assert that these technological developments of computers and satellites with all their accessories and networks have clearly worked in favour of the news producers and fostered a more intensive flow of their international services. He explained further that although it was not intended, but the computerization of the world has immediately increased the volume of news produced and transmitted over the wires. Satellite transmission turned out to be even more beneficial to the global wires. It has freed them

from the costly and inefficient monopolies that public telecommunication companies enjoyed in most parts of the world, particularly in developing countries[31],[32],[33][34].

Beer (2010) cited in Ekenganywu *et al.*, (2012)[1] regards them as informal news institutions which serve as “pervasive agents of globalization as well as democratization”. Social networking sites support the human need for social interaction using internet and web based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one too many) into social media dialogues (many too many). Facebook according to him is one of the most popular Social networks reported to have been the most trafficked with more than 21 million registered members generating 1.6 billion page views each day and the site is highly integrated into daily media practises of its users. According to Cassidy (2006)[16], quoted in Ekanganwu *et al.*, (2012)[1] an average user spends about 20 minutes a day on the site with two-thirds of users login at least once a day[35],[36],[37].

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Ekeanyanwu and Kalyango (2013)[2] this discussion can make do with so many mass communication theory or hypothesis, among them are: the international flow theory, gate keeping theory, agenda setting theory, the value system theory and so on just to name a few. However, in this study only the market place of ideas theory will be used to argue the position of this paper.

## MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS THEORY

This theory on marketplace of ideas is a form of radical libertarianism that emerged in the United States in the 1800s by John Stuart during the penny press and the yellow journalism era. The ascension of the theory was majorly to check the growing reoccurrence of widespread injustices and corruption at the time government and business conglomerates including mega media organisations were making heavy profit margins at the expense of the working class whose working conditions and incentives were

asymmetrically neglected. This led to the emergence of the antitrust legislation to break the powers of all existing monopolies such as the news agencies at that time. This scenario is pointing to the commodification of news by those powerful industrialised News Agencies who exerted strong technological capacities that further impoverished the less developed countries. It is only needful for this inequality to be addressed through a united action by governments of the world in the interest of equal access and equal freedom to information.

By so doing, the influence of the government of the powerful nations in news production will be reduced. This will make the onus of content production lie with the content producer who will ensure that the likes of the people and expectations of society are not jeopardized. This therefore remains the only justification for journalists in both developed and underdeveloped nations to generate news contents that are relevant to those that receive them with very minimal government politicisation. The freedom provided by social media which will be examined in this paper will be properly scrutinized to see if it will provide to the Northern and Southern Nations of the world a stage that will truly make information sharing and exchanges typical of the philosophy of the market place of ideas theory.

#### **THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN FOCUS: WHAT ARE THEIR ROLES IN INTERNATIONAL NEWS FLOW DISCOURSE**

Ekeanyanwu, Kalyangu and Peter (2012)[2] posit that the entrance of social media networks into the news flow debate has added a unique twist into the global news flow controversy. They have helped to deconstruct the structure of news-gathering and dissemination since the debut of Facebook in 2004 and launch of Twitter in 2005, the looming social media have significantly changed both the landscape of internet operations and people's daily lives. According to numerical statistics in the second quarter of 2008, three quarters of internet surfers had become social media users (Van, 2005)[17]. The influence of social media in social change is significantly felt in the information communication system. For example, it was reported by Ochogwu (2012)[18] that China's

environmental protest took place and was precipitated in a small south western Chinese town of Shifang both by the engagement of the potency of the social media which later resulted into a national pandemonium and attracted government attention. Similarly, recent happenings particularly the mobilisation of the people for mass revolts in the Muslim Arab States (the Arab spring) suggested that the social media network has been accepted and therefore cannot be wished away (Ekeanyanwu, Kalyango & Peters 2012)[2].

Oyeyinka and Nyaki, (2004:7)[19] rendered it like this:

The utilisation of social media networks have become undeniably imperative that more nations including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iran, China and Malaysia who were hitherto objectionable to these modern social media resources have quietly conceded its benefits for economic development and other uses.

#### WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE DISCOURSE?

Ekeanganwu et al. (2012)[1] have argued that the most powerful nations of the world known to be exercising control over news flow including the United States of America are gradually easing off and loosing it. This is because of the economic situation of most of the media industry in the United States and the availability of almost free alternatives as evidenced in the social networks. This is in consonance with the submission of Turan, Colakoglu and Colakoglu (2009)[20] whose admission of the fact that the mainstream news media that used to be trusted institutions are now beginning to lose their popularity. Continuing, Turan, Colakoglu and Colakoglu (2009)[20] citing cogent examples said the 1958 America's National Election Study (ANES) found that 66% of Americans thought newspapers were "fair", while only 27% said they were unfair. These views were bi-partisan, with 78% of Republicans and 64% of democrats viewing newspaper as fair. When the Ropar Organisation asked a similar question about network news in two 1964 polls, 71% and 61% of the public thought it was fair, while just 12% and 17% thought it was unfair. To show the extent of credibility the media enjoyed they asserted that:

A famous 1972 poll found that 72% of Americans listed CBS evening news anchor Walker Cronkite higher than any other public figure in the survey. In 1976, investigation by Washington post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Banstein's uncovering of the Watergate scandal and its subsequent adaptation in a book. "All the President's Men portrayed journalists and the mainstream media as defenders of democracy but not any more as this trend has been reversed by the advent of the social networks which have proliferated the media space and provided a veritable source for mainstream media because of its speed, credibility and all inclusiveness"[20].

For Castells (2002)[21] the advent of social media networks has changed dominant ideologies and has given sufficient space of expression to minority politics, diasporic groups on the internet as in no other medium. He puts it this way:

The internet is not simply a technology: it is a communication medium (as the pubs were), and it is the material infrastructure of a given Nations information network form: the network (as the factory or mainstream media was). On both counts the internet became the indispensable component of the kind of social movements emerging in the network society[21].

But beyond the Internet, there is another communication technology which is increasingly appropriated by different populations; this is satellite broadcasting with manifestations mostly on social networks. Al-Jazeera for instance, has shaken the world with its stubborn success against Western global media (Joseph, 2004)[22]. Comparing the dominance between the South and the North over the social media network, the result showed that by 2005, South Korea was already leading the world in broadband ahead of the west and America with nearly a quarter of its population having access to broadband, while China had emerged the world's leading television market, overtaking the United States which was the Western leader in global news flow. China also has the largest number of mobile phones users and had become the largest exporter of Information Technology

products displacing the West and its Northern allies thereby taking the lead as the World's leading information society. It is this kind of scenario that will tempt anyone reading this paper to ask, has America lost it? This is because the 21<sup>st</sup> century information era is ICT driven and in the whole world there seems not to be anyone as rich as china in ICT products [23].

Another study by Lynch (2006)[24] showed that the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera since its launch in 1996 has redefined journalism in the Arab world; CCTV in China is another emerging international power in news production that is not only producing dissenting voices but most importantly remains a prominent example of contra-flow in global media products. By 2006, this pan Arabic 24/7 news network that is, Al-Jazeera alone was claiming to reach 50 million viewers across the world, undermining the Anglo American domination of news and current affairs perpetrated by CNN and BBC in one of the world's most geopolitically sensitive areas (Livingston & Asmolov, 2010)[25]. If the live broadcast of the 1991 US military action against Iraq contributed to making CNN having a global presence, the 'war on terrorism' catapulted Al-Jazeera into an international broadcaster whose logo can be seen on television screens around the world. These developments opened—new transnational networks, contributing to what one commentator has called 'Easternisation and South-South flows' (Castells 2002)[21]. There is evidence that global media traffic is not just one way from the West (with the USA at its core) to the rest of the world, even though it is disproportionately weighted in favour of the former. Non-Western countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Brazil and India have become increasingly important in the circulation of cultural products including news largely as a result of their embrace of social networks[26].

No wonder Appadurai (1996)[15] added thus:

The United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images that is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes. The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To

grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old ideas of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt school sense)

According to Mitu (2012)[27] social media have made it easy for “everyone” to be informed in either mainstream traditional journalism or peripheral citizen journalism. This means that they are now multiple sources for news-gathering and dissemination and greater access and mass participation in the news production and distribution business.

This implies according to Ekenangwu et al. (2012)[1] that no nation or people could justify any further cry of marginalisation in how they are covered or reported because the invention of social media networks have liberalized and decentralised the process to encourage popular participation. Continuing Ekenagnwu et al. (2013)[1] has added that traditional media are no longer setting the public or media agenda alone. The emergence of social media networks has reset the calculation, opened up the space and attracted more participation in what people think they should be talking.

This has been reaffirmed in a Pew Research Centres Project (2010)[28] results which have shown that between January 19, 2005- January 15, 2010, News topics across media platforms in America have revealed that blogs have featured about 17% political / government stories. Twitter covered 6%; YouTube covered 21% while the traditional press was only able to cover 15%. On the economy, Foreign events (non US), economy ,technology, health and medicine, blogs were seen to have covered 12%,7%,8 and 7% stories while twitter, it was revealed covered 13%, 1%,43%and 4% respectively. YouTube on the other hand, it was revealed covered 26%, 1%, and 6%, while traditional press it was found covered 9%, 10%, 1% and 11% accordingly. These results by Pew Research can be interpreted as a confirmation that the United States Media are gradually moving away from mainstream international news coverage and reporting to a more global outlook using the social network sites.

Although Egwu (2011)[29] pointed that the huge information activity carried on the social network cannot be regarded to be done by journalists and journalism except if there will be a re-conceptualization or retooling of the concepts of “journalism and journalist”.

### CONCLUSION

It can be safely said that this work has revealed that what has changed in the International flow of news is that the advent of social media networks has caused a shift in International news flow from unidirectional to bidirectional and also sets agenda. This the social media networks have done through the decentralisation, liberalisation, democratisation and increasing participation in the flow of information across frontiers. This is evident in this paper by the submission of scholars as reviewed in the studies of [2],[28].

Theoretically also, the study has reinforced the basic tenets of the marketplace of ideas theory used in this study for the enlargement of wider freedom for expression as espoused by the use of social media networks. This therefore implies that the domination and control exercised by what used to be the “top four” (4) News Agencies such as the United Press International, Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France is no more.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The adoption of specifically international channels or foreign channels by Nigerian Television Networks such as NTA International is good. This however can be made better when these networks devise visibility on other social network sites that are borderless as a means of deepening the country’s presence on the international or global communication map.

Since its been discovered by the paper that social media networks also set agenda on the international system, Nigerians and Nigerian journalists must utilize the huge potentials the networks have in selling the socio-economic riches of the country and the

continent at large by repeatedly sending messages that are strategic as against its arbitrary use which at present is disturbing.

Thirdly, since one of the findings of this paper has espoused the fact that it's not only the mainstream media that set agenda but also social media networks. It therefore implies that any attempt by the Nigerian government to regulate the social media is an evil to rob the nation of the great benefits of these networks in earning the nation a global visibility on the communication map of the world.

Lastly, it is therefore necessary, that international communication scholars, media experts, and other concerned parties within civil society should revisit the literature and theoretical conceptualization that supported earlier positions on the international news flow debate in this dispensation of social media networks.

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