

International News Flow and Social Media Networks: A Survey Of Stranglehold By Western Media

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to ascertain the international news flow and social media networks: a survey of stranglehold of Western media. The objectives of the study were among others: to find out if new flow debate is still relevant with the emergence of social media networks in the news production and distribution and to find if the traditional media is still setting public agenda in this era of social media networks popularity. The method used was descriptive survey design. The study, however, using secondary data from the Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2021), social media online clippings and library content. The instrument for data collection was secondary data for the study was gathered through the use of this study, however, using secondary data from the Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2021). This enabled the study to collate first hand data and information on the phenomenon under study directly from the target population. Data collected were analysed using quantitative method which were presented and analysed entirely using simple percentages and would be arranged in frequency tables. Findings show that social media channels are already neck deep in setting agendas for public discourse. These results also show that there are similarities in daily or weekly issues for discourse between the social media networks and the traditional media organizations. Where they differ, it is even observed that the public line up behind the social media networks because of it is participatory, interactive and free of obvious charges (cost) nature. The study concluded here that traditional media are no longer setting the public or media agenda alone. The emergence of social media networks has reset the calculations, opened up the space and attracted more participation in what people think they should be talking about. Social media networks are in this for real and it does not look like their popularity is about to wane. The study recommends among others that there should be commitment on the part of Nigeria government towards investing in media infrastructures.

Keywords: International, news flow, social media network, stranglehold, Western media

Introduction

The antecedent to the call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) centres on the view by the developing nations that the existing order is unfavourable and unacceptable to them. This is supported by the findings of the MacBride Commission which investigated the claims and released its findings which indicted the West in its handling of global flow of news (MacBride *et al*, 1981). The MacBride Commission, however, noted that part of this imbalance is often branded the logical consequence of the developed gap between the industrialized nations and the third world. In their counter claims, some of the western nations on the opposing side of the debate at the UNESCO forum argued that the world is a free marketplace of ideas where information/news flow should be free and unhindered.

Okigbo (1996) was, however, worried that even though the world is a free marketplace of ideas where information flow should not be hindered; he observed that the west's refusal to recognize anything insidious in the virtual saturation of the underdeveloped African nations with news reports and cultural artefacts originating from the West at the detriment of African political, economic, and cultural stability should be of global concern. Third World journalists and scholars, on their part, counter-charged that what the West call global "free flow" of information and news is, in fact, a euphemism for the economic, political and cultural domination of developing nations by the West with the aid of its powerful transnational news agencies. The major focus of the developing nations' 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 establish and perpetuate domination in mass media systems over the developing nations both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Quantitative imbalance is about the amount of news flowing from industrialised nations to the un-industrialised nations and vice versa. For instance, if a content analysis of CNN, BBC etc is carried out, it is likely that out of 100 news stories, maybe only 10 will be about the un-industrialized nations put together. Ekeanyanwu (2005) also notes that out of the paltry 10 news stories about the un-industrialized nations, nine maybe all negatives. This is qualitative imbalance. Ekeanyanwu (2007) argues further that South nations never get a mention in the media of the western world unless the bizarre or disaster/crisis oriented event occurs. The implication for this is that news about poverty, hunger, political struggles, diseases, wars, coup d'états, disasters and other forms of crises are reported in the Western media. These same types of unfavourable news are relayed back to the developing countries (Ekeanyanwu, 2007).

Egwu (2001) highlights the South's situation in 2001 by juxtaposing its situation to the media saturation in the United States:

The United States has over 25,000 periodicals [By 2001]; over 1,200 book publishers; over 10,000 radio stations (AM & FM); over 1,000 television stations; and some 26million other types of (e.g. citizens band) Radios. There is therefore a situation of media monopoly by the North, not only in hardware, but also in software. News Agencies also abound in the North... to the annoying neglect and marginalization of the South, especially Africa (p.20).

A comparative content analysis of four British and American newspaper's coverage showed that only 0.1% of the entire news space was dedicated to African news over a period of four months (Nwosu, 1987). This reveals serious under-reporting of Africa, that study also

supported earlier findings that much of the Western reporting on Africa is characterised by “bush fire” journalism where crises predominate to the vital exclusion of development oriented news. The developed nations also dominated the international flow of news well into the 1990s due to their domination of the world communication systems and resources, which include news agencies, satellite broadcast facilities, newspapers and magazines (Okunna, 1993). World news had always been dominated by the “Big Four” international news agencies: Reuters headquartered in the United Kingdom, the Associated Press, which is based in the U.S., United Press International, also based in the U.S., and Agence France Presse, which is based in France (Okunna, 1993). Third World countries have made good progress in reducing their dependence on other types of imported western media programs and reduced their total reliance on the “Big Four” for world news.

Despite the establishment of national and regional news agencies, this situation has not changed in the last two decades as much as it necessary to democratise communication in the world. In Africa, for instance, there is still increasing concern among African countries that the news coverage of their affairs by foreign news agencies is grossly inadequate (Ochogwu, 1987; Golan, 2008; de Beer, 2010). While most media houses in Africa have regular slots and spaces for news originating from the developed world, African countries are either not being covered at all in the media of the western world (quantitative) or endure malicious negative news reports about events in these countries (qualitative).

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

News flows tend towards a North-South direction and inhibit development of exchanges between developing countries themselves. While there is a flood of news on the east/west axis between North America and Europe, as well as, although on a lower level, between socialist and western countries, the much lesser one-way flow between North and South can hardly be called an exchange due to the excessive imbalance. There are, obviously, various reasons, both inside developing countries and on the international scene, which prevent media from counteracting the blanketing effect of the one-way flow.

This belief has been reinforced by the Timbergen report (Ekeanyanwu, 2007) to the “Club of Rome” on information flow in 1977. The report states: “It must also be recognised that international dissemination has long formed the subject of discriminatory practices ... the monopolistic and discriminatory practices inherent in current international information dissemination must be deemed as one of the worst”. The argument here is that communication according to MacBride *et. al.* (1981) 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 monopolise the flow of news”. Momoh (1988) strengthens 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” (p.7).

Okigbo (1990) also points out “despite the fact that the developing countries account for about 75 percent of the world population, less than 30 percent of world news coverage is devoted to them” (p.6). Okigbo 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. He goes on to say that the flow of world news is mostly unidirectional. Thus, according to him, the average South citizen is more likely to know more about the western world than the Third World. This paucity of news flow from the Third World to the western world also means that the average westerner is likely to know very little about the Third World. This inadequate and biased flow of international news around the globe has led to the perpetuation of some prejudices and the holding of certain attitudes that do not support global co-operation based on fairness, equity and just treatment (Okigbo, 1990).

This study therefore analyses the global news flow debate in the light of social media networks to determine whether some of the issues of “free flow” and “free and balanced flow” still reverberate even with the emergence of social media networks and their tendencies towards news liberalisation. This study is also expected to determine the impact of social media networks on the media agenda setting theory.

Literature Review

News Flow Debate and Social Media Networks

The entrance of social media networks into the News Flow Debate (NFD) added a unique twist into the global News Flow Controversy (NFC). They have helped to deconstruct the structure of news gathering and dissemination. De Beer (2010) regards them as informal news institutions which serve as pervasive agents of globalisation as well as democratisation. Social networking sites support the human need for social interaction, using internet and web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many).

Facebook, one of the most popular of the social networks, has been reported to be the most trafficked social networking site with more than 21 million registered members generating 1.6 billion page views each day. The site is tightly integrated into the daily media practices of its users. According to Cassidy (2006), the typical user spends about 20 minutes a day on the site and two-thirds of users log in at least once a day. The online or virtual community created by the social networking sites is one of a kind. It is an active community and well informed about issues around them. It thrives on interactivity, open conversations and mass participation. This is where the NFD becomes relevant. Before their emergence, traditional or formal media channels seemed to have been weighed down by economic, political and other non-professional considerations in the coverage of world news. The social networks thrive on citizens’ or civic journalism whereby news democratisation has made more and more information available to more persons at a marginal cost. However, a recent study by the Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) attempted to compare information flows between social media networks and mainstream media in the United State to argue that global news flow has not really changed much in the era of social media emergence and participation in the news flow process. The study found out that social media and the traditional media usually share the same agenda to some extent:

They tend to be blockbuster events, and they cut across a wide variety of topic areas - the economy, health pandemics, and the deaths of well-known figures. In the 49 weeks studied, blogs

and the mainstream press shared the top story just 13 times. The storyline shared most was the U.S. economic crisis. Other storylines that drove attention on both platforms included the initial H1N1 flu outbreak in late spring, the June protests in Iran, the death of Senator Edward Kennedy in late August and the shooting at Ford Hood in early November (Pew Research Centre's PEJ, 2021). The Pew Research Centre study also found out traces of differences in coverage between social media networks and mainstream traditional media in the United States. The results as presented in the tables below show that the social media are beginning to cast shadows on mainstream traditional media claims to setting public and media agenda.

The weeks in November and December, more than a quarter (27%) of the traditional press' news hole was occupied with the war in Afghanistan as Obama delivered a major speech outlining his plans for the U.S. role there. In the blogs, Afghanistan was the third largest subject of the week, following two very different subjects. First was a vote in Switzerland to ban the building of minarets, which are distinctive structures associated with Islamic mosques and second was the subject of global warning surrounding the 'climate-gate' controversy. On Twitter, Afghanistan was not among the top five stories at all (Pew Research Centre's PEJ, 2021).

Commenting further on their findings, the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2021) under its "New Media, Old Media blogosphere" (p.1), also notes thus: of the three social media platforms studied, news-oriented blogs share the most similarities with the mainstream press. Bloggers almost always link to legacy outlets for their information, and politics, government and foreign events garnered the greatest traction. There are, however, also some clear differences. While the biggest topic areas overlap, there was considerable divergence in the specific news events that garnered attention. In less than one third of the weeks did the blogosphere and traditional press share the same top story. Bloggers tend to gravitate toward events that affect personal rights and cultural norms – issues like same-sex marriage, the rationing of health care or privacy settings on Facebook, while traditional media news agendas are more event driven and institutional. And a strong sense of purpose often accompanies the links in blogs and social networking media. In many cases, it is voicing strongly held and often divisive opinions. After the botched terror attack on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day, for instance, a number of conservative bloggers immediately blamed Obama, while others claimed that the fear of terrorism had become larger and more irrational than it should be. In others, the function was more to share personal connections to events or to take action.

Statement Problem

The importance of this study cannot be overemphasised. The emergence of social media networks has encouraged mass participation of the ordinary public, news liberalisation, citizens/individual's engagement in news production and dissemination business, as well as news democratisation. This is the current situation that was not envisaged during the introductory stages of the news flow debate. It is important therefore to study the impact of this new phenomenon on the news flow debate. Second, recent happenings especially the mobilisation of the people for mass revolts in the Muslim Arab States (The Arab Spring) suggests that the social media networks have been accepted and therefore cannot be wished away. How this plays up in the context of the current analysis of news flow debate is worth studying.

The two questions that drive this study were:

1. Is the news flow debate still relevant with the emergence of social media networks in the news production and distribution business?

2. Is the traditional media still setting public agenda in this era of social media networks popularity?

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to ascertain the international news flow and new media networks: A survey of stranglehold by Western media. Specifically, the aim of the study was to:

1. Find out if new flow debate is still relevant with the emergence of social media networks in the news production and distribution.
2. Find if the traditional media is still setting public agenda in this era of social media networks popularity.

Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions in order to assess the purpose of this research study.

1. Is the news flow debate still relevant with the emergence of social media networks in the news production and distribution business?
2. 2. Is the traditional media still setting public agenda in this era of social media networks popularity?

Theoretical Framework

Development Media Theory.

The development media theory is very relevant to a discourse on the economic, social and political development of Africa and other Third World countries like Nigeria. This theory was one of the outcomes of the call for a new world information and communication order (NWICO) that preoccupied communication scholars in the early 1980s and is presently assuming greater relevance among African communication and economic scholars because of the growing threat of media imperialism and economic neo-colonialism. According to Okunna (2003):

This theory emerged in the 1980s to fill-a void which became increasing noticeable as the gap between the developed and developing countries widened. As this gap widened, it became apparent that none of the classical theories of the press was strictly applicable to the development concern of developing countries (p.16).

In the main, this theory argues that under-development is characterized by wars and conflict over scarce means lack of educational and social facilities and basic infrastructures essential to self-actualisation. Truly, communication practice and its content should therefore be geared towards the development needs of these counties.

Ukonu (2010) also acquiesces and writes that it is an effort to orient communication towards national economic, social and political goals in developing countries. "The aim is to use the instruments of communication to help Africans in various skills that lead to self-improvement" (p. 36). Ukonu notes further that communication can become an instrument of increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and means of achieving material well-being. Thus, the media can be at the vanguard of the creation of opportunities, through purposeful media content for realising human potential to achieve development. When applied to the focus of this study, the transmission of ideas, information and culture by the media should reflect the development needs of the society.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey design method. Research design used was a survey, using online content from social media. This study, however using secondary data from the Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (2023), social media online clippings and library content were used. Library materials were the instrument of data collection. The researcher visited various universities/academic libraries wherever the different scholarly postulations were sourced with the aid of those data gathered from the social media online clippings. Secondary data for the study was gathered through the use of this study, however, using secondary data from the Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (2023). This enabled the study to collate first hand data and information on the phenomenon under study directly from the target population. The secondary sources of data were the bulk of data used in the literature and analysed quantitatively. Data collected were analysed using quantitative method which were presented and analysed entirely using simple percentages and would be arranged in frequency tables.

Results

Table 1: News Topics across Media Platforms

| | Blogs | Twitter | You Tube | Traditional Press |
|--------------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Politics/Government | 17 | 6 | 21 | 15 |
| Foreign events (non-U.S) | 12 | 13 | 26 | 9 |
| Economy | 7 | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| Technology | 8 | 43 | 1 | 1 |
| Health/Med | 7 | 4 | 6 | 11 |

Source: Pew Research Centre’s PEJ Study Data, 2023

Table 2: Topics Pieces of News Coverage: Blogs vs. Traditional Press

| | | |
|---------------------|----|----|
| Politics/Government | 17 | 15 |
| Foreign events | 12 | 9 |
| Science/Tech | 10 | 1 |
| Health & Med | 8 | 1 |
| Celebrity | 7 | 11 |
| Economy | 7 | 2 |
| Terrorism/crime | 7 | 10 |
| Environment | 6 | 4 |
| Pop culture | 6 | 5 |
| Gay issues | 4 | 2 |
| Consumer news | 3 | 1 |
| Education | 3 | 1 |
| Disasters/Accidents | 2 | 1 |

A through interpretation and examination of the results presented in the tables above, apart from questioning the gatekeeper and agenda setting roles of the mainstream traditional media in the United States, also suggests that the United States media are gradually moving away from

mainstream international news coverage and reporting to more of a global media with national outlook.

Table 3: Geographic Focus

| Geographic Focus | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| local | 710 | 1.3 |
| U.S. non-local/US national | 38430 | 73.0 |
| Non-U.S International | 7499 | 14.3 |
| Non-U.S International | 5964 | 11.3 |
| No specific geographic focus | 11 | 0 |
| total | 52614 | 100.0 |

Without meaning to overemphasize this point, Table 3 above clearly shows that only 11% of the entire content of U.S. news flow is about the rest of the world. This is not a problem as all media systems studied since the NFD started have shown glaring evidence of imbalance in their reportage of other countries or continents. But the media system under analysis is the U.S. media system. If the United States media organisations are now local or best national, who is then covering the world? Where is then the Centre of Global News Flow? Can the U.S. continue to hold on to the global news leader title it rightly earned in the early 80s and 90s? Does this suggest a refocus of the NFD in line with current realities?

These questions are begging for answers. However, we are convinced of two things: the NFD should refocus on current realities and that the U.S. grip on the global news flow scene is gradually easing off. The economic situation of most of the media industries in the United States and the availability of almost free alternatives as evidenced in the social media networks clearly suggest that the U.S. media industry is heading towards more and more local/national news coverage and less and less international news coverage emphasis. This is still a hypothesis but one based on empirical findings that supports it. The picture as presented in Table 3 above may not likely change immediately. We see a situation where U.S. Local and non-local/US national news coverage will move to about 90% from the present 74.3% presented in Table 3.

Discussion of Findings

The United States media industry before the emergence of social media networks (which is supported by improvements in New Communication Technologies (NCTs), was arguably the world's new leader in terms of the traffic of news that emanated from the industry about the world. Then, no major happening in the world (in terms of what the West defines as news) escapes the lens of the U.S. media industry.

However, following the economics of decline in the industry, international news coverage and reportage have declined in the United States thus questioning the notion that the United States media industry is the world's news leader. Livingston and Asmolov (2010) agree that the industry's bleak financial condition and the erosion of its basic structural elements, such as overseas bureaus were partly the major causes of this decline. Robinson (2007) also observes that media organisations can no longer afford to maintain expensive foreign bureaus "to report developments that seem of little concern to most readers and viewers in the United States". To further push forward the thesis of economic downturn as the root cause of the decline in international news coverage in the United States, Livingston and Asmolov (2010) argues thus: Indeed, public indifference to foreign affairs news and its cost are among the chief causes of its decline in recent years.

In 2007, advertising revenue for newspapers and their websites dropped 7.9 percent, this was followed by another 16.6 percent drop in 2008 (Newspaper Association of American, 2010). But the real financial blow came with the 2009 economic crisis when ad revenue for some newspapers dropped 30 percent for the first quarter, a figure made even more worrisome by an accelerating rate of decline. In the heat of these crises, thousands of journalists have lost their jobs. In 2008 alone, Massine (2009) reports that newspapers (Journalists) lost 15, 974 jobs, followed by another 10,000 in the first six months of 2009. International news coverage, no doubt, got caught up in the web of this worst economic crisis to hit the U.S. media industry since the new century began.

Livingston and Asmolov (2010) were, however, quick to point out that "not all of the news about the news is bad." According to their findings, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times* still maintain a strong international presence in the core and strategic peripheral centres of the world news structure. Within this economic crisis, new sources of international news for the United States audience also emerged. *Global Post* was founded in 2009 and has about 65 correspondents in 50 countries of the world (Allen, 2009). Livingston and Asmolov (2010) also note that *World Focus* is a new television station managed by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States which concentrates on global news coverage.

Are these latest trends a sign of hope? Livingston and Asmolov (2010: 747) attempt an answer: though it is impossible to say with certainty, it seems reasonable to conclude that a handful of traditional news organisations will continue to devote the resource needed to cover global news responsibly. The wire and video services also must be factored into the equation. They, too, in some configuration, will continue to provide images and copy to domestic services unable or unwilling to post correspondents overseas. In short, a core element of traditional news services will remain, though perhaps leaner than they were during much of the twentieth century.

A closer examination of Livingston and Asmolov (2010) arguments above suggests that their opinion is based on "technological, sociological and political trends that call for a remapping of

our conceptual landscape and to a retooling of the vocabulary used for describing journalism and international affairs.” This seems to be in the mind of De Beer (2010) when he argues that the definitions of global vis-à-vis international, transnational, national or foreign are now mired in controversy. Supporting his arguments with works of such scholars as De Vereaux and Griffin (2006), Reese (2001) and Berglez (2008, 2009), DeBeer (2010) note that such terms assume the nation-state as the basis of analysis of what is national news or international news. Continuing, de Beer (2010) observes that, “it is not a question of foreign news (media reporting about news elsewhere in the world) as such becoming more global in scope, but rather that local (domestic/national) news, also when reported by foreign journalists, are expanding into a new form of global journalism.”

The argument so far is that the terms national and international are now debatable as they relate to news flow on a globalised world. However, whichever way one considers these concepts the questions of whether the United States media system still qualifies as the world’s news leader or whether the centre of global news flow has shifted remains apt. With the current economic recession going on right now in the United States media industry, especially the Newspaper arm of it; the rise of citizens journalism and the inevitable dominance of social media networks in opening up the journalism space for greater mass participation and democratisation of the news business; the United States has no option than to re-evaluate her reclining role in the global news flow scene or at least acknowledge the emergence of other “powers” in the NFD.

Again, the issues being argued necessitate a re-conceptualization of the terms “journalism” and “journalist”. Tables 1 to 3 as presented earlier in the previous section show that social media channels are already neck deep in setting agendas for public discourse. These results also show that there are similarities in daily or weekly issues for discourse between the social media networks and the traditional media organisations. Where they differ, it is even observed that the public line up behind the social media networks because of it is participatory, interactive and free of obvious charges (cost) nature.

Conclusion

News Flow studies have remained a valid area of scholarship since the early 80s. Scholars have continued to ask questions on what influences coverage and why some are favoured and others are not. These questions are not rhetorical but the answers maybe farfetched. However, the United States has continued to maintain her dominance on the global flow of information not until recent happenings in the Information Technology world as well as the economic recession threatening the traditional media systems in that country. U.S. still able to exact her dominance on the news flow issue in her current economic crisis? These are valid questions still waiting for answers.

This study, however, using secondary data from the Pew Research Centre’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (2021), concludes that the United States coverage of the world has shifted focus in terms of the quantity of news about non-U.S. that you can find in the U.S. media. Whether this is cost situated or that there are other predictive factors causing this is still an area to research into. Our major submission here is that if the trend continues unabated in the next five years, United States will seize to be the world news leader in terms of being the eyes and ears of the globe.

To the primary objectives and research questions we set out with, it appears that the recent happenings in the global news space with particular reference to the emergence of social media networks nullifies any leftover legitimacy or even credibility to the NFD. Social media have made it easy for “everyone” to be informed in either mainstream traditional journalism or peripheral

citizen journalism. There are now multiple sources for news gathering and dissemination and greater access and mass participation in the news production and distribution business. This implies that no nation or people could justify any further cry of marginalisation in how they are covered or reported. The social media networks have liberalized the process to encourage popular participation. In the same thinking, the study concluded here that traditional media are no longer setting the public or media agenda alone. The emergence of social media networks has reset the calculations, opened up the space and attracted more participation in what people think they should be talking about. It will be therefore, in the interpretation of the recent results in news flow studies, wrong to still conclude that the traditional news media are the sole agenda setters. Social media networks are in this for real and it does not look like their popularity is about to wane.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There should be commitment on the part of Nigeria government towards investing in media infrastructures.
2. Finally, the Nigeria government should ensure adequate universal service by revisiting the regulatory framework; improve infrastructure and manpower in communication development.

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