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# Webs of Resistance: The Citizen Online Journalism of the Nigerian Digital Diaspora

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WEBS OF RESISTANCE:  
THE CITIZEN ONLINE JOURNALISM OF THE NIGERIAN DIGITAL DIASPORA

by

FAROOQ ADAMU KPEROGI

Under the Direction of Dr. Michael L. Bruner

ABSTRACT

The enhanced discursive opportunity structures that the Internet enables has inspired a momentous revolution in the Nigerian media landscape. This dissertation chronicles the emergence and flowering of the citizen and alternative online journalism of the Nigerian diasporic public sphere located primarily in the United States. Using case-study research, it profiles the major diasporan online citizen media outlets and highlights instances where these geographically distant citizen media sites shaped and influenced both the national politics and policies of the homeland and the media practices of the domestic media formation.

The study makes the case that while it is customary in the scholarship on sovereignty, state-civil society relations, and diaspora studies to emphasize domination and one-

dimensionality in cultural flows, the participation of members of the Nigerian digital diaspora in the politics and discourses of their homeland, from their exilic locations in the West through the instrumentality of online citizen media, illustrates that citizens, especially in the age of the Internet, are not mere powerless subjects and receivers of informational flows from the institutions of the state and corporate mass media but can be active consumers and producers of informational resources and even purveyors of political power in ways that amply exemplify trans-local reciprocity.

It also argues that the Nigerian diaspora media might very well be a prototype of an evolving, Internet-enabled, trans-local, and mutual informational and cultural exchange between the educated deterritorialized ethnoscaples of peripheral nations whose exile in the West endues them with symbolic and cultural capital and the private institutions and governments of their homelands. The study recommends a comparative study of the online citizen journalism of Third World virtual diasporas in the West.

**INDEX WORDS:** Alternative journalism, Alternative media, Citizen media, Deliberative democracy, Diasporic media, Guerilla journalism, Nigeria, Nigerian journalism, Online journalism, Public sphere

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by

FAROOQ ADAMU KPEROGI

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

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May 2011

**DEDICATION**

*Dedicated to the memory of Zainab, my late wife who died in a car crash in Nigeria on June 4, 2010. May her soul rest in peace.*

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I am indebted to more people than I have space to acknowledge here. The first, of course, is my late wife, Zainab, who gave her all to make this dream materialize. She was my most important moral prop and motive force throughout my studies. She believed in me and supported me all the way. While I was away studying first at the University of Louisiana and later here at Georgia State, she took care of our children with uncommon dedication. She never wavered in her commitment and love for me in spite of the distance that stood between us and my extended absence from home. She had eagerly looked forward to this moment. Unfortunately, she hasn't lived to witness the result of her perseverance. Without her, it would have been impossible for me to achieve this feat. In a way, this is a bitter-sweet crowning accomplishment.

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My parents deserve commendation for always being there for me from the beginning and for bringing me up to cherish the virtues of hard work and critical inquiry. I thank them from the bottom of my heart for all their support and unquestioning love. My dad had always said that his greatest desire was for me to get the Ph.D. I am glad that I have not disappointed him.

Were it not for the sincere friendship and emotional support I got from many of my Nigerian compatriots in the United States, my experience here would have been a lot less exciting than it turned out. They kept me in good cheer even in moments of despair. I am talking



of Moses Ochonu of Vanderbilt University and Abubakar Alhassan, formerly of the University of Florida, who has returned to Bayero University Kano, our alma mater, after his doctoral studies. I particularly want to thank Moses for his unfailing friendship, companionship, and intellectually stimulating telephone conversations throughout the course of my studies.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### 1 INTRODUCTION

A momentous revolution is sweeping across Nigeria's media landscape. Since 2005, the dominance of the traditional media in the country is being challenged, and occasionally supplanted, by an emergent, if as yet amorphous, diasporic online citizen journalism formation, reversing time-honored notions of the contours of informational flows between diasporas and homelands and the role of ordinary individuals in the transmission of information across geographic and temporal boundaries. Ordinary Nigerians who are now permanently located in America by virtue of voluntary geographical displacement have taken advantage of the enhanced discursive opportunity structures that the Internet enables to set up citizen media sites that not only serve as valuable vaults of information for many ordinary Nigerians and traditional journalists back home but that also expose corruption in government and ethical infractions in homeland media practice. The purveyors of this inchoate but nonetheless politically potent diasporan online media have neither institutional support for their operations nor are they affiliated with the state.

Hamid Mowlana has perceptively isolated three historically foremost vectors of cross-border informational flows: national governments, transnational corporations, and individuals.<sup>1</sup> However, as Karim H. Karim has aptly noted, the preponderance of international communication and globalization scholarship over the years has tended to be disproportionately concerned with the first two at the expense, sometimes to the exclusion, of the third.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is the case that

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<sup>1</sup>Hamid Mowlana, *Global Information and World Communication* 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Karim H. Karim, "From Ethnic Media to Global Media: Transnational Communication Networks Among Diasporic Communities," Economic and Social Research Council, Oxford University, 1998; accessed September 1, 2009 from <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/karim.pdf>

individuals who operate outside the institutional structures of governments and corporations have played significant roles in trans-border data flows. This fact is becoming even more salient with the extraordinary expansion and reach of the Internet, which is enabling the emergence of a vast multitude of what Latin American scholar Michel S. Laguerre has called “virtual diasporic public spheres,”<sup>3</sup> or what Jennifer Brinkerhoff has called “digital diasporas.”<sup>4</sup>

The progressively diminishing importance of the nation-state in the age of globalization, what Arjun Appadurai controversially characterized as the imminence of the “end of the era of the nation-state,”<sup>5</sup> is also bringing into bold relief the importance of non-state and non-corporate actors in the new information age. As Appadurai observes, in place of nation-states, “transnations” of diasporic communities play increasingly defining roles in shaping the structure and substance of the processes of globalization. He argues that as electronic media “increasingly link producers and audiences across national boundaries, and as these audiences themselves start new conversations between those who move and those who stay, we find a growing number of diasporic public spheres.”<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Nancy Fraser has extended this notion of the emersion of ever more politically and socially consequential but spatially dispersed non-state actors in the contemporary, globalized epoch to account for the growth of public spheres that are “transnational” in form and essence. Specifically, she uses the term to denote the profusion of

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<sup>3</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, “Homeland Political Crisis, the Virtual Diasporic Public Sphere, and Diasporic Politics,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 10, (2008): 206 – 225.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalizations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 22.

non-traditional communicative arenas for the articulation and mobilization of political will-formations that “overflow the bounds of nations and states.”<sup>7</sup> These transnational diasporic public spheres, as Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh have noted, may be “comprehensive publics, counter-publics, weak publics or strong publics.”<sup>8</sup> Such conceptions extend Appadurai’s notion of diasporic public spheres in one important respect: they free it from a narrow preoccupation with the dynamics of the flows of migratory elites from the periphery to the core of the global power structure and link it instead with the politics and discourses of transnational political will-formation and mobilization by non-state actors.

What is missing, however, even in Fraser’s more sophisticated analysis of transnational diasporic public spheres—and in the analysis of most scholars who study transnational diasporic public spheres—is a recognition of the progressively central roles that the online media, especially the citizen online media, of diasporic public spheres now play in the articulation and mobilization of political will-formation across the bounds of nations and states.<sup>9</sup> Even scholars who have studied the role of the Internet in the enablement of transnational public spheres have generally failed to focus attention on the role of the Web-based citizen media of diasporic public spheres.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24 no. 4 (2007), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh, “Is the World Social Forum a Transnational Public Sphere?: Nancy Fraser, Critical Theory and the Containment of Radical Possibility,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 no.5 (2009), 65.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Steve Vertovec, “Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22 (1999): 447–62; J.A. Guidry, M.D. Kennedy and M.N. Zaid, *Globalizations and Social Movements: Culture, Power, and the Transnational Public Sphere* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Bruce Becker and Jason Wehner, “Electronic Networks and Civil Society: Reflections on Structural Changes in the Public Sphere,” in *Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an International Global Village* ed. Charles Ess (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001); and Karim H. Karim, “Mapping Diasporic Mediascapes,” in *The Media of Diaspora* ed. Karim. H. Karim (London: Routledge Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Bart Cammaerts and Leo Van Audenhove’s study of the role of the Internet in the enabling of a transnational public sphere in a European context: Bart Cammaerts and Leo Van Audenhove, “Online Political



In a related but slightly different context, Ulf Hannerz problematizes this deficiency as a manifestation of the inadequacy of disciplinary conversation between migration and media studies even though, as he points out, migration and mediatization “are continuously intertwined.”<sup>11</sup> I would say, however, that what the lack in transnational public sphere scholarship evinces is the inadequacy of disciplinary dialogue between the as yet embryonic but nonetheless vibrant field of transnational online journalism research and the more theoretically grounded area of public sphere theory. This study fills that void by studying how the citizen online media of a peripheral but transnational virtual diasporic public sphere have functioned as veritable sites for transformative trans-border informational and political intercourse between a deterritorialized ethnoscape and the media and state institutions of its homeland.

Over the past eight years, the Nigerian diasporic public sphere has transcended media and migration scholars’ notions of the concerns and preoccupations of deterritorialized ethnoscaples.<sup>12</sup> During this period, we have seen the robust growth and flowering of Web-only, citizen-generated, and sometimes alternative, diasporic Nigerian online news outlets that have risen above the traditional thematic preoccupations of diasporic media. Such U.S.-based, Nigerian-owned online news outlets as SaharaReporters.com, Pointblanknews.com, ElenduReports.com, TimesofNigeria.com, Huhuonline.com, and Nigeriavillagesquare.com have become rich sources of information for local Nigerian newspapers. They have also called

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Debate, Unbounded Citizenship, and the Problematic Nature of a Transnational Public Sphere,” *Political Communication* 22 (2005):179-196, and Victoria Bernal’s study of the same phenomenon in an African context. Victoria Bernal, “Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: The Eritrean Diaspora Online,” *Global Networks* 6.2 (2006): 161–179.

<sup>11</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Cultures, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), 101.

<sup>12</sup> Most scholars who study the media of diasporic public spheres often do no more than study the media consumption patterns of migratory elites in their bid to reterritorialize in their host countries. See, for instance, Karim H. Karim, ed., *The Media of Diaspora: Mapping the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Russell King and Nancy Wood, eds., *Media and Migration: Constructions of Mobility and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001).

attention to acts of corruption in Nigeria and challenged abuse of power in ways the local media are not equipped to do. This study specifically focuses on the six diasporic online media just mentioned—which straddle the traditions of citizen and alternative journalism—and evaluates their impact on the politics and journalistic practices in Nigeria. This is done through archival, documentary, and observational evidence.

Although it is customary for some scholars to conflate citizen media and alternative media, I distinguish them in this study and apply this distinction to my objects of inquiry.<sup>13</sup> In the new media literature, as we will see in more detail in Chapter Two, citizen journalism is conceptualized as online “news content produced by ordinary citizens with no formal journalism training.”<sup>14</sup> It needs to be noted, though, that this definition does not preclude people with formal journalism training who partake in non-professionalized, user-generated news-gathering and dissemination practices. Alternative journalism, on the other hand, is not merely non-professionalized and non-institutionalized journalism produced by ordinary citizens; it is also purposively counter-hegemonic and “closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices.”<sup>15</sup> While citizen journalism (at least the way the term is widely understood in new media scholarship) is enabled solely by the emergence of the Internet, alternative journalism preceded the Internet. And while all online alternative media, to the extent that they are products of the journalism by ordinary citizens outside institutional and professional structures, are citizen media, not all citizen media are alternative media. To be alternative media, citizen media have to be expressly

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Clemencia Rodriguez’s *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens’ Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Kristen A. Johnson and Susan Wiedenback, “Enhancing Perceived Credibility of Citizen Journalism Web Sites,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86 no. 2 (2009), 333.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Atton, “What is ‘Alternative’ Journalism?” *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 4 (2003): 26.

oppositional and actuated by a progressive, emancipatory political agenda.<sup>16</sup> Since all the six online media selected for this study are run by ordinary diasporan Nigerian citizens who are not affiliated with any professional news organization, they qualify as citizen media. But not all of them are alternative media because they are not all explicitly political and counter-hegemonic in their reportorial temperaments, as chapters four, five and six show.

As subsequent sections of this study reveal, however, these categories are not neat, unchanging, and invariably mutually exclusive. News sites that began as alternative media can transmute to being ordinary citizen media, and profit-driven citizen media can occasionally exhibit the characteristics of alternative media. What is not in doubt, though, is that the Nigerian diasporan online news media, whether they are merely citizen or alternative media, have dramatically altered the journalistic landscape in Nigeria and have caused major shifts in homeland state policies in unexampled ways.

## **1.1 Significance of the Study**

The primary reason this study is necessary is because the emergence of Nigeria-focused diasporan online citizen media has not only broadened the breadth and diversity of informational resources for Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora, it has also inaugurated a sometimes noticeably hostile and at other times ambivalent relationship between traditional, mainstream media practitioners in Nigeria and the plethora of exilic online citizen journalists who increasingly seem to be building their legitimacy on the strength of their capacity to undermine the credibility of traditional journalists in the homeland. Diaspora citizen journalists also have

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<sup>16</sup> Alternative media researchers traditionally evaluate the “alternativeness” of media by the extent to which the media emphasize political versus cultural news, offer critiques of capitalism, and mobilize the citizenry for action in their news reports. See Rodney Benson, “Commercialism and Critique: California Alternative Weeklies,” in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* ed. Nick Couldry and James Curran (Lanham, MO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

easy access to news sources and privileged newsgathering practices that have sometimes put traditional Nigerian journalists to shame. Similarly, the citizen online media of the Nigerian diasporic public sphere has lately been at the vanguard of instigating politically consequential discourses that have had and continue to have far-reaching implications for politics and governance in the homeland. An indication of the ever-increasing importance of the sometimes adversarial online citizen journalism of the Nigerian diasporic public sphere is the growing tense relationship between critical online citizen journalists in the diaspora and the Nigerian government, a relationship that has led to the high-profile arrests of a number of diasporan online journalists who had cause to travel to the homeland for routine business.<sup>17</sup>

No scholarly work has captured this burgeoning phenomenon of diasporic citizen online media simultaneously changing and challenging the practice of corporate, institutional journalism and dramatically influencing the state policies of a far-flung homeland, or other dimensions of the emerging hallmarks of the transnational citizen online journalism of the Nigerian diaspora in the West. If Nancy Fraser is correct that a transnational public sphere is defined by its capacity “to be a vehicle for mobilizing public opinion as a political force [and by its capacity to] empower the citizenry vis-à-vis private powers and permit it to exercise influence over the state,” then the non-corporate, non-professional online citizen and alternative media of geographically displaced but politically and socially consequential Nigerian exiles in the West undoubtedly qualify as a veritable transnational diasporic public sphere and are

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, BBC News, “News Blogger Detained in Nigeria,” accessed September 11, 2009 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7686119.stm>; Committee to Protect Journalists, “Second U.S.-based Nigerian Blogger Held,” Oct. 31, 2008 [accessed September 11, 2009 from <http://cpj.org/2008/10/second-us-based-nigerian-blogger-held.php>]. Also see Sahara Reporters, “Federal Court Declares the arrest and detention of US-based Blogger Emmanuel Asiwe Illegal,” February 3, 2009 [accessed September 11, 2009 from [http://www.saharareporters.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=663%3Aafederal-court-declares-the-arrest-and-detention-of-us-based-blogger-emmanuel-asiwe-illegal&catid=1%3Alatest-news&Itemid=18&showall=1](http://www.saharareporters.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=663%3Aafederal-court-declares-the-arrest-and-detention-of-us-based-blogger-emmanuel-asiwe-illegal&catid=1%3Alatest-news&Itemid=18&showall=1)].

therefore worthy of a careful scholarly study.<sup>18</sup> These newfangled Nigerian diaspora media might very well be the prototype of an evolving, Internet-enabled, trans-local, and mutual informational and cultural exchange between the educated deterritorialized ethnoscaples of peripheral nations whose exile in the West endues them with symbolic and cultural capital and the private institutions and governments of their homelands.

It was Debra Spitulnik who first called attention to how what she calls “small media” in Africa (by which she means alternative, citizen discursive spaces that ordinary individuals and small groups can be in command of, such as the Internet, cassettes, and so on) can function as “vital and pervasive undercurrents and reservoirs of political commentary, and potential mobilization.”<sup>19</sup> Courtesy of the dizzying ease of cross-border data flow, made even easier by the phenomenal expansion of hitherto restricted Internet and mobile phone technology on the African continent,<sup>20</sup> only a few years after her essay appeared, what she identified as a probability is materializing in ways that likely exceed her prognostications.

The argument of this study, therefore, is that while it is customary in the scholarship on sovereignty, state-civil society relations, and diaspora studies to emphasize domination and one-dimensionality in cultural flows,<sup>21</sup> the participation of members of the Nigerian digital diaspora in the politics and discourses of their homeland, from their exilic locations in the West through

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<sup>18</sup> Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere:”7.

<sup>19</sup> Debra Spitulnik, “Alternative Small Media and Communicative Spaces,” in *Media and Democracy in Africa* ed. Goran Hyden, Michael Leslie and Folu F. Ogundimu, New Brunswick:Transaction Publishers, 2002, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Bjørn Furuholt and Stein Kristiansen, “Internet Cafés in Asia and Africa: Venues for Education and Learning?” *The Journal of Community Informatics*, 3 no. 2 (2007):1-12; Peter A. Kwakwu Kyem and Peter Kewku LeMaire, “Transforming Recent Gains in the Digital Divide into Digital Opportunities: Africa and the Boom in Mobile Phone Subscription,” *The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries*, 28 no. 5 (2006):1-16.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988); Thomas B. Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture*, 15 (2003): 11–40.

the instrumentality of online citizen media, illustrates that “citizens,” especially in the age of the Internet, are not mere powerless subjects and receivers of informational flows from the institutions of the state and corporate mass media but can be active consumers and producers of informational resources and even purveyors of political power in ways that amply exemplify trans-local reciprocity.

This study will be the first to systematically chronicle and explore the rising power, through the instrumentality of online citizen media, of the digital public sphere of a previously politically disempowered diaspora in the West. Traditionally, diasporans, because of what Brinkerhoff called their “hybrid identities,” had always been comparatively politically inconsequential in the politics of their homeland.<sup>22</sup> In particular, their media use patterns had consisted in (and in most other contexts still consist in) the consumption of news from the homeland rather than participation in the generation and reporting of news from, about, and for the homeland. Historically, where vibrant diaspora media existed, their creators and consumers did little more than deploy them mostly to negotiate their identities as voluntary and involuntary exiles, promote solidarity, and nurture collective national memories that were often sanctified by nostalgia and the desire to suture the ruptures that so readily emerge in a state of uprootedness that is concomitant with geographic displacement to new socio-cultural habitats, what Arif Dirlik has called the “mournful discourses of marginalized diasporics.”<sup>23</sup> The media were never used as instruments to change homeland state policies, or as reservoirs of information for citizens back “home,” or as tools for political mobilization.

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<sup>22</sup> Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas*: 2.

<sup>23</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Intimate Others: [Private] Nations and Diasporas in an Age of Globalization,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5 no. 3 (2004), 496. Also Andreea D. Ritivoi’s *Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002) offers an interesting and incisive exploration of the intersections among nostalgia, identity, and the immigrant experience.

The online citizen media of the Nigerian diasporic public sphere have transcended these time-honored structural hallmarks of diaspora media in ways that seem to have no parallel as yet. This study, therefore, makes important contributions to the existing literature on critical diaspora discourse. It illustrates, through the diasporic alternative and citizen journalism of the Nigerian digital public sphere, that, in the process of deterritorialization, societies of departure and arrival are inextricably interlinked in the delineation of human motions, which is characterized not “by linear and unidirectional motions...but by ‘circulations’ of peoples and commodities that are in the process of creating new spaces....”<sup>24</sup>

This study is also significant because it captures, on a transnational scale, the nascent ambivalent relationship between citizen journalism and institutional journalistic practices. The extant literature on the consequences of the proliferation of citizen media on traditional journalistic practices is almost exclusively preoccupied with the experiences of the more advanced parts of the world; it does not capture the singularities of peripheral, transitional nations like Nigeria where the Internet is only just becoming demotic, where the tension between traditional and online journalism is assuming unpredictably unique forms every moment, and where alternative and/or citizen online journalism imposes on itself the simultaneous task of fighting corrupt governments and an equally corrupt, co-opted traditional, mainstream media in the homeland.<sup>25</sup>

By tracing the evolution of the citizen journalism of the Nigerian digital diaspora, exploring its variegated manifestations and forms, capturing the relational and professional

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<sup>24</sup> Dirlik, “Intimate Others: ”, 495.

<sup>25</sup> For scholarly works on the tensions between citizen journalism and the traditional media in the West, see Neil Thurman, “Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of User Generated Content Initiatives by Online News Media,” *New Media & Society*, 10 no.1 (2008):139–157; Donald Matheson, “Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism,” *New Media & Society* 6 no.4 (2004): 443–68; Neil Thurman and Susan Jones, “From Nexus to Newslog: Online Journalism from the Grassroots,” in *Print Journalism: A Critical Introduction* ed. R. Keeble (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005).

tensions between online citizen journalists in the diaspora and traditional journalists in the homeland, and showing how all this has altered journalistic practice and statecraft in Nigeria, this study makes original contributions to the scholarship not only on the tension between online and traditional journalism but also on the reconfigurations of the loci of political and symbolic power that are taking place in the age of globalization and the Internet. It therefore joins and advances disciplinary conversations in media and migration studies, online journalism, and public sphere theory.

It also contributes to the body of work on the notion of “resistance” in critical media theory and cultural studies. For instance, it explores such questions as: How much “resistance” (a subject-matter with which cultural studies has been preoccupied) can Web-based alternative media that are compelled to survive by attracting advertisements put up to the system they purport to fight? Cultural studies scholars, in their bid to reverse the disabling cynicism of much of the Frankfurt School, have been obsessed with investigating instances of “resistance” to the power structure by citizens at the lower end of the social scale. As Thomas Frank satirically has noted, in echoes of Meaghan Morris’ apt observation of the tendency of cultural studies scholars to read rebellion in every banal form of pop culture consumption,

Their books teem with stories of aesthetic hierarchies rudely overturned; with subversive shoppers dauntlessly using up the mall’s air conditioning; with heroic fans building their workers’ paradise right there in the Star Trek corpus; with rebellious readers of women’s fashion magazines symbolically smashing the state.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Frank, *New Consensus for Old: Cultural Studies from Left to Right* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), 283; Meaghan Morris, “Banality in Cultural Studies,” in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Arnold, 1996).



He was ridiculing such cultural studies scholars as John Fiske who aver that the capacity for “oppositional” readings of media texts is evidence of “resistance” to cultural hegemony.<sup>27</sup>

However, as Douglas Kellner has argued, such “oppositional” readings occur at no cost to the reader and certainly without any consequence to the capitalist hegemony it is supposed to be “resisting.” It is merely a weak struggle for “meaning” and “pleasure.”<sup>28</sup> So where might resistance lie in the emerging forms of Web-based alternative citizen media, or what Chris Atton has called “radical online journalism”?<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, this study complicates traditional notions of media imperialism and advances the conversation about media flows in international communication scholarship. The concept of media imperialism has dominated scholarship in international communication for decades. The argument of scholars who propounded the theory of media imperialism is that the flow of cultural goods across the world is disproportionately skewed in favor of countries in the West, which are at the core of the world system, and to the disadvantage of countries in the Third World, which are at the periphery of the global system. The early proponents of this theory, interestingly, are American scholars whose geographic and cultural realities put them at the core of the world system.<sup>30</sup> Writing in the 1970s, Herbert Schiller pointed out, for instance, that 65 percent of the world’s news and cultural products originated in the United States, a reality that

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<sup>27</sup> John Fiske, “British Cultural Studies and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, 2nd ed. Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London, Routledge, 1995), 39.

<sup>29</sup> Atton, *Alternative Internet*: 25.

<sup>30</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett, “Media Imperialism: Towards an International Framework for the Analysis of Media Systems,” in *Mass Communication and Society* ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott (London: Edward Arnold, 1977); Peter Golding, “Media Professionalism in the Third World: The Transfer of an Ideology,” in *Mass Communication and Society* ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

condemned the rest of the world to being consumers of American media and cultural products.<sup>31</sup>

Wilbur Schramm also pointed out that the uneven distribution of mass media in the world has meant that the realities of the peoples of the Third World are either ignored or distorted by the dominant Western media.<sup>32</sup>

Over the last few decades, however, fresh theoretical insights into the nature of global flows have challenged the accuracy of the media imperialism paradigm. One such insight is the theory of contra-flows, which shifts scholarly attention to instances of the subversion of the dominant conception of global flows. Appadurai, for instance, calls attention to the fact that globalization has not necessarily translated into the homogenization of the world or, for that matter, the Westernization of non-Western societies. What has happened, he says, is that in cultural and informational flow, the global often fuses with the local to produce the “glocal.”<sup>33</sup> As Daya Thussu points out, “The global (which in essence means Western or more accurately American) offering interacts with the national and the local in ways that produce often hybridized, ‘glocal’ media products, hallmark of a postmodern cultural sensitivity.”<sup>34</sup> This reconsideration of the nature of global flows has given rise to the concept of “contra-flows.”

In his essay, “Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow,” Thussu develops a typology that divides the main media flows in the world into three categories: global, transnational and geo-cultural. He draws a distinction between what he calls the “dominant

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<sup>31</sup> Herbert Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976). Also see Herbert Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire* (Beacon Press, 1969), 140.

<sup>32</sup> Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Media and National Development* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 65.

<sup>33</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Daya Thussu, “Introduction,” in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow* ed. Daya. Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

flows,” which spring forth from the global North, and the “subaltern flows,” which he defines as “contra-flows originating from the erstwhile peripheries of global media industries.”<sup>35</sup> This is similar to Straubhaar’s asymmetrical interdependence thesis, within the context of a developing bifurcation in global cultural interchange between the “global popular” in movie production and “glocalization” in television production.<sup>36</sup>

The notion of contra-flows has become popular and can even be said to have achieved a position of dominance in international communication scholarship. As a result, the perception of a unidirectional flow of informational and cultural goods from the Western “core” to the Third World “periphery” has been contested by many scholars who insist that global flows are inherently multi-directional.<sup>37</sup> Such scholars theorize globalization as a force that animates—or at least has the potential to animate—ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic resistance to the homogenizing and imperialistic tendencies of the Western media and the neoliberal gospel of their owners. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, for instance, points out that popular notions of Western cultural and media imperialism blur the intricate and mutually reinforcing nature of interaction over centuries between diverse and progressively more hybridized cultures.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Anthony Giddens, among others, points to the phenomenon of inverse colonization instantiated by the proliferation of alternative loci of cultural influence in the

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<sup>35</sup> Daya Thussu, “Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow,” in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow* ed. Daya. Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph D. Straubhaar, “Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, (1991): 39-59.

<sup>37</sup> See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. For a recent insightful account of how several loci of hitherto non-hegemonic forms of cultural imperialism are emerging in places that have themselves been victims of media and cultural imperialism in the past, see Aswin Punathambekar, “Bollywood in the Indian-American Diaspora: Mediating a Transitive Logic of Cultural Citizenship,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8 no. 2 (2005), 151-173.

<sup>38</sup> See Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, “Globalization, Communication and Transnational Civil Society: Introduction,” in *Globalization, Communication and Transnational Civil Society* ed. S. Braman and A. Sreberny-Mohammadi (Cresskil: Hampton Press, 1996).

periphery and, in fact, the increasing exportation of this influence to the core, such as the export of Brazilian television programs to Portugal, its ex-colonial overlord, and the “Hispanicization” of southern California.<sup>39</sup> More generally, it is argued, global media enterprises have been forced to adapt to local cultures and to link up with local partners in order to sustain their expansion. The identity of diasporic communities, it is argued, can also now be nourished not only through treasured postcards and the evanescent recollections of grandparents but through daily media feeds that sustain endangered ethnic minority identities.<sup>40</sup>

The emergence, popularity, and ubiquity of the Internet have further complicated this process. Although the wealthiest nations of the world still have an edge in access to the Internet, the nature of the Internet has helped to dramatically complicate informational flows. Information from “peripheral” countries is getting to “core” countries at a higher volume—and at a faster rate—than was ever thought possible. This has enabled coalition building between people who are vastly physically separated.

This study takes off from these interventions about the perpetually kaleidoscopic nature of informational and cultural flows in the age of globalization, but departs from them and advances their application to the changing face and phase of global news flow in ways that account for what I call Western diaspora media cultural capital. Although the media flow that I investigate is still geographically from the West, it is initiated by people who have been territorially displaced from the periphery to the core by the forces of globalization and who have not only internalized a Western journalistic ethos but have tremendous access to information that is not available to their counterparts in the homeland.

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<sup>39</sup> See Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World* (BBC Reith Lectures, 1999) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/events/reith\\_99](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/events/reith_99); accessed April 29, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> James Curran, “Globalization Theory: The Absent Debate,” in *Media and Power* ed. James Curran (London: Routledge, 2002).

In this study I argue, therefore, that territorial displacement in the emerging global age does not simply alienate; it also invests people with the social and cultural capital to exert influence in the domestic public sphere from which they are uprooted in ways that complicate and dramatize the antinomies between diasporic public spheres and the national politics of nation-states. This reality has profound implications for the ways we theorize globalization, media flows, and media imperialism.

It is obvious from the foregoing that citizen journalism on the Internet constitutes the fulcrum around which this changing phase of transnational news flows revolves and that is what this study is concerned with. In order to empirically map and situate the evolution, rise, significance and impact of Nigerian diasporan online citizen journalism we need a set of questions to undergird our investigation. The following six research questions have been formulated to guide this study. A methodology and study design based on these questions follow.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

1. How have the online citizen and alternative media of the Nigerian diaspora influenced traditional journalistic practices in Nigeria?
2. How and why have online citizen and alternative media of the Nigerian diaspora caused the Nigerian government to change state policies?
3. How and why did online citizen news media emerge in the Nigerian digital diaspora with their current characteristics?
4. How have the online media of the Nigerian digital diaspora disrupted traditional notions of news flows between the media of the homeland and the people in the diaspora?

5. What dominant influences—such as advertising, political affiliations, emancipatory politics, etc—actuate the citizen journalism of the Nigerian diaspora?
6. How might the journalistic practices of the Nigerian diaspora complicate notions of citizen and alternative journalism?

### 1.3 Methodology

In light of the above research questions, the method found to be best suited to study the impact and consequences of the online citizen journalism of the Nigerian virtual diasporic public sphere is the in-depth case-study research method, which has variously been defined as the “detailed examination” of either a single example or multiple examples of a class of social phenomena,<sup>41</sup> “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings,”<sup>42</sup> the in-depth study of the “particularity and complexity of a single case”<sup>43</sup> where the researcher “emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual.”<sup>44</sup> Most importantly, it has been explicated as a research technique that is “especially appropriate in new topic areas”<sup>45</sup> or, as Izak Benbasat and his colleagues put it, where research and theory are at their early formative stages”<sup>46</sup> such as this study, which investigates a phenomenon that is not yet captured in the scholarly literature. However, as Robert

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<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *Dictionary of Sociology* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1994), 34.

<sup>42</sup> Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, “Building Theories from Case Study Research,” *The Academy of Management Review* 14 no. 4 (1989), 534.

<sup>43</sup> Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), xi.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, xii.

<sup>45</sup> Eisenhardt, “Building Theories from Case Study Research,” 532.

<sup>46</sup> Izak Benbasat, David .K. Goldstein and Melissa Mead, “The Case Research Strategy in Studies of Information Systems,” *MIS Quarterly* 11 (1987), 369.

Stake cautions, “not everything is a case.” A case, he says, is a bounded, integrated system, which may be consciously goal-directed. “The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system.”<sup>47</sup>

According to Robert Yin, one of the leading case-study research methodologists, the appropriateness of the method is determined to a large degree by the nature of the researcher’s research questions, the extent of depth required in laying bare the particular social phenomenon the researcher investigates, and the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events. The more researchers seek to make sense of a contemporary social phenomenon, especially “how” and “why” a social phenomenon exists, and the more they have a need to do an extensive “in-depth” description of a social phenomenon, the more that the case study will be relevant.<sup>48</sup> Since this study investigates an ongoing social phenomenon (the impact and consequences of the citizen journalism of the Nigerian digital diaspora) about which nothing has been done in the past and which therefore requires a detailed description, the case study approach is appropriate.

An additional advantage that redounds to the appropriateness of the method for this study is that it lends itself to triangulation. Case studies, Eisenhardt points out, in general, coalesce such data collection methods as archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations.<sup>49</sup> As Yin observes,

The case study is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. The case study relies on many of the same techniques as a history, but it adds two sources of evidence not usually included in the historian’s repertoire: direct observation of the events being studied and interviews *of* the persons involved in the events. Again, although case studies and histories can overlap, the case

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<sup>47</sup> Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*: 2.

<sup>48</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Eisenhardt, *Building Theories from Case Study Research*,” 534.

study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations—beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study [emphasis mine].<sup>50</sup>

What is obvious from the above passage is that six sources of evidence are central to case-study research: documents (letters, agendas, progress reports), archival records (past news reports, and so on), interviews (typically open-ended, but also focused, structured), direct observations (which can either be formal or casual or both), and physical artifacts. Since this study explores a complex, multifaceted, and evolving social phenomenon, it lends itself to the kind of mixed-method approach to scholarly inquiry that Yin says the case study research method allows.

This latitude has allowed me to study the historical background of the citizen online journalism of the Nigerian digital diaspora, to utilize information I gather from my participant observation of the phenomenon I am studying, to explore and analyze archives of both the online diaspora media and the print and online editions of Nigerian newspapers that this study investigates, and to reconstruct and interpret what Yin calls the “interviews of the persons involved” in the events that the case studies highlight. This last point is particularly important because I did not directly interview the persons involved in the events of this study because of the near impossibility of getting IRB approval for research subjects that are located outside the United States.<sup>51</sup> Fortunately, the key figures involved in the phenomenon that this study investigates have given interviews to newspapers and online outlets on various aspects of their activities, which have sufficed to answer some of this study's research questions. That is why

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<sup>50</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*: 11.

<sup>51</sup> I have passed the IRB certification to conduct interviews with research subjects based in the States. But to get permission to interview human subjects outside the United States, the GSU IRB office requires that the researcher get IRB approval from the countries in which human subjects will be interviewed. No such office exists in Nigeria.



Yin's phrasing of case study interviews is noteworthy here. It does not have to be interviews *with* the persons involved to be valid; it can also be interviews *of* the persons involved.

The case study as a method has over the years achieved a position of respectability in social science research, although it had been dogged by many misconceptions.<sup>52</sup> Some of the misconceptions about case study research from an early stage (some of which endure till today) are that the method is best suited only for the exploratory (and not descriptive or explanatory) phase of research; that it is too context-dependent; that it is subjective and gives too much interpretive latitude to the researcher; that its findings are not generalizable; and that it often encompasses a considerable element of narrative, which is not reducible to "neat scientific formulae, general propositions, and theories."<sup>53</sup> But as many case study methodologists have pointed out, these misconceptions are a consequence of an inadequate appreciation of the meaning and intent of case-study research. For instance, Bent Flyvbjerg points out, in defense of case-study research, that predictive theories and universals cannot be found in any study of human affairs and that formal generalization is often "considerably overrated as the main source of scientific progress."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the most comprehensive defense against the charge of the lack of predictive validity of case-study research is provided by Campbell in the following passage:

In a case study done by an expert social scientist who has thorough local acquaintance, the theory he uses to explain the focal difference also generates predictions or expectations on dozens of other aspects of culture, and he does not retain the theory unless most of these are also confirmed.... Experiences of social scientists confirm this. Even in a single qualitative case study, the conscientious social scientist often finds no explanation that seems satisfactory. Such an outcome would be impossible if the

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<sup>52</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 no. 2 (2006), 237.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*: 226.

caricature of the single case study...were correct—there would instead be a surfeit of subjectively compelling explanations.<sup>55</sup>

The experiences encapsulated in the above passage show that it is falsification, not verification, that is the most important hallmark of the case study. Besides, since all human research is amenable to subjectivism of some sort, it is impractical to suppose that it can be eliminated in case-study research. However, to increase the generalizability of case-study research, methodologists have suggested that circumspection be exercised in the choice of cases to isolate and study.<sup>56</sup> There are broadly six kinds of samples and cases in case-study research. They are random selection, information-oriented selection, extreme/deviant cases, maximum variation cases, critical cases and paradigmatic cases.<sup>57</sup>

The type of cases researchers choose in order to illuminate their subject of inquiry is often determined by the purpose of the selection. Researchers concerned with avoiding systematic bias in their sample size choose random selection, although in case study research case selection is less about statistical sampling than it is about theoretical sampling. But researchers who seek only to generalize for specially selected subgroups choose random sampling. Where researchers want to maximize and generate the widest possible range of information from small, single cases they do an information-oriented selection. Extreme cases are useful in instances where the researcher wants to highlight a phenomenon through a dramatic example. Popular and oft-cited examples of this, according to Flyvbjerg, are such case studies as

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<sup>55</sup> Donald T. Campbell, “Degrees of Freedom and the Case Study,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 8 no. 1 (1975), 181-182.

<sup>56</sup> Charles C. Ragin, “‘Casing’ and the Process of Social Inquiry,” in *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* ed. C.C. Ragin and H.S. Becker (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>57</sup> Flyvbjerg, “Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research”: 230.

Foucault's "Panopticon" and Freud's "Wolf Man."<sup>58</sup> A critical case is one that has a strategic importance in relation to the general problem a researcher studies. It is the kind of case that permits the researcher the latitude to make such logical deductions as "If this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases."<sup>59</sup> Although there are no universally accepted methodological principles to isolate critical cases, it is a "good idea to look for either 'most likely' or 'least likely' cases, that is, cases likely to either clearly confirm or irrefutably falsify propositions and hypothesis."<sup>60</sup>

The last strategy for the selection of cases is choice of the paradigmatic case. Paradigmatic cases draw attention to "exemplars," to prototypes, to instances that bring a particular social phenomenon into bold relief. As Eisenhardt has noted, there is considerable overlap among the case selections discussed above, especially among critical, extreme, and paradigmatic cases. Because cases are chosen "for theoretical, not statistical, reasons," more often than not, a case can be all of the three at the same time.<sup>61</sup> Foucault's "Panopticon," for instance, is simultaneously a critical, extreme, and paradigmatic case. In the next section, I show which kinds of cases I have chosen for this study and my justification for choosing them.

#### **1.4 The Design of the Study**

As Peter Darke and his colleagues have noted, "designing and scoping a case study research project in order to ensure that the research question (or research questions) can be appropriate and adequately answered can be difficult, and data collection for case study research can be time-

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid: 131.

<sup>61</sup> Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," 537.

consuming and tedious, and often results in the accumulation of large amounts of data.”<sup>62</sup> These difficulties can be overcome or minimized, however, if the researcher has a well-defined unit or units of analysis, has isolated types and number of cases to study and analyze, and has developed a general data analysis strategy that “will indicate what to analyze and why, and will help ensure that data collection activities are appropriate and support the ways in which the evidence is to be analyzed.”<sup>63</sup> Based on the foregoing, I conducted the following study design.

The primary units of analysis for this study are the archives of six prominent Nigerian online diasporan citizen media, well-known professionally run traditional newspapers in Nigeria, interviews given by Nigerian diasporan citizen journalists in Nigerian newspapers and in online outlets, and opinion articles and commentaries about the phenomenon this study is investigating in both the print editions of selected Nigerian newspapers and in the archives of popular Nigerian online discussion forums. This was complemented with my observation of the citizen and alternative journalism of the Nigerian diaspora and my in-depth experiential familiarity with the background of the study. I am a former newspaper editor and write two weekly columns for different Nigerian newspapers. I am also an active participant in the discourses of the Nigerian cyber-sphere. Thus, extensive newspaper documentation, archival, documentary and observational evidence constitute the core of the data with which I answered the study’s research questions. As Yin has noted, the best case studies are those that deploy multiple sources of evidence. “The use of multiple sources of evidence in case studies allows an investigator to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues. However, the most important

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Darke, Graeme Shanks and Marianne Broadbent, “Successfully Completing Case Study Research: Combining Rigour, Relevance and Pragmatism,” *Information Systems Journal*, 8 (1998), 274.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid: 284.

advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of *converging lines of inquiry*, a process of triangulation and corroboration...” [emphasis original].<sup>64</sup>

The diasporan online citizen media analyzed in this study are Nigeriavillagesquare.com, ElenduReports.com, SaharaReporters.com, TimesofNigeria.com, Pointblanknews.com, and Huhuonline.com. These U.S.-based Web-online citizen media are by far the most popular and the most effective diasporan media that not only serve as alternative sources of information for Nigerians at home and in the diaspora, and therefore function as counterweights to the traditional print media in Nigeria, but that have served and continue to serve as vigorous arenas for political mobilization against repressive homeland state policies. The earliest of them—Nigeriavillagesquare.com—emerged in 2003, and the last of them—Huhuonline.com and Pointblanknews.com—came to the scene in 2007. All of them have fully functional archives of their past stories and of their discussion boards that served as some of the primary texts for this study.

Since this project is interested in exploring the impact and consequences of the online journalism of these diasporan online media on the traditional, mainstream, institutional media in Nigeria, newspapers and weekly newsmagazine are randomly analyzed as well. They are *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Punch*, *Leadership*, *Guardian* and *The News*. Although Nigeria has a “large number of newspapers and magazines,” these seven are chosen because of their strategic importance, prestige, influence, and vast national reach.<sup>65</sup> The *Guardian* is Nigeria’s most influential newspaper, the *Punch* its most widely read paper, the *Nigerian Tribune* its oldest surviving paper and southwest Nigeria’s most influential newspaper, the *Daily*

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<sup>64</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*, 114.

<sup>65</sup> Press Reference, “Nigeria Press, Media, TV, Radio, Newspapers,” accessed September 30, 2009 from <http://www.pressreference.com/Ma-No/Nigeria.html>.

*Trust* is northern Nigeria's most influential paper and one of the nation's most prestigious, and the *Vanguard* has a reputation as the nation's paper of record. The *Leadership* is an influential, up-and-coming newspaper headquartered in the nation's capital, and the *The News* is far and above the country's most popular and most influential weekly newsmagazine; it has the distinction of inaugurating an insurgent genre of media practice called "guerilla journalism," which was designed to fight military totalitarianism in Nigeria in the 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Its evening publication, called *PM News*, was also analyzed.

The selection of newspapers also achieves some geographical balance: four of the publications—*Guardian*, *Punch*, *Vanguard* and the *The News*—are published in Lagos, Nigeria's media capital and commercial nerve center, and two of them—*Daily Trust* and *Leadership*—are published in Abuja which, though the nation's capital, is geographically in northern Nigeria. The *Nigerian Tribune* is published in Ibadan, the political headquarters of southwest Nigeria. But, most importantly, all the publications are circulated and read nationally.

This study will not look at the broadcast media because in Nigeria the broadcast media are, for the most part, state-run, are deeply distrusted by the Nigerian public, and are additionally not influential sources of mass communication. Although newspapers are in danger of disappearing, at least in their present form, in the West,<sup>67</sup> they are "still the most iconic outlet for news and other types of written communication" in Nigeria.<sup>68</sup> It is precisely because they are the most reliable vaults of historical records, the most readily accessible chronicles of contemporary

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<sup>66</sup> See Dapo Olorunyomi, "Defiant Publishing in Nigeria," *Media Studies Journal* 10 no. 4 (1996): 65-74.

<sup>67</sup> Hiromi Cho, Hugh Martin, and Stephen Lacy, "An Industry in Transition: Entry and Exit in Daily Newspaper Markets, 1987-2003," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83 no. 2 (2006): 381-396.

<sup>68</sup> Akobundu Dike Ugah, "Strategies for Preservation and Increased Access to Newspapers in Nigerian University Libraries," *Library Philosophy and Practice 2009*, University of Idaho, accessed September 30, 2009 from <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~mbolin/ugah7.htm>.

national events and memories, and the most dominant form of mass communication for the educated elite in the country that they have been chosen for the evaluation of the impact of the citizen and alternative online journalism of the Nigerian digital diasporic public sphere in the homeland. They are also the media best suited for examining the reactions of Nigerian public officials to the acts of political will-formation and mobilization by the Nigerian digital diaspora through their citizen journalism.

The observational data for this study was gathered from my own extensive immersion in Nigerian online discussion groups, my relations with some U.S.-based citizen journalists,<sup>69</sup> and my intimate familiarity with the traditional Nigerian press with which I have been associated for many years. This background situated and inflected my interpretation of the documentary and archival evidence that I gathered from examining the citizen online media and homeland newspapers selected for this study. As Yin points out, the case-study investigator “must *have a firm grasp of the issues being studied*, even if in an exploratory mode. Such a grasp reduces the relevant events and information to be sought to manageable proportions.”<sup>70</sup>

For data analysis, the analytic choice of this study is a multiple-case approach that identified and isolated cases that answer the study’s research questions. In order to draw attention to data that have strategic importance, that offer dramatic examples, and that are prototypic, the case selections encompass those that meet the criteria to be simultaneously adjudged critical, extreme, and paradigmatic; they were not guided by the requirements of representativeness of samples since, according to Eisenhardt, qualitative case study research is

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<sup>69</sup> I am familiar, for instance, with the main people associated with SaharaReporters and the Nigeriavillagesquare.com.

<sup>70</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*, 69. Emphasis original.

not about statistical sampling but rather theoretical sampling, or what he calls “theoretically useful cases... that replicate or extend theory by filling conceptual categories.”<sup>71</sup>

In light of this, the case selections I deployed for data analysis are those that highlight major instances where Nigerian diaspora online media broke sensitive stories that not only made it to the pages of Nigerian newspapers but that also caused federal and state governments to react officially or that caused them to change state policies. The case selection began from 2005, when Nigerian diasporan online news media started to be taken seriously, and end in the early part of 2011. I also explored the history of the diasporan citizen media sites, paying close attention to the personalities associated with them, the highs and lows in their evolution, stories that defined their character, controversies that trailed them, and the financial and political pressures they contended with in the course of their existence. These profiles in themselves constitute case studies.

In order to build the internal validity of the cases that were selected for the study, I did a cross-case pattern search, using divergent techniques, to show the “why” behind relationships.<sup>72</sup> For instance, using my background knowledge as a guide, I examined why some diasporan online citizen media reported certain stories and others did not, and why some have more access to privileged sources of information from the homeland than others. In order to do this, I searched for the types of advertisement that appeared on the sites of the selected online citizen media, the political affiliations of their sponsors (if any), and the possible motivations for their highlighting of particular stories at the expense of others. I also highlighted cases that illustrate

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<sup>71</sup> Eisenhardt, “Building Theory from Case Study Research,” 533.

<sup>72</sup> I published an essay on this subject-matter using a case-study research method. See Farooq Kperogi, “Guerrillas in Cyberia: The Transnational Alternative Online Journalism of the Nigerian Diasporic Public Sphere,” *Journal of Global Mass Communication*, 1 no. 1 (2008): 72-87.



the cooperation, tension, and ambivalence that characterize the relationship between online citizen journalists in the diaspora and traditional journalists in the homeland.

Finally, I situated the evidence I gathered from this data analysis within the broader theoretical framework of this study and compared it with existing literature on diaspora media, international news flows, resistance theory in critical cultural studies, and transnational public sphere theory. This design conforms to the useful analytic manipulations recommended by Matthew Miles and A.M. Huberman, which include putting information into diverse categories, making a matrix of categories and placing evidence within such categories, tabulating the frequency of different events, and putting information in a chronological order or using some other temporal scheme.<sup>73</sup>

## 1.5 Outline of Chapters

Chapter One is a broad overview of the subject-matter of this study, the significance and justification for the study, the research questions that guide the investigation, and the methodology that is deployed to provide answers to the research questions.

Chapter Two reviews and coalesces the extant literature on diaspora media, citizen online journalism, alternative media, public sphere theory, and the various conceptions of informational flows. It also identifies the gaps in the existing literature and points out what contributions this study is making to the disciplinary conversation. It, in addition, highlights the broad theoretical framework that undergirds this study.

In Chapter Three, I trace the historical trajectory of resistant and emancipatory journalism in Nigeria and find linkages between this and the study's object of inquiry. It particularly focuses

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<sup>73</sup> Matthew Miles and A.M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

on a phenomenon that has been called “guerilla journalism” in Nigeria, which flourished in the 1990s in the face of a particularly brutal military dictatorship that reigned between 1993 and 1998. With the restoration of democratic rule in 1999, the insurgent journalism of the “guerilla” media era in Nigeria all but fizzled out and the erstwhile radical, uncompromising, and adversarial media now appear co-opted and compromised. This chapter locates the emergence of the citizen online diasporic media within this dead or dying media tradition, especially because some of the diasporan media initially had working agreements with the remnants of the guerilla media in Nigeria to share and cross-promote stories.

Chapter Four is one of the compositional phases and evidentiary bases of the study. It traces the history of online journalism in Nigeria and locates the evolution of online journalism in Nigeria in the context of broader discussions about online journalism globally. It then provides detailed histories of the six diasporan citizen media sites selected for this study, pointing out their most important stories, reportorial temperaments, limitations, and differential motivations.

This set the stage for the examination of more specific case studies in Chapter Five. The cases are organized and thematized to illuminate cases where online citizen media stories have led to homeland governmental policy changes and cases where the diasporan online media exposed high-level corruption in the local media. This selection conforms to the outlines of critical, extreme, and paradigmatic case studies discussed earlier. The implications of these cases are explored and related to the broader theoretical and empirical concerns of the study.

Chapter Six is the last chapter. It juxtaposes the research questions in Chapter One against the data presented in chapters Four and Five. It also highlights the implications of the findings of this study and draws conclusions based on these findings. The findings, where applicable, are compared to existing theoretical formulations to discover patterns, themes, key

issues, nuanced divergences, and new insights. Since this dissertation is ultimately about the nature and consequences of emergent forms of informational flows between the diasporas and homelands of peripheral, transitional nation-states in the age of globalization and the Internet, in this chapter I draw connections between existing theories of media flows, transnational public spheres, resistance, and so on and the findings of the research. I also show the limitations of the study and recommend areas for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2 CITIZEN AND ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Citizen journalism and alternative journalism are core constructs in this study. Although some scholars conflate the two, they are markedly different, and an awareness of the differences between them is central to the preoccupations of this investigation. In this chapter, I define alternative and citizen journalism, map their conceptual contours, and point out their intersections in the age of the Internet. In reviewing the corpus of research that has been done in conceptualizing citizen and alternative journalism, I reveal the gaps in the extant literature. How might we conceive alternative journalism? How is it different from and similar to citizen journalism? And how are these categories useful for this project?

Relative to traditional, mainstream “professional” journalism, alternative journalism has historically attracted little scholarly attention from both critical and administrative researchers.<sup>74</sup> The last ten years, however, have witnessed a profusion of scholarly interest in alternative journalism.<sup>75</sup> This is certainly partly a consequence both of the popularity and ubiquity of the Internet and the expansion of the discursive space that it enables, evidenced in the unexampled blossoming of several Web-based citizen and alternative media. But although many critical media scholars have robustly and carefully captured the emergence, constraints, motives, practices, prospects, singularities, and dominant thematic preoccupations of alternative media, there is no universally agreed upon conception of what alternative journalism is.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Tanni Haas, “Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization,” *Journalism Studies* 5 (2004): 115-21.

<sup>75</sup>Jennifer Rauch, “Activists as Interpretive Communities: Rituals of Consumption and Interaction in an Alternative Media Environment,” *Media, Culture & Society* 29 no. 6 (2007): 994-1013.

<sup>76</sup>See, for instance, Chris Atton, “Alternative Media in Scotland: Problems, Positions and ‘Product’,” *Critical Quarterly* 42 no. 4 (2000): 40-47; Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London: Sage, 2001); Chris Atton, “News Cultures and New Social Movements: Radical Journalism and Mainstream Media,” *Journalism Studies* 3 (2002):

As Chris Atton has noted,<sup>77</sup> until relatively recently, the only definitive scholarly study of alternative journalism was John Downing's influential 1984 book on the subject.<sup>78</sup> For Downing, the distinctiveness of alternative journalism lies in its self-conscious subversion of the elaborate hierarchies typical of professional news organizations and in its explicitly non-conformist and counter-hegemonic political agenda. The kind of media formation this engenders is often well suited to the progressive, anti-capitalist agenda of social movements, which are usually marginalized in the mainstream media. Downing draws clear contrasts between alternative media and the mainstream media, and maintains that the operations of the mainstream media are animated by crass profit motive, are organized according to predetermined, exclusive professional and routinized standards, and are hallmarked by entrenched hierarchies. In other words, as Atton observes, Downing's conception of alternative media privileges "media that are written and run by non-professionals, by groups that are primarily activists for progressive social change."<sup>79</sup>

As more critical media scholars became interested in the systematic study of alternative media, however, conceptions of what constitutes alternative journalism has become much more

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491-505; Chris Atton, "What is 'Alternative' Journalism?" *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 4 (2003): 267-72; Chris Atton and Emma Wickenden, "Sourcing Routines and Representation in Alternative Journalism: A Case Study Approach," *Journalism Studies* 6 (2005): 347-59; John D. Downing, "Audiences and Readers of Alternative Media: The Absent Lure of the Virtually Unknown," *Media, Culture & Society* 25 (2003): 625-65; Tamara Villarreal Ford and Genève Gil, "Radical Internet Use," in *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*, ed. John D. Downing (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001); Haas, "Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization."; Eun-Gyoo Kim and James W. Hamilton, "Capitulation to Capital? OhmyNews as Alternative Media," *Media, Culture & Society*, 28 no. 4 (2006): 541-560; Sara Platon and Mark Deuze: "Indymedia Journalism. A Radical Way of Making, Selecting and Sharing News?" *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 4 (2003): 336-55.

<sup>77</sup> See Atton, "News Cultures and New Social Movements: "

<sup>78</sup> John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>79</sup> Atton, "News Cultures and New Social Movements:" 492.

complicated than Downing's simplistic, if historically contingent, binaries. Since the publication of Downing's book, at least five other notable scholarly books—among them another book by Downing which revises his earlier approach—have been published, all of which have sought to more carefully capture the complexity of alternative journalism.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, at least five journal issues have devoted exclusive attention to the subject of alternative journalism.<sup>81</sup>

As Patricia Gibbs and James Hamilton have pointed out, part of the difficulty in providing an all-encompassing definition of alternative journalism is that the term is often merely a convenient label that encapsulates—or seeks to encapsulate—a variety of non-hegemonic media practices that are vastly diverse in aims, goals, and specificities, and that replace or supplant “more specific designations such as the ‘labor press,’ ‘feminist press,’ or ‘underground media.’”<sup>82</sup> Vincent Campbell agrees. He says terms like “alternative press” tend to be used as “broad-brush collective terms for a disparate body of practices,” although common themes can often be isolated from these practices.<sup>83</sup> Scholars who want to remain faithful to the differential motivations that actuate the practices of alternative media formations often distinguish between “oppositional” alternative media and “advocacy” alternative media to take

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<sup>80</sup> See Atton, *Alternative Media*; Downing, *Radical Media*; DeeDee Halleck, *Hand Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (Bronx, New York: Fordham Press, 2002); Clemencia Rodriguez, *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001); and Rodger Streitmatter, *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>81</sup> See Atton, ed., “What is Alternative Journalism?”; Matthew Cecil, ed., “Alternative Media,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24 no. 4 (2000): 355-356; Patricia Gibbs and James Hamilton, eds., “Special Issue of Media History: Alternative Media,” *Media History* 7 no. 2 (2001): 117-118; Dorothy Kidd and Bernadette Barker-Plummer, ed., “Social Justice Movements and the Internet,” *Peace Review* 13 no. 3 (2001): 331-337; Graeme Turner, ed., “Citizens' Media,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 103 (2002):

<sup>82</sup> Gibbs and Hamilton, eds., “Special Issue of Media History: Alternative Media:” 117.

<sup>83</sup> Vincent Campbell, *Information Age Journalism: Journalism in an International Context* (London: Arnold, 2004), 178.

account of the dominant concerns that inform several different alternative media practices.<sup>84</sup>

While advocacy alternative media often function as the mouthpieces of organized social movements, oppositional alternative media are usually not wedded to any definite political cause or social movement.

However, even though the term “alternative media” would appear to dissolve the exceptionalities that characterize a wide variety of counter-hegemonic, insurgent media practices, Gibbs and Hamilton insist that “it is extremely useful to see them together because such a move emphasizes their collective resistance to increasingly monolithic commercialized media systems and products.”<sup>85</sup> In fact, John Downing, in his later work on alternative media, agrees with Vincent Campbell that in spite of what might seem like the vastly divergent goals of various categories of alternative media, they are actually united by the dual functions they all perform: as “counter-information institutions” and as “agents of developmental power.”<sup>86</sup> It is because of this dual function that some scholars have broadly characterized this genre of journalism as “insurgent journalism”<sup>87</sup> or “counter-hegemonic journalism.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, alternative journalism’s meaning can only be realized in opposition to the established, mainstream media.

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<sup>84</sup> See Michael R. Evans, “Hegemony and Discourse: Negotiating Cultural Relationships Through Media Production,” *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 3 no. 3 (2002): 309-329; David Sholle, “Access Through Activism: Extending the Ideas of Negt and Kluge to American Alternative Media Practice,” *Javnost—The Public* 2 no. 4 (1995): 21-35; Karol Jacobowicz, “Musical Chairs? The Three Public Spheres of Poland,” *Media Culture & Society* 12 (1990): 195-212.

<sup>85</sup> Gibbs and Hamilton, eds., “Special Issue of Media History: Alternative Media:” 117.

<sup>86</sup> Downing, *Radical Media*: 45.

<sup>87</sup> James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting, and New Media in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16.

<sup>88</sup> Harcup, “The Unspoken—Said:” 372.

Such a discursive delineation provides the conceptual justification for the customary practice in media studies to conceive of “alternative” media in binary opposition to the “mainstream” media, with “‘mainstream’ seen as maximizing audiences by appealing to safe, conventional formulas and ‘alternative’ foregoing the comfortable, depoliticizing formulas to advocate programs of social change.”<sup>89</sup> It is in the same vein that Tanni Haas conceives of alternative media as “media devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform.”<sup>90</sup>

This means, in essence, that alternative media defines itself—or is defined—only in contradistinction to the mainstream media. Where the mainstream media is impersonal and professionally managed, alternative media is “self-managed.”<sup>91</sup> Where the mainstream media is formally structured, alternative media is “non-hierarchical.”<sup>92</sup> Where the practices of the mainstream media are motivated by profit motive, those of the alternative media are motivated by “collectivist-democratic” ideals.<sup>93</sup> By being radically different from the mainstream media in structure and content, alternative media seek to comfort a broad range of subaltern populations that are either pushed to the margins of the mainstream media or that are completely excluded from it.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> James Hamilton, “Alternative Media: Conceptual Difficulties, Critical Possibilities,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 24 no. 4 (2000): 357/8.

<sup>90</sup> Haas, “Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization,” 115.

<sup>91</sup> John Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 2001.

<sup>92</sup> Atton, *Alternative Media*.

<sup>93</sup> John Hochheimer, “Organizing Democratic Radio: Issues in Practice,” *Media, Culture & Society* 15 no. 4 (1993): 473-486.

<sup>94</sup> Atton, *Alternative Media*.



Most importantly, according to scholars of alternative media, while the mainstream media impose on themselves the responsibility to create and nurture an “informed” citizenry, alternative media practitioners have as their goal the desire to inspire a “mobilized” citizenry.<sup>95</sup> As Kenya Tomaselli and Eric Louw put it, alternative media practitioners perceive their role more as “facilitators of social communication” than as “sources of information.”<sup>96</sup> This explains why scholars of alternative media variously characterize the unequivocally political content of alternative journalism as “mobilizing information,”<sup>97</sup> “information for action,”<sup>98</sup> “action on action,”<sup>99</sup> or simply “useful information.”<sup>100</sup>

Other scholars locate the difference between alternative media and mainstream media in terms of their differential conventions of news sourcing. While the routinized professional practices of the mainstream media often predispose them to take recourse to “the systematic accessing of powerful, resource-rich institutions and their definition of events—and to the marginalization of resource-poor social groups and interests,”<sup>101</sup> alternative media actively seek a “different cast of accessed ‘officials’ and other voices.”<sup>102</sup> It adopts a newsgathering practice that has been dubbed “native reporting,” which Atton defines as an alternative newsgathering

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Kenya Tomaselli and Eric Louw, “Alternative Media and Political Practice: The South African Struggle,” in *Communication for and against Democracy* ed. Marc Raboy and Peter Bruck (Montreal: Black Rose, 1990), 213.

<sup>97</sup> Haas, “Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization,” 116.

<sup>98</sup> Atton, *Alternative Media*: 154.

<sup>99</sup> Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 379.

<sup>100</sup> Brian Whitaker, *News Limited: Why You Can’t Read All about It* (London: Minority Press Group, 1981), 105.

<sup>101</sup> Simon Cottle, “Rethinking News Access,” *Journalism Studies*, 1 no.3 (2000), 433.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 434-5.

practice “where social actors, instead of being subjects of the news, become their own correspondents, reporting on their own experiences, struggles and ideas.”<sup>103</sup> This nonconformist alternative media reportorial practice finds its most sophisticated expression in what Nick Couldry calls “active witnessing,”<sup>104</sup> which John D. Peters describes elsewhere as a situation in which “one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge in an extraordinary, often forensic, setting in which speech and truth are policed in multiple ways.”<sup>105</sup>

In other words, for the mainstream media, the primary definers of news are people who occupy the upper end of the social scale, while for the alternative media the voices of the voiceless tend to take precedence. Predictably, this makes most “professional” news hardly more than the concerns, interpretations, and the cultural biases of the privileged few in the society. The concerns of the lower rung of the social order only get highlighted under special circumstances. As Robert McChesney observes,

Professional journalism tends to demand ‘news hooks’—some sort of news event—to justify publication. This means that long-term public issues, like racism or suburban sprawl, tend to fall by the wayside, and there is little emphasis on providing the historical and ideological context necessary to bring public issues to life to readers.<sup>106</sup>

An additional consequence of this demotion of the concerns of subalterns to the fringes and the elevation of the concerns of the upper classes to the forefront is that the society is often burdened with a media formation in which “consumerism, the market, class inequality, and individualism tend to be taken as natural and often benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values, and anti-

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<sup>103</sup> Chris Atton, “Ethical Issues in Alternative Journalism,” in *Communication Ethics Today* ed. R. Keeble (Leicester: Troubadour, 2005), 22.

<sup>104</sup> Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>105</sup> John Durhan Peters, “Witnessing,” *Media, Culture & Society* 23 (2001):707-723.

<sup>106</sup> Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 2000), 49-50.

market activities tend to be marginalized or denounced.”<sup>107</sup> It is this media practice that liberatory alternative media seeks to reverse and, in its place, inaugurate a media system

where working people, sexual minorities, trade unions, protest groups—people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups of owners, managers and senior professionals—could make their own news, whether by appearing in it as significant actors or by creating news relevant to their situation.<sup>108</sup>

This is possible because many people involved with alternative journalism, Tony Harcup reminds us, “see their journalism as ‘political activity’ . . . , a perspective that appears to be far from the norm among journalists in the wider industry.”<sup>109</sup> However, the Nigerian experience of alternative citizen journalism, with which this study is primarily concerned, is in some ways markedly different from most of the dimensions of “native reporting” that scholars of alternative journalism have identified. Most of the alternative online news sites use conventional news sources for their stories. Although they speak with sources that would not have any voice—or that would at best have only marginal voices—in the mainstream Nigerian media, they mostly tap from the discontent and internal wrangling of the Nigerian power elite to get exclusive stories that would never make it to the pages of the mainstream media.

This is especially possible because the Nigerian alternative online news practitioners are geographically displaced from the homeland. This gives their sources assurances of confidentiality. Exclusive pictures of the president’s son bathing in a pile of cash and brandishing brand new guns, video clips of a governor in the strictly Muslim, Sharia-implementing state of Borno dancing with a female musician and splashing loads of cash on her (dancing and music are prohibited in Sharia states), PDF files of court documents showing that

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>108</sup> Atton, *Alternative Media*, 11.

<sup>109</sup> Tony Harcup, “‘I’m Doing this to Change the World’: Journalism in Alternative and Mainstream Media,” *Journalism Studies*, 6 no. 3 (2005), 362.

important Nigerian government officials were once convicted of crimes (which should disqualify them from holding public office), or pictures of the choice property of corrupt Nigerian elites in Nigerian cities and in Western capitals, do not fall under the purview of “native reporting,” but they are radically alternative nonetheless, and have so shaken the roots of the Nigerian presidency that the late president of Nigeria, Umaru Yar’adua, was compelled in 2008 to force every person working in his office to swear an oath of secrecy.<sup>110</sup> Nigeria’s oldest surviving weekly newsmagazine, the *Newswatch*, remarked that “This is the first of such oath-taking at the seat of power” in Nigeria.<sup>111</sup> The only feature that this mode of newsgathering shares with native reporting is its unabashed repudiation of the requirement of balance and objectivity, what Sunday Dare, a practitioner of “guerilla journalism” (a precursor to Nigerian alternative online journalism that is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) calls “an editorial philosophy of partisan objectivity on the side of the truth.”<sup>112</sup>

Another popular way to conceive of alternative media, especially among Marxist and neo-Marxist media theorists, is to understand them in terms of their location “outside of the forces of market economics and the state.”<sup>113</sup> Independence from the constraints of the market and the pressures of the state, Atton contends, imbues alternative media with the capacity to confront “radical questions of citizenship in the public sphere” in ways the mainstream media

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<sup>110</sup> Chesa Chesa, “Presidency Administers Secrecy Oath On Staff,” *Daily Independent* September 24, 2008; accessed September 24, 2008 from <http://www.independentngonline.com/news/tfpg/article01>.

<sup>111</sup> Anza Philips, “Keep Your Mouth Shut,” *Newswatch* October 4, 2008; accessed on September 30, 2009 from [http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=47](http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=47).

<sup>112</sup> Sunday Dare, *Guerilla Journalism: Dispatches from the Underground* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Kraft Books Limited, 2007), 91.

<sup>113</sup> Chris Atton, “Towards a Cultural Study of Alternative Media on the Internet,” *Southern Review* 35 no. 3 (2002), 53.

cannot.<sup>114</sup> Like other scholars of alternative media, he argues that it is this characteristic that makes alternative media such irresistible magnets for new social movements. It has been observed, for example, that alternative media emerge and flourish “during periods of heightened social tension.”<sup>115</sup> In Nigeria, the social tension that justified the emergence of online alternative media in the diaspora is the deepening of corruption and elite irresponsibility in the wake of the restoration of civilian rule, as chapters Three, Four and Five show. This is precisely why there has historically been a strong nexus between alternative media and social movements, although in the Nigerian case an organized social movement has not accompanied the emergence of alternative media platforms.

A number of empirical studies have also demonstrated that only alternative media formations frame social protests sympathetically and cast activists in a positive light.<sup>116</sup> Another study specifically found that activists in social movements consume more news from alternative media than do non-activists. Yet another study showed that although activists extensively use news from alternative media, they do not ignore the mainstream media.<sup>117</sup> The implication of all of this is that because of their constant exposure to alternative viewpoints through alternative media, activists are likely to develop what Stuart Hall called “resistant readings”<sup>118</sup> of the hegemonic codes inscribed in the messages of the mainstream media. That is why Atton has argued that a key feature of alternative media, especially online alternative media, is their

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Tony Harcup, “The Unspoken Said: The Journalism of Alternative Media,” *Journalism* 4 no. 3 (2003), 257.

<sup>116</sup> Rauch, “Activists as Interpretive Communities.”

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language* ed. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

“egalitarian mode of address, where intellectuals share media platforms with activists and where it is hoped that elitism is eroded. Here we find the new media used both by grassroots activists and by dissenting academics and other intellectuals participating in a counter public sphere.”<sup>119</sup>

This is, however, an inadequate definition of radical online journalism. By limiting it to the exchange of platforms between intellectuals and activists, it has already been rendered a victim of the elitism it hopes to escape. This limitation is clearly a consequence of the tendency among alternative media scholars to associate radical online news practices only with established social movements and to conflate alternative media with social movement media. Although these two kinds of media share many similarities, they are different in significant respects. While social movement media are distinguished by their association with organized social movements, not all alternative media are embedded in organized social action. When we learn to conceive of online media activism outside the limited confines of organized social movements, and to recognize that it can incorporate several varieties of small-group and individual dissent, we will do more justice to notions of radical online journalism. The entire online alternative citizen media that this study investigates, as pointed out earlier, operate outside the orbit of organized social movements.

This is why Roger Silverstone’s instructive point that “alternative media have created new spaces for alternative voices that provide the focus both for *specific community interests* as well as for *the contrary and the subversive*” [emphasis mine] is more apt to this study.<sup>120</sup> Three elements can be isolated from Silverstone’s conception of alternative media. First, alternative media are often targeted at specific communities. This is a crucial distinction with the mass

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<sup>119</sup> Atton, *Alternative Internet*: 25.

<sup>120</sup> Roger Silverstone, *Why Study the Media* (London: Sage, 1999), 103.

media that, for the most part, target a mass, heterogeneous, and anonymous audience, except that the Nigerian alternative and citizen media also target both the subaltern population and the power structure, which makes their reach more widespread than the traditional conceptions of alternative media and their role as both “facilitators of social communication” and “sources of information.” Second, alternative media are ideologically invested in espousing points of view that are contrary to the traditions and conventions of the established order. Third, in order to counter the hegemony of the power structure, alternative media deploy subversive tactics and strategies. This ranges from their self-conscious repudiation of the institutional and organizational structures of the mainstream media to their rejection of traditional methods of news sourcing. Silverstone adds that whenever alternative media formations decide to adopt the practices of the mainstream mass media, they often do so with the explicit aim to “pursue a critical or alternative media agenda, from the margins, as it were, or from the underbelly of social life.”<sup>121</sup> This dovetails with the character and operations of the Nigerian online news outlets that will be studied and analyzed for this project. They do not employ the techniques of “native reporting,” but rather adopt, adapt and subvert mainstream media newsgathering techniques.<sup>122</sup>

Based on these varying conceptions of alternative media, Atton concludes that the most rewarding way to understand alternative media is to recognize their location outside time-honored, routinized professional news practices:

Alternative media may be understood as a radical challenge to the professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media. Alternative media privilege a

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid: 103.

<sup>122</sup> They usually capitalize on the internal wrangling within the Nigerian elite circles to get exclusive, sometimes incriminating, documents against public officials, among other strategies of newsgathering, as we will see in the data chapters.

journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices. Its practices emphasize first-person, eyewitness accounts by participants; a reworking of the populist approaches to tabloid newspapers to recover a ‘radical popular’ style of reporting; and collective and anti-hierarchical forms of organization which eschew demarcation and specialization—and which importantly suggest an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism.<sup>123</sup>

Alternative journalism is radical, he adds, when it is “opposed to hierarchical, elite-centered notions of journalism as a business.”<sup>124</sup> This is, of course, problematic because many radical online news outlets are run as businesses of some sort since they allow advertisements to be placed on their web sites from which they make money. Similarly, not all alternative journalism is explicitly anti-business. A few Nigerian alternative diasporan online media outlets illustrate this.

## **2.1 Problematizing the Binary Opposition of Alternative and Mainstream Media**

It is obvious from the foregoing that the germinal conceptions of alternative journalism, which are still influential today, locate it in binary opposition to what has been understood as the mainstream media. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising. After all, the very notion of “alternativeness” presupposes not just an opposition to something but, in fact, mutual exclusivity with the thing.

Lately, however, a few scholars of alternative media have begun to question the ontological utility of this dualist conception of alternative media. In his later works, Downing himself concedes that the dualism of his earlier typology imposed definitional and discursive

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<sup>123</sup> Chris Atton, *An Alternative Internet* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2004), 26.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.



burdens on the notion of alternative journalism.<sup>125</sup> He has identified two fundamental flaws with his earlier approach. He terms the first flaw “anti-binarism.”<sup>126</sup> By “anti-binarism” he means his rejection of the then dominant Western and Soviet media models and his insistence that both models were ideologically complicit with maintaining and naturalizing exploitative relations of production. Because he thought both media systems were monolithic and unrepresentative, he argued that neither of them offered any hope. He labels the second flaw “binarism,” by which he means the rigid distinction he imposed between alternative journalism and traditional, professional journalism. He points out, however, that the “binarism” was prompted by the need to “hammer home merits of alternative ways of communicating politically, however picayune they might appear in the first instance.”<sup>127</sup> Downing has acknowledged that these flaws prevented him from appreciating the subtleties and continuums that exist between alternative media and mainstream media, and he ended up with an account that “seriously simplified both.”<sup>128</sup>

Many other scholars are recognizing the futility of an “either or” approach to understanding alternative media. Atton, for instance, following Downing’s self-criticism, has argued that it is more useful to talk of the “hybridity” of reportorial practices within “the contemporary media landscape,” and has pointed to “the complex, hybrid nature of alternative media in relation to its mainstream counterparts.”<sup>129</sup> Harcup has also called attention to what he

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<sup>125</sup> See John Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Chris Atton, “Ethical Issues in Alternative Journalism,” *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, 1 no.1 (2003), 26-27.

terms the “crossover grouping,” that is, current mainstream media practitioners who were previously alternative journalists and vice versa.<sup>130</sup>

Similarly, the mainstream media have increasingly incorporated into their professional repertoire media practices that were once thought to be exclusive to alternative media formations. Such mainstream media practices as public or civic journalism,<sup>131</sup> which are becoming more and more fashionable, especially with the popularity of online media, are borrowed from alternative media practices. There are also many respects in which alternative media practices borrow from the mainstream media.

Given the instability of the boundaries of “alternative” and “mainstream” media practices, it has been suggested that critical scholars should embrace Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to gain a more theoretically sophisticated understanding of media practices.

According to Atton,

[M]edia practices may be viewed as movable; they may articulate to bourgeois (mainstream) values in one instance, but become joined with radical views in another. A hegemonic approach suggests a complexity of relations between radical and mainstream that previous binary models have not been able to identify.<sup>132</sup>

Nick Couldry,<sup>133</sup> for his part, argues that the insistence on a rigid distinction between “alternative” media and “mainstream” media has the effect of perpetually consigning progressive, activist media to the margins and thereby robbing them not only of what Pierre

<sup>130</sup> Harcup, “‘I’m Doing This to Change the World’,” 362.

<sup>131</sup> Public or civic journalism, as subsequent sections will show, is the kind of journalism that actively seeks the input of the reading or viewing public in the newsgathering process.

<sup>132</sup> Atton, “Towards a Cultural Study of Alternative Media on the Internet,” 58.

<sup>133</sup> Nick Couldry, “Mediation and Alternative Media, or Relocating the Centre of Media and Communication Studies,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 2002. 103, (2002): 24-31.

Bourdieu calls “symbolic power,”<sup>134</sup> but also contributing to their exclusion from what Italian political sociologist Alberto Melucci calls “the power of naming.”<sup>135</sup> Bourdieu notes that,

Durkheim has the merit of designating the *social function*...of symbolism in an explicit way: it is an authentic political function which cannot be reduced to the structuralists’ function of communication. Symbols are the instruments of knowledge and communication... they make it possible for there to be a consensus on the meaning of the social world, a *consensus* which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of social order [emphasis from original].<sup>136</sup>

By accepting the label “alternative,” and conceding that the bourgeois media are the “mainstream,” progressive and independent media practitioners legitimize the consensus that reproduces narratives of their alterity and therefore unwittingly participate in their own marginalization. Couldry avers that precisely because, in comparative terms, alternative media organizations lack symbolic resources and the power of naming, their activities tend to be largely invisible,<sup>137</sup> circumscribed, and reduced to being no more than what James Scott calls “weapons of the weak.”<sup>138</sup> The challenge, then, is for the media of the oppressed to not only challenge the status quo but to also seek the symbolic capital that will empower them to contest meanings and the politics of naming. This is perhaps why many alternative media practitioners now prefer to call their media “independent” media, with the implication that the corporate, legacy media are “dependent” on external forces—advertisers, big business, the state, etc—to exist, and are therefore, by implication, compromised and unreliable.

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<sup>134</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>135</sup> Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, 182. He contends that “The real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming.”

<sup>136</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 166.

<sup>137</sup> Couldry, “Mediation and Alternative Media, or Relocating the Centre of Media and Communication Studies.”

<sup>138</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

The utility of this distinction, however, is limited to pre-Internet, social movement alternative media, which were usually supported, by and large, by voluntary contributions from political activists who subscribed to the points of views of the various alternative media platforms. In the age of the Internet this has been complicated. While activist-supported, advertiser-averse, social movement media still exist, in the new platforms enabled by the Internet, various kinds of alternative media whose practices are increasingly difficult to differentiate from the corporate, commercialized media have emerged. So has the Internet qualitatively altered the form and content of alternative media? Or are the changes brought about by the Internet on the character and practices of alternative media merely cosmetic? The next section provides insights on these questions.

## **2.2 Alternative Media in the Age of the Internet**

While scholars have acknowledged how the Internet has radically altered the content and character of alternative media, not all have come to terms with the ways in which the Internet has done epistemological violence to erstwhile conceptions of alternative journalism. In fact, some scholars are reluctant to admit that the Internet has inaugurated wholly new modes of practices. According to Atton, prominent new media scholar Dorothy Kidd, for instance, finds striking parallels between “contemporary, internet-based alternative media formations such as Indymedia and its precursors in previous decades of social movement media”<sup>139</sup> and insists that the Internet is not unique in any radical way. However, insistence that the Internet is no more than the migration of erstwhile forms of alternative media formations in virtual forms does disservice to efforts to come to grips with the ways in which the Internet complicates our understanding of

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<sup>139</sup> Atton, “Towards a Cultural Study of Alternative Media on the Internet,” 55.

contemporary alternative media forms. It ignores the substantially wider reach, structural singularities, and the evolving form and content of Internet-supported alternative media. In so doing, it ignores its capacity for unique patterns of publicity.

There are currently literally millions of blogs on the Internet with over 70,000 new blogs added every single day.<sup>140</sup> While most of the blogs are owned by private citizens (which makes them potentially “alternative” or at least “citizen” media since they are not “mainstream”), not all of them are motivated by progressive, emancipatory political agendas. Furthermore, many of them have “capitulated to capital”<sup>141</sup> by allowing Internet ads to be placed on their sites. As Kim and Hamilton observe, in reference to a huge, commercially successful Internet-based “alternative” media site in South Korea,

The charge of hypocrisy can be leveled against a media organization ostensibly committed to progressive social change (which often includes as part of this the reform, or even the abolition, of exploitative capitalist relations) but still sells its audience as a commodity to advertisers. Similarly, critics of commercialization argue that courting advertising revenue leads to depoliticization.<sup>142</sup>

This dilemma confronts many self-confessedly progressive Web-based alternative media. So, if, as Atton argues, one of the abiding hallmarks of progressive alternative media is their freedom from market forces, do ad-supported but nonetheless oppositional Web-based media qualify as alternative media?<sup>143</sup> Or is Rodney Benson right in arguing that the commercialization of progressive, counter-hegemonic alternative media is not a sufficient basis to conclude that they

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<sup>140</sup> Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, “Technopolitics, Blogs, and Emergent Media Ecologies: A Critical Reconstructive Approach,” in *Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools* ed. B. Hawk, D.M. Rieder, and Ollie O Oviedo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 226.

<sup>141</sup> Eun-Gyoo Kim and James W. Hamilton, “Capitulation to Capital? OhmyNews as Alternative Media,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 28 no. 4 (2006): 541-560.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 542-3.

<sup>143</sup> Atton, “Towards a Cultural Study of Alternative Media on the Internet,” 53.

have been compromised?<sup>144</sup> What of Internet-based “alternative” media that are not associated with, or the product of, any organized social movement?

And what about the phenomenon of mainstream media organizations maintaining and supporting vibrant, uncensored online citizen media that, in fact, provide more untrammelled avenues to ventilate strong opinions against the hegemonic order than many forms of alternative media? For instance, a recent “State of the News Media” report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that, paradoxically, the mainstream media provide greater mechanisms for feedback and critiques than do most citizen media.<sup>145</sup> What is more, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the relationship between alternative media and the mainstream media in the age of the Internet is one of symbiosis rather than mutual exclusivity. Most online alternative media liberally use material from the mainstream media, just as the mainstream media now increasingly utilize information from the online citizen media (of which alternative media are a part, as will become clear in the discussion on citizen journalism) for its profit-driven broadcasts.<sup>146</sup>

All this calls for more self-reflexive theoretical exploration of the phenomenon of alternative media in the age of the Internet, or what has more broadly been labeled citizen journalism. Of course, there are significant differences between alternative journalism and citizen journalism. It suffices, however, to just state for now that while most alternative journalism is citizen journalism (that is, not produced by institutional and corporate media elites), not all citizen journalism is alternative journalism (that is, consciously political and

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<sup>144</sup> Rodney Benson, “Commercialism and Critique: California’s Alternative Weeklies,” in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* ed. James Curran and Nick Couldry (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>145</sup> See David Bauder, “Web Has Unexpected Effect on Journalism,” *USA Today*, March 17, 2008; accessed September 16, 2009 from [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-03-17-3511532335\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-03-17-3511532335_x.htm).

<sup>146</sup> For a very perceptive discussion on the interdependence between citizen blogs and mainstream media, see Tanni Hass, “From ‘Public Journalism’ to the ‘Public’s Journalism’? Rhetoric and Reality in the Discourse on Weblogs,” *Journalism Studies*, 6 no. 3 (2005): 387-396.

counter-hegemonic). So what is citizen journalism, and how is it different from other models of journalism? The next section explains citizen journalism and situates it within the context of other models of journalism. This move is important because it helps us to categorize the emergent diasporan online media that the objects of inquiry of this study, especially in relation to the traditional homeland legacy media they both subvert and complement.

### **2.3 Citizen Journalism and Resistance to Traditional Journalism**

In online journalism scholarship, it is customary for scholars to deploy a variety of terms to describe the same online media formations and practices. For instance, the terms “participatory journalism,” “civic or public journalism” and “citizen journalism” are often used interchangeably. However, these terms not only have distinct meanings, they also have different histories. Since they will be used liberally in this study to refer to different genres of journalism it is useful to distinguish them clearly.

Joyce Nip identifies five broad categories of journalism: (1) traditional journalism, (2) public or civic journalism, (3) interactive journalism, (4) participatory journalism, and (5) citizen journalism.<sup>147</sup> Although these terms have widely different significations for different scholars and do, in fact, overlap at different conceptual levels, there appears to be sufficient agreement among journalism scholars on their distinguishing features to deserve delineating them as distinct journalistic models.

Traditional journalism, according to Nip, is the kind of journalism where “professional journalists are the gatekeepers who filter through the happenings of the world, select the

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<sup>147</sup> Joyce Nip, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism,” *Journalism Studies*, 7 no. 2 (2006): 212-236.

significant events, and report them for their audience”<sup>148</sup> This model has limited participatory content, except for letters to the editor and such other kinds of audience feedback, which are sometimes no more than indecipherable crackles of background noise because they are merely reactive and neither significantly inform the content of news nor the process of newsgathering. In this model, professional journalists determine what constitutes news using frames of reference internalized from their professional training and associations. In most cases, news is little more than the actions of the primary definers of news: politicians and accredited sources in government and other institutions that have access to the media almost as a matter of right. In this sense, as Janet Woollacott points out, the media serve “to reinforce a consensual viewpoint by using public idioms and by claiming to voice public opinion.”<sup>149</sup> This has been the dominant model of journalism practiced by the mainstream media for many years.

Public journalism, also called civic journalism, emerged as a response to the perceived inadequacies of traditional journalism.<sup>150</sup> According to Jay Rosen, the concept of “public journalism” first appeared in the United States in 1993 as a reaction to the deepening chasm between journalism and the citizens it professes to serve on the one hand and between the quotidian concerns of ordinary people and public life in general on the other.<sup>151</sup> Lewis Friedland cites the *Wichita Eagle* as the first notable newspaper to experiment with this model of journalism.<sup>152</sup> Public journalism, in essence, invests itself with the task of actively seeking the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid: 216.

<sup>149</sup> Janet Woollacott, “Messages and Meanings,” in *Culture Society and the Media*, ed. M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, and J. Woollacott, (London: Methuen, 1982), 109.

<sup>150</sup> See Theodore L. Glasser, ed., *The Idea of Public Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

<sup>151</sup> Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>152</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, *Public Journalism: Past and Future* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2003).



input of local communities both in the choice of what constitutes news and how the news is presented. As Nip points out,

Town hall meetings, citizen panels, and polls are common techniques used to tap the concerns of the community, which would then form the reporting agenda for the journalists. During the news-gathering process, professional journalists often report back to the citizens what they have found for generating discussion in search of solutions to the problems.... There have been cases where the citizens even partnered with the professionals in gathering the news.<sup>153</sup>

Although this model represents a greater connection with the people than traditional journalism does, it still retains the professional journalist as the gatekeeper. Therefore, civic journalism, while pretending to be an improvement on mainstream news practices, is mere cosmetic reformism that leaves intact the fundamental essence of professional, mainstream media practices. For one, it is market driven and constrained by the institutional and organizational structures of the dominant mainstream news practices from which it purports to depart.<sup>154</sup> As Louise Woodstock observes, “traditional and public journalisms adopt similar narrative strategies to effect essentially the same ends: placing the power of telling society’s stories in the hands of journalists.”<sup>155</sup>

How is interactive journalism different from public journalism? The interactive journalism model is not radically different, although it seeks to improve upon some of the shortcomings of public journalism by taking advantage of the improved technical capabilities of media organizations in the last couple of years since the Internet became a demotic medium. But

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<sup>153</sup> Nip, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism”: 216.

<sup>154</sup> Steve Davis, “Public Journalism: The Case Against,” *Journalism Studies* 1 no. 4 (2000): 686-9; Theodore L. Glasser, “The Politics of Public Journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 1 no. 4 (2000): 683-6.

<sup>155</sup> Louise Woodstock, “Public Journalism’s Talking Cure: An Analysis of the Movement’s ‘Problem’ and ‘Solution’ Narratives,” *Journalism: Theory Practice and Criticism* 3 no. 1 (2002), 37.

precisely what interactive journalism actually entails is still imprecise.<sup>156</sup> Following Wolfgang Iser, however, we can construe it as consisting in a “network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text”<sup>157</sup> and in which the reader “is less massified and more open.”<sup>158</sup> Jaana Hujanen and Sari Peitikainen define interactive journalism as “the increasing opportunity to communicate across ‘old’ boundaries of time and place, and between journalists and citizens.”<sup>159</sup> According to Brian Massey and Mark Levy, there are two important dimensions to interactivity: content interactivity and interpersonal interactivity.<sup>160</sup> Content interactivity is made possible not only by the technical capabilities that give users the latitude to liberate themselves from the one-dimensionality set by the professional journalists, but also by the variety of choice of content available to users. Interpersonal interactivity occurs when users can interact with professional journalists through exchange of emails, chat sessions, or when the “comment” pages of news organizations can serve as a site for the push and pull of contending viewpoints in response to a news story on a news Web site. As Nip rightly notes, interactive journalism is little more than computer-mediated public journalism.<sup>161</sup>

Participatory journalism goes a step further than interactive journalism by actually engaging consumers of news in the newsgathering process. In this model, users do not merely

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<sup>156</sup> Donald Matheson, “Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism,” *New Media & Society* 6 no. 4 (2004):443–468.

<sup>157</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 34.

<sup>158</sup> Matheson, “Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News:” 453.

<sup>159</sup> Jaana Hujanen and Sari Peitikainen, “Interactive Uses of Journalism: Crossing Between Technological Potential and Young People’s News-Using Practices,” *New Media & Society* 6 no. 3 (2004), 383.

<sup>160</sup> Brian Massey and Mark Levy, “Interactivity, Online Journalism, and English-language Web Newspapers in Asia,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 76 no. 1 (1999), 138-152.

<sup>161</sup> Nip, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism:”

interact with the news and professional journalists that produce the news; they also participate in some fashion in a many-to-many collaborative form of journalism. Like interactive journalism, it is also enabled by the technology of the Internet, as it allows a new generation of Internet users to become content creators. In this wise, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis define participatory journalism as

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.<sup>162</sup>

They add that participatory journalism uses what they call a “publish, then filter” model instead of the traditional “filter, then publish” model.<sup>163</sup> In other words, citizen input to media content often first goes past traditional media gatekeepers. However, the content could later be locked out by media gatekeepers when it is found to be unworthy of the standards of the media organization. Some of the features of the model, according to these authors, include discussion groups, user-generated content, weblogs (blogs), collaborative publishing, peer-to-peer systems, and Web syndication. As is by now obvious, although participatory journalism allows the participation of news users in the news-making process, the process is still controlled by professional journalists within mainstream institutional journalistic structures. The OhmyNews site in South Korea, which is often wrongly called a citizen media site, is credited with pioneering this brand of journalism. On this site, readers generate the bulk of the news stories, but these stories are edited by a full-time staff of a few dozen editors. Yeon-Jung Yu, writing in the *Japan Media Review*, says, “Most are written by housewives, schoolkids [sic], professors and

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<sup>162</sup> Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, “We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information,” <http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/>; accessed September 11, 2009.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

other ‘citizen journalists.’”<sup>164</sup> San Jose *Mercury News* columnist Dan Gillmor predicts that the many-to-many collaborative model of Korea’s OhmyNews would define the direction of news business: “OhmyNews is transforming the 20th century’s journalism-as-lecture model -- where organizations tell the audience what the news is and the audience either buys it or doesn’t – into something vastly more bottom-up, interactive and democratic.”<sup>165</sup>

Among prominent news organizations that have adopted the participatory model of journalism are the BBC’s ‘‘Have Your Say’’ ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking\\_point/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/default.stm)), which invites news users to express their views about the news and then publishes them in a particular section of the news product, and the relatively less successful MSNBC’s Citizen Journalists Report (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6639760/>), where an editor suggests assignments for whoever is interested in reporting on specified aspects of developing news stories, and so on.

Citizen journalism is different from the preceding four models (traditional, civic, interactive and participatory) precisely because it eliminates the authority of the professional journalist. As Nip puts it,

It can be one or a number of individuals, a citizen group, or a nonprofit organization without a paid staff running a news blog, news website, community radio station, or newspaper. To qualify as journalism, the content needs to include some original interviewing, reporting, or analysis of events or issues to which people other than the authors have access.<sup>166</sup>

In other words, citizen journalism is the model of journalism that allows a wider range of participants, including what Jay Rosen has described as “the people formerly known as the

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<sup>164</sup> Yeon-Jung Yu, “OhmyNews Makes Every Citizen a Reporter,” *Japan Media Review*, September 17, 2003, <http://www.japanmediareview.com/japan/internet/1063672919.php>.

<sup>165</sup> Dan Gillmor, “A New Brand of Journalism is Taking Root in South Korea,” *San Jose Mercury News*, May 18, 2003.

<sup>166</sup> Nip, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism:” 218.

audience,”<sup>167</sup> to perform what J.D. Lasica calls “random acts of journalism.”<sup>168</sup> Terry Flew identified three elements that are critical to the rise of citizen journalism and citizen media: open-source publishing, capacity for collaborative control of content, and the availability of democratic, Web-enabled forms of content distribution.<sup>169</sup> Following Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis’s model, I will characterize citizen journalism as the “publish, don’t filter” model of journalism. The Indymedia site, a transnational multimedia news outlet that became prominent for opposing the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999, is often cited as one of the pioneers of the citizen journalism model. It pioneered dialogic democracy in its news content as every news report sent by the public is left intact. More generally, news-based weblogs can also be categorized as practicing citizen journalism since the defining feature of citizen journalism is that it is wholly user-generated and is free from the encumbrances of professional news judgment and gate-keeping.

The five models of audience connection proposed above vary on the extent and form of people participation, with citizen journalism involving the people to the greatest extent, and traditional journalism the least. Interactive journalism gives the users initiative after the news is published, whereas participatory journalism gets the users to gather the news. Public journalism encompasses a wide range of experimentation in engaging citizens as advisers and partners in news gathering and writing, while also allowing interaction after news publication.

It is clear that none of these models are immanent, self-sufficient containers of meaning. They are not self-conscious journalistic models isolated in time and space. And they constantly

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<sup>167</sup> Jay Rosen, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience.” *PressThink: Ghost of Democracy in the Media Machine*. [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html) (accessed May 5, 2009).

<sup>168</sup> J.D. Lasica, “Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other,” *Nieman Reports*, 2003, pp. 70-4. <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2009).

<sup>169</sup> Terry Flew, *New Media: An Introduction* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, (Melbourne, & London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

overlap. It does appear, though, that citizen journalism is the only model that can be thought of as distinct, even new-fangled; the rest are mere adaptations of or improvements on traditional journalism. The five diasporan online news outlets chosen for this study fit the definition of citizen media (those that are explicitly counter-hegemonic would in addition qualify as alternative media), and the Nigerian newspapers that will be used to evaluate the impact and consequences of the diasporan citizen media practice traditional journalism with occasional elements of interactive journalism, since all of them have Web sites that permit reader comments on their stories. A few of the traditional Nigerian newspapers allow readers to initiate and submit eye-witness, user-generated, “publish-then-filter” content in a separate portion of their Web sites. That would qualify as participatory journalism.

But, most importantly, it is the migration of news and information to the Internet that has led to the robust flowering and proliferation of citizen journalism. Over the last few years, millions of Weblogs, or blogs, with thematic preoccupations that encapsulate a broad spectrum of human endeavors, have emerged and have continued to redefine the practice of journalism in many fascinating ways. This development has inspired optimism in some quarters that what Herbert Schiller famously called the “corporate take-over of public expression” by the traditional media is about to be subverted, perhaps even extirpated, by the unexampled discursive democracy that Web-based citizen media enable.<sup>170</sup>

People who are enamored of this thought-process often construe user-generated citizen media as inherently counter-hegemonic, as the emerging, as yet unformed but nonetheless potent, antithesis to the traditional media. Writing in the *Buffalo News*, for instance, Anthony Violanti gleefully celebrated the fact that “the mainstream media met their match” in blogs,

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<sup>170</sup> Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc., The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

which “not only compete in a new media landscape but also answer to the competitors.”<sup>171</sup>

Implicit in this enthusiastic valorization of citizen media is the idea that they exist apart from and, in fact, in opposition to, the mainstream media. As Stephen Reese and his colleagues have pointed out, it has become customary to point to instances where news and public affairs blogs exposed inaccurate reporting by mainstream media as evidence that “the online army of bloggers will supplant the work and value of traditional journalists.”<sup>172</sup>

Recent research has, however, shown that rather than challenging the dominance of mainstream news media by linking to and commenting on an ideologically diverse range of alternative news providers, weblog writers help strengthen mainstream media dominance by further circulating, if not amplifying, their discourse. Indeed, the “derivative”<sup>173</sup> if not “parasitic”<sup>174</sup> relationship between weblogs and mainstream news media makes it more accurate to characterize the blogosphere as an “online echo chamber of mass-mediated political views”<sup>175</sup> than as an “alternative sphere of news and views.”<sup>176</sup> If this is the case for the citizen media in advanced democracies, what is different about the citizen media of the Nigerian

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<sup>171</sup> Anthony Violanti, “Alternative News Made its Mark,” *Buffalo News*, November 4, 2004, p. C1.

<sup>172</sup> Stephen D. Reese, Lou Rutigliano, Kideuk Hyun and Jaekwan Jeong, “Mapping the Blogosphere: Professional and Citizen-based Media in the Global News Arena,” *Journalism*, 8 no. 3 (2007), 236.

<sup>173</sup> See Paul Andrews, “Is Blogging Journalism?” *Nieman Reports* 57 (2003): 63-64; Andrew Baoill, “Weblogs and the Public Sphere,” in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* ed. Minnesota Blog Collective, accessed September 12, 2009 from [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/weblogs\\_and\\_the\\_public\\_sphere.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/weblogs_and_the_public_sphere.html); Brian Carroll, “Culture Clash: Journalism and the Communal Ethos of the Blogosphere,” in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*, ed. Minnesota Blog Collective, accessed September 12, 2009 from [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/culture\\_clash.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/culture_clash.html).

<sup>174</sup> Alexander Halavais, “The Web as News: September 11 and New Sources of Web News,” Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association of Internet Researchers, Maastricht, The Netherlands, October, 2002.

<sup>175</sup> Jane Singer, “The Political J-Blogger,” Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Canada, August, 2004, 23.

<sup>176</sup> Guy Redden, “Read the Whole Thing: Journalism, Weblogs and the Remediation of the War in Iraq,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy*, 109 (2003), 162.

diasporic public sphere that gives them the power to sometimes determine the editorial agendas of the institutional media in the homeland? Why would the online media of a far-flung diaspora challenge the authority and credibility of an established homeland media formation, mobilize the citizenry both at home and abroad for collective action and, in the process, change state policies?

These questions highlight the tricky convergence between citizen journalism and alternative citizen journalism. Citizen journalism, we have seen, is journalism that is practiced by ordinary people, that is wholly user-generated, and in which professional news judgment and gate-keeping, especially of the kind popularized by the corporate media, are eliminated. It is this broad category of Internet-enabled media, which includes the millions of news weblogs on the Internet, that have been described as largely derivative, parasitic and little more than online eco-chambers of the hegemonic media. But this is a broad-brush characterization that ignores the fact that there are also alternative and citizen media whose characteristics mark them out as independent media formations. Let us recapitulate some of the features of online alternative media: they are often operated by activists for progressive causes, they function as resistance to monolithic commercialized media systems, they are located outside the forces of the market economy and the state, they adopt counter-hegemonic reportorial practices (such as native reporting and active witnessing) in newsgathering, they serve as counter-information systems and agents of development power, they act as facilitators of social communication rather than as sources of information, and they are more concerned with nurturing a “mobilized” citizenry than an “informed” citizenry.

But can a media formation be deficient in some of the features of alternative media and still legitimately be oppositional (to the mainstream media and the state) and activist? Many of the Nigerian diaspora online media, for instance, do not deploy the kind of counter-hegemonic



news gathering practice that alternative media scholars have identified; instead, they use conventional newsgathering practices to subversive ends. Furthermore, some of them are not just facilitators of social communication but sources of information for ordinary Nigerian citizens, the national elite and even the corporate media. Similarly, almost all of the influential Nigerian diasporan online media are not affiliated with any organized social movement and yet are sufficiently activist and oppositional to cause tremendous discomfiture to the state and to the national corporate media. And, although the content of some of the Web sites can be derivative of and parasitic upon the mainstream homeland media, they offer interpretations opposed to those offered in the mainstream media. These considerations partly inspire this study.

Significantly, both alternative journalism and citizen journalism take place in a public sphere. Since the term public sphere, which is a core construct in this project, has varied and sometimes hotly contested significations, it is appropriate to precede my historicization of the evolution of the Nigerian public sphere with a brief excursion into the conceptions of public sphere, and how the term will be used here. The next section therefore discusses the meaning, history, application, critiques, and limitations of the concept of public sphere that undergirds this research.

## 2.4 Understanding the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas, arguably the most notable of the second-generation members of the influential Frankfurt School of critical theory,<sup>177</sup> popularized the concept of the public sphere in the

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<sup>177</sup> The Frankfurt School, also known as the Institute of Social Research, was founded in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923 by German Jewish Marxists Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Erich Fromm. As a result of Nazi persecution, they fled Germany and went into exile first to Geneva and later to Moscow, California, and Columbia University in New York. For a discussion of the influence they brought to bear on the social sciences and philosophy, see Neil McLaughlin, "Origin Myths in the Social Sciences: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the Emergence of Critical Theory," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24 no.1 (1999): 109-139.

English-speaking world when his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in 1962, was translated into English in 1989.<sup>178</sup> He conceives of it as an open, inclusive, dialogic arena of rational-critical discourse untrammelled by either the state or the private sector and that acts as a check on state power. It is important to note, however, that although Habermas' theory of the public sphere may be the most influential today, it is by no means the only one; there is a multiplicity of competing conceptions of what constitutes the public sphere.

An influential conception of the public sphere that is coeval with but radically different from Habermas', for instance, is Reinhart Koselleck's, whose concept of the public sphere is located in his historicization of the role that secret societies such as the Freemasons played in challenging totalitarian authority in Europe.<sup>179</sup> By countervailing the totalitarianism prevalent in Europe in the eighteenth century, he argued, the secret societies created moral alternatives that expanded the range of discourse in much the same way that the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas famously historicized served as a counterweight to feudal absolutism. For John Dewey, an influential American theorist, the public is called into being by the concatenation of "indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior" of individuals and groups in the society.<sup>180</sup> For Walter Lipmann, the public sphere resides in a core of people with specialist knowledge and skills who serves as a buffer between the government

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<sup>178</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (London: Polity Press, 1989).

<sup>179</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>180</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 1927): 64.

and the masses of the people.<sup>181</sup> In Mikhail Bakhtin's conception,<sup>182</sup> the public inheres in moments of wildly funny and grotesque inversion of the social hierarchies in the society, what M. Lane Bruner calls "progressive public transgression."<sup>183</sup> Since publics are constituted in those moments in history when the ruling classes allow for the temporary upending of social hierarchies through the carnivalesque, he dispenses with the necessity for communicative and procedural rationality, or for the bracketing of subjectivities. What is common to all these conceptions is that the public is constituted outside the home and the state, except Dewey's conception.<sup>184</sup>

The notion of the public sphere that forms the theoretical bedrock of this work is the one propounded by Jürgen Habermas because, as Nancy Fraser puts it, "no attempt to understand the limits of actually existing late-capitalist democracy can succeed without in some way or another making use of [Habermas' early conception of the public sphere]."<sup>185</sup> Additionally, since this project is concerned with investigating how the media of public expression can and have served as centers for discursive resistance to totalitarian state powers, Habermas' conception of the public sphere seems particularly appropriate. According to Habermas,

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<sup>181</sup> Walter Lipmann's *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1922). Also see Walter Lippman, "The Appeal to the Public," in *Public Opinion*, 398-410. New York, Macmillan, 1922.

<sup>182</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington. Indiana UP, 1984).

<sup>183</sup> M. Lane Bruner, "Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 no. 2, (2005), 138.

<sup>184</sup> For another influential conception of the public sphere, see Hanna Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). For an excellent comparison of the different traditions of public sphere theorizing, see Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (MIT Press, 1992). She delineates three models of the public sphere and associates them with the work of particular theorists. She calls the first model, represented by the work of Hanna Arendt, the agonistic model. She characterizes the second model, represented by the work of Ackerman, as the legalistic model, and labels the third model, represented by the work of Habermas, as the discursive model. My work is influenced by the discursive model of the public sphere.

<sup>185</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (MIT Press, 1992):111.

By ‘public sphere’ we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. We speak of a political public sphere when the public discussions concern objects connected with the practice of the state.<sup>186</sup>

Habermas' theory derives inspirational strength from a historical juncture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe—particularly in England, France and Germany—when coffee houses, salons, societies, the town hall, the village church, the tavern, the public square, convenient barns, union halls, parks, factory lunchrooms, and even street corners became the arenas of debate, political discussion, and action. Habermas extends this to a normative model of popular involvement in the public sphere for contemporary times. He explains that in these venues, everyone had an equal right to speak *as if* they were equals. In England, for example, the coffee house conferred discursive sanctuary not only on the nobility, but also on “the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers.”<sup>187</sup> The dialogue, he posited, transpired in a profoundly democratic forum where the status differentials and positional hierarchies of participants were bracketed and issues were discussed without external coercion.

According to Habermas, the public sphere was governed by a moral-practical discourse, and the apparatus for the mediation of this discourse was rational and critical argumentation. Habermas’ analysis of communication in the archetypal bourgeois public sphere reveals that every participant who engaged in the moral-practical discourse of the time made recourse to a

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<sup>186</sup>Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, eds. C. Mukerji and M. Schudson. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991):398. Habermas was an assistant to Adorno in 1959. But he is distinguished from the Adorno/Horkeimer/Marcuse tendency of critical theory by his more sympathetic approach to science and technology.

<sup>187</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: 33.

number of normative conditions, which he later called the “ideal speech situation” in his extension of this theory.<sup>188</sup> The requirements to qualify for the Habermasian ideal speech situation are as follows: the discourse should be independent from state and corporate interferences; the exchange of points of views during a discourse should be amenable to criticism and review, and dogmatism should be eschewed; participants in the discourse should demonstrate reflexivity and a willingness to question both their individual assumptions and those of the social milieu in which they live; participants should show a capacity for tolerance, sympathy, and even a vicarious identification with points of views that are at variance with theirs and also avoid the use of emotive and insulting language; participants must make an effort to be sincere in their search for the truth; and there must be discursive inclusivity and equality.<sup>189</sup>

It is significant that Habermas himself has recognized that these are counterfactual ideals that have never been fully realized, even in the classical bourgeois public sphere. That is why in Habermasian, discursive public sphere theory it is traditional to differentiate between the ideal-normative concept of the public sphere and the empirical-descriptive concept.<sup>190</sup> The ideal-normative model has never materialized anywhere; it is merely derived from the prototype of the possibilities presented by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European public spheres. This approach takes the public sphere as non-normative, having no special “origin” but presenting

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<sup>188</sup> See, for instance, Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

<sup>189</sup> This summary of Habermas’ requirements for a rational-critical debate in the quintessential public sphere was adapted from the model developed in Lincoln Dahlberg, “Computer-mediated Communication and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7 no.1 (2001): par.4 [journal online]; available from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html>; Internet; accessed February 5, 2010. It encapsulates the whole range of Habermas’ theoretical postulations, published in different books, on the public sphere.

<sup>190</sup> See Michael Neblo, “Thinking through Democracy: Between the Theory and Practice of Deliberative Politics,” *Acta Politica* 40 no. 2 (2005): 169-181.

itself to us just in its empirically observable form. The empirical-descriptive concept of the public sphere sees society in terms of the functioning of public institutions that act in the public domain, “such as the mass media, cultural establishments, educational institutions etc. – and of the representations that the institutions convey, such as the acts of politicians and celebrities, news and reports, advertisements, etc. – i.e. public ‘images’.”<sup>191</sup> Most researchers deploy the empirical-descriptive concept of the public sphere to ask questions about how and why notions of reasonable deliberations work in some societies and not in others, what influences public debates, how public opinions form and influence state policies, etc.

Interestingly, in an important extension of his theory of the public sphere, Habermas argues that if democracy is to be implemented in today’s diverse and complex world, society has to learn to adjust to the reality of the impracticability of a spatially bound agglomeration of mutually consenting members in the public sphere. Instead, he proposes that citizens who are not necessarily physically co-present can develop forms of communication that dispense with the necessity for corporeal presence.<sup>192</sup> This extension takes into account, or even prognosticates, the centrality of mass media systems—and the Internet—in public deliberations. In this project, I explore the mass media system and Internet-based journalistic activism of the Nigerian public sphere. However, in spite of the popularity of Habermas’ theory and the immense utility it has had and continues to have for the analysis of deliberative practice and state-civil society relations, it has attracted criticism from a variety of quarters.

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<sup>191</sup> Hannu Nieminen, “On the Formation of the National Public Sphere,” Paper Presented at the International Association for Media and Communication Research Conference, Porto Alegre, Brazil August, 25-30, 2004, p.5.

<sup>192</sup> Cited in John Durham Peters, “Distrust of Representation: Habermas on the Public Sphere,” *Media, Culture and Society* 15 no. 4 (1993): 564.

## 2.5 Criticism of Habermas' Public Sphere

Critics from different theoretical and ideological orientations have interrogated the limitations of Habermas' lofty, idyllic construction of the public sphere that most theorists of democracy and popular participation invoke to evaluate the performance of both the traditional media of mass communication and the new media in terms of meeting the conditions to qualify as public spheres. Habermas' conception of the public sphere has been criticized as Eurocentric, as biased in favor of the bourgeoisie and against the working class, as patriarchal, and as logo-centric.<sup>193</sup>

Poststructuralists such as, for instance, Lyotard even question the functional relevance of Habermas' model of consensus through rational-critical discourse.<sup>194</sup> He specifically queried the emancipatory and social utility of excessive rationalism in the conduct of discourse for the wider strata of society. The concept is also criticized for instituting a linear, evolutionary and progressive history of the world that ignores the differential socio-historical experiences of non-Western or, to be sure, non-European societies. It is accused of falsely conferring on the idiosyncrasies of Enlightenment Europe a universality it never possessed, and of consigning the differential temporalities of other societies to the discursive fringes.<sup>195</sup>

Feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser also point out the exclusion of women in Habermas' public sphere.<sup>196</sup> As Neil McLaughlin observes, a typical participant in the public sphere was usually male, educated and propertied, with the means and leisure to take part in

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<sup>193</sup> Habermas responded to the criticisms of his conception of the public sphere in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, eds. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>194</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Brian Massumi and others (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>195</sup> For a review of the criticism of Habermas' public sphere, see Craig Calhoun, "Introduction," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>196</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990):80- 56.

public discourse.<sup>197</sup> Economically disaffiliated segments of the society that had a need, indeed an obligation, to work hard to survive the vicissitudes and cruelties of the incipient capitalist socio-economic order did not have the luxury to expend energies and time to participate in the public sphere discussions of the time. And certainly women at that time were either too ensnared by the drudgery of domestic engagements or the suffocating stranglehold of male tyranny and oppression to participate in the discursive indulgence of the public sphere. Several feminist theorists such as Anne Fernald,<sup>198</sup> including a whole host of other critics in an edited volume titled *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*,<sup>199</sup> also point out that the putative discursive openness of Habermas' public sphere is premised on practices of deliberative omission not only of women but also of children and other marginal and subordinate groups in the society. And Jodi Dean cites critics who allege that Habermas' account of the bourgeois public sphere is historically suspect, or "never existed."<sup>200</sup> She also characterizes it as the "utopian imaginings of democracy" that have been co-opted by "communicative capitalism."<sup>201</sup>

Aside from poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist critics, other critics such as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge,<sup>202</sup> Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner<sup>203</sup> also instructively call

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<sup>197</sup> Neil McLaughlin, "Feminism, the Public Sphere, Media and Democracy," *Media Culture and Society* 15 no.4 (1993): 599.

<sup>198</sup> Anne Fernald E., "A Feminist Public Sphere? Virginia Woolf's Revisions of the Eighteenth Century," *Feminist Studies* 31, no.1 (2005): 158-25.

<sup>199</sup> Johanna Meehan, ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>200</sup> Jodi Dean, "Why the Net is not a Public Sphere," *Constellations* 10 no. 1 (2003): 96

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>202</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi and others (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>203</sup> See Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" and Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).



attention to Habermas' privileging of a hegemonic public sphere, which they argue was structured to be congenial only to the preferences and prejudices of people who occupy the upper end of the social scale. In place of one overarching, dominant public sphere, they postulate the concept of multiple public spheres that are not only oppositional to the hegemonic public sphere but that also incorporate the aspirations of marginal groups in society such as the working class, women, and racial and sexual minorities.

The symbolic utility of their argument in terms of contemporary scholarship in non-Western parts of the world and, in fact, in computer-mediated communication is that the landscape of the public sphere has shifted from a historico-transcendental veneration of Europe during the Enlightenment to a multiplicity of trans-historical loci of discourses. This crucial change in the notion of the public sphere assumes its full consequence when it is seen in relation to the Internet which, in many ways, defies simplistic spatial and temporal categorizations, and encompasses a robust array of spheres of discourses in ways that are probably unparalleled in human history.

It also allows us to conceive of the public sphere for this study in ways that differ significantly from notions of the public sphere in non-Western societies. In Nigeria, for instance, the state is organically linked with the quotidian existence of the citizens of the country. For instance, a government-funded newspaper in northern Nigeria called the *New Nigerian*, while largely supportive of the colonial government and subsequently northern Nigerian regional governments, also served as the arena for anti-colonial protests and for searing critiques of postcolonial northern Nigerian governments. So, Habermas' insistence that the absence of state interference in public discourse is crucial to the notion of a public sphere is limiting. It does not adequately capture the lived realities of people in a "gate-keeper state." As Chapter Three shows,

the Nigerian public sphere has multiple origins and a diverse character and it is often called into being in relation to or within the constraints of the state—from the colonial state to the post-independence state.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3 THE NIGERIAN PRESS: FROM COLONIAL EVANGELISM TO GUERRILLA JOURNALISM

The Nigerian press has historically functioned as a veritable arena for the robust articulation, ventilation, and circulation of transformative and politically consequential national discourse, and for the instigation of momentous social changes. That is why studies of political developments in Nigeria from the colonial to post-colonial period have always highlighted the role of the Nigerian press and of Nigerian journalists in energizing and galvanizing popular support for major, defining issues of the times. The Nigerian press was, for instance, the primary instrument for sustained nationalist agitation against British colonialism, a fact that inspired James Coleman to write that “there can be little doubt that nationalist newspapers and pamphlets have been among the main influences in the awakening of racial and political consciousness [in Nigeria].”<sup>204</sup> Nigeria’s first president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was himself an anti-colonial activist journalist, similarly characterized the Nigerian press as “identical with the intellectual and material developments of this country,” pointing out that the “galaxy of immortal journalists produced by Nigeria” played tremendous roles “in this corner of the world in the great crusade for human freedom.”<sup>205</sup>

But, before and after the dislodgement of formal colonialism, to what extent has the Nigerian press served as a site for public sphere debates, especially in light of the rather anticlimactic emergence of a corrupt, morally bankrupt, and intolerant post-colonial Nigerian

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<sup>204</sup> James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: A Background to Nationalism* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 184.

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in Fred I. Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria 1800-1937* (London: Longman, 1978), vii.

state that Terisa Turner aptly characterizes as a “gate-keeper state”?<sup>206</sup> This chapter attempts to answer this question by periodizing the evolution of the press in Nigeria—from the colonial-era press in the mid 1800s to the anti-imperialist nationalist press that lasted from the late 1800s to the late 1950s, and to the implacably adversarial anti-military press of the late 1990s, which is often dubbed “the guerilla press.” These diverse epochs represent varying degrees of the emergence, flowering, expansion, and constriction of the Nigerian public sphere and can help to explain, connect, contextualize, and even presage the materialization of the diasporic citizen and alternative online journalism that this project investigates.<sup>207</sup>

However, it is important to note that mapping the history of the Nigerian press is a messy affair because of the strong regional differences in the country, which are rooted in the decision of British colonialists to govern the country as two separate regions for many years before commixing them. Southern and northern Nigeria had been ruled as two separate territories until 1914 when they were arbitrarily amalgamated for colonial administrative convenience. The brief history of Nigeria below will help contextualize the differences in the form and character of the southern and northern press and the proliferation of state government presses in the 1980s.

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<sup>206</sup> Terisa Turner, “Commercial Capitalism and the 1975 Coup,” in *Soldiers and Oil: The Political Transformation of Nigeria* ed. Keith Panter-Brick, (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 171.

<sup>207</sup> This review of the press history of Nigeria excludes the broadcast industry for two reasons. First, as Colin Legun notes, throughout the colonial period between the late 1800s and the late 1950s, there were no television stations in all of Africa. It was not until 1958 that the first TV station in the continent was established by the self-governing but nonetheless partly British-controlled Western Region in Nigeria. The colonial governments also had exclusive control over radio, except in the tiny Western African nation of the Gambia where a private radio station was allowed to exist. Television, therefore, is largely only a post-independence phenomenon in Africa. Second, even after its emergence, the broadcast industry (which includes radio and television) has been “wholly owned and controlled by the government, usually under the direct authority of the Ministry of Information or a commission, corporation or board under Ministry supervision,” which is a legacy from colonialism. (See Colin Legun, “The Mass Media: The Institution of the African Political Systems,” in *Reporting Africa* ed. Olav Stokke, (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1971), 27. The newspaper press, conversely, has been traditionally privately owned and therefore a more vigorous instrument of and avenue for public expression.

### 3.1 A Brief Political Background of Nigeria

Nigeria is a West African country made up of thirty-six states—plus Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory—and over 400 ethnic groups, of which Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are the major ones. With a population of over 150 million, it is the most populous country on the African continent, the eight most populous country in the world, and the world's most populous country in which the majority of the population is black. Lagos is the economic center of the country—and its media hub—and was its capital city until 1991 when a new capital, Abuja, located in almost the dead center of the country, was created.

Nigeria's modern history is traceable to 1886 when the area was occupied by the Royal Niger Company (Chartered & Limited), a mercantile company chartered by the British government. Prior to that, the territory was a concatenation of different ethnic-based empires and kingdoms. In 1900, the British government took over direct administration over what became known as Nigeria and divided it into the southern and northern protectorates, a decision whose consequence lingers to this day. In 1914, the northern and southern protectorates were amalgamated to form Nigeria.<sup>208</sup> After sustained nationalist agitations, mostly on the pages of southern newspapers, on October 1, 1960 the country became independent from Britain. It, however, retained many holdovers of British colonial rule. For instance, because of the difficulty of adopting any of the over 400 languages in the country as the lingua franca, English was adopted as the official language.<sup>209</sup> It is the language of government, the media, the judiciary, and of education.

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<sup>208</sup> Up to now, it is traditional to delineate the country into North and South. These demarcations are not merely cartographical; they are also political, cultural, and historical. Northern Nigeria, which is predominantly Muslim, has 19 of Nigeria's 36 states and occupies more than three quarters of the entire landmass of the country. Southern Nigeria, on the other hand, is predominantly Christian and consists of 17 states.

<sup>209</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Hausa language, native to Northern Nigeria, is the most widely spoken language in Africa in terms of numerical strength. It is spoken by over 80 million people in Nigeria, Niger, Ghana

But there is an almost one-hundred-year gap between the British presence in Nigeria and the introduction of formal institutions of learning. By the accounts of many educational historians, it was only after the end of the First World War that the British Colonial Office began to take a systematic interest in education not only in Nigeria but also in all of the African colonies under the British sphere of influence.<sup>210</sup> There is ample literature on the justifications proffered for this policy by British colonialists—and counter-arguments by an evolving nationalist elite group that was initially educated by the British for purposes of serving as a buffer zone between the colonizers and the colonized.<sup>211</sup> In light of the fact that the British Colonial Office was not interested in the education of the “natives,” Christian missionaries filled the void. So, early education in most of the former British colonies in Africa was not secular. Protestant Christian missionaries were so involved in British colonial education policy that it was customary to refer to them as Britain’s “unofficial partner” in the colonial project.<sup>212</sup> This fact had deep implications for education, nationalist struggles, and newspaper journalism in Nigeria. Because of the Christian missionary character of early education in Nigeria, it was stoutly resisted by the Muslim north. This reality accounts for the wide disparity in educational attainment between the north and the south, for the unequal media presence in the two regions, and for the difference in the tone and tenor of nationalist agitations between the elites of the

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and some parts of Sudan. But because the language has been identified with a particular ethnic group, there is reluctance, indeed resistance, to adopt it as the lingua franca of Nigeria.

<sup>210</sup> See Clive Whitehead, “The Historiography of British Imperial Education Policy, Part II: Africa and the Rest of the Colonial Empire.” *History of Education* 34 no. 4 (2005): 441–454. He argues that part of the reason for the reluctance of the British to educate their African colonial subjects was the desire to avoid the grim prospect of mass-producing a horde of troublesome “intellectual proletariat” such as was the case in India.

<sup>211</sup> See, for instance, Bob W. White, “Talk about School: Education and the Colonial Project in French and British Africa (1860—1960),” *Comparative Education* 32 no.1 (1996): 9-25.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

regions. In fact, by the late 1950s when Western-educated nationalists in the south were agitating for independence from British colonial rule, their counterparts in the north protested that they had not yet had enough indigenous Western-educated manpower to take advantage of the benefits of self-governance. So they replaced the 1956 date proposed by southern Nigerian nationalists for Nigeria's independence from Britain with the imprecise phrase "as soon as practicable."<sup>213</sup> Generally, the colonial authorities were more comfortable with elites from the north than they were with the elites from the south. There were at least two reasons for this. The Muslim north was easier to govern because it had had a pre-existing centralized system of governance that stressed respect for constituted authority. The British colonialists exploited this structure to administer the vast region with little or no resistance. The second reason was that the colonial authorities made good their pledge to never Christianize the region and so the feudal elite willingly cooperated in the colonial project and were not in a hurry to achieve independence. As would be expected, when the British departed in 1960, they handed over power to northern Muslims—to the chagrin of southerners who felt their superior access to Western education should make them worthier to inherit the departing colonizers than northerners. The resentment of the southern elites at northern political dominance in spite of its educational disadvantage was vigorously ventilated in their newspapers.

Thus, from its very founding, Nigeria has been plagued by regional rivalries, which is also reflected in the character of the country's media system. After only six years of northern-dominated post-independence democratic rule, the country was engulfed in bitter internecine regional rivalries that snowballed into a southern, Igbo-led Christian military coup against the northern Muslim central government. After a Northern counter-coup which wrested back power

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<sup>213</sup> Kenneth Post and George D. Jenkins, *The Price of Liberty: Personality and Politics in Colonial Nigeria* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 156.

from the south, the Igbo ethnic group fought to secede from Nigeria and declared its own country called Biafra. This secessionist bid precipitated a bitter and sanguinary civil war between 1967 and 1970. Some accounts put the death toll at over 30,000.<sup>214</sup>

The division of Nigeria from three regions at independence to thirty-six America-style states in the mid 1990s was informed by the desire of successive military governments to douse the importance of regional identification and to suppress the eruption of what Adiele Afigbo calls “Nigeria’s sleeping volcano,” which he defines as “the primordial federal features of Nigerian society (geographic and ethnic plurality).”<sup>215</sup> At independence, there were only three regions: the Northern Region, the Eastern Region and the Western Region. The west and the east were part of the Southern Protectorate. In 1966, the Mid-West Region was carved out of the Western Region. In the wake of the Civil War, the regional structure was dissolved by the northern-led military government. In its place, twelve states were created, which later increased to nineteen and finally thirty-six. State creation, however, came with its peculiar problems, which were exacerbated with the proliferation of state newspapers each championing the points of views of their people and government, as we will see shortly.

Another important fact of Nigeria’s political history is that it has been ruled by a succession of brutal, corrupt military dictatorships since 1966 with only spasmodic periods of democratic rule. Sustained democratic governance was restored in May 1999 with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo who was a military ruler between 1975 and 1979 and who was imprisoned by the previous military government for his caustic criticism of the lawlessness and

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<sup>214</sup> John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).

<sup>215</sup> Adiele E. Afigbo, “Background to Nigerian Federalism: Federal Features in the Colonial State,” *Publius* 21 no. 4 (1991): 27.



venality of the government of the day.<sup>216</sup> After leaving office in 2007, Mr. Obasanjo, a southern born-again Christian, handed over power to northern Muslim successor, Umaru Musa Yar'adua, who died in office in 2010. His deputy, Goodluck Jonathan, completed his term and is seeking a fresh term of four years.

### **3.2 The Nigerian Press and the Colonial Public Sphere of Debate**

Peter Golding captured a fundamental fact of the history and development of the mass media systems in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin American in general when he observed that the media are not the products of the natural, spontaneous social evolutions of these societies but little more than cultural and professional transplants from the media systems of the “metropolitan centers” of the West.<sup>217</sup> But his famous assertion that “the Nigerian press was born out of anti-colonial protest, baptized in the flood of nationalist propaganda, and nurtured in party politics,” while providing a good starting point to analyze and understand the history and dynamics of the Nigerian press, does not give the accurate historical context of the birth and maturation of the Nigerian media system.<sup>218</sup>

It is more correct to assert, as Frank Ugboajah did, that the introduction of the press in Nigeria was a consequence of the efforts of Christian missionaries who were tangentially associated with the British colonial project at the time. As he put it, “The newspaper press thus arrived to our shores...accompanied by its concepts and prejudices which were completely

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<sup>216</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo is one of only two military heads of state from the south. The rest were northerners.

<sup>217</sup> Peter Golding, “Media Professionalism in the Third World: The Transfer of an Ideology,” in *Mass Communication and Society* ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott (London: Open University Press, 1977), 291.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 301.

exogenous.”<sup>219</sup> In this statement, Ugboajah reclaimed a germinal element in the birth of the Nigerian media system that was absent in Golding’s account: the unequivocally missionary and colonial character of its heritage.

Although British claims to a West African sphere of influence received international recognition in 1885, the territory known as Nigeria today did not formally come under the control of the British government until January 1, 1901.<sup>220</sup> This means that what we call the Nigerian press today, as Adigun Agbaje aptly notes, actually “predated formal colonial annexation of any part of the area now known as Nigeria.”<sup>221</sup> In other words, the press in Nigeria is more than a quarter of a century older than the Nigerian state.

Nigeria’s first newspaper, established in 1859, or thirty years before the formal colonization of Nigeria by the British Empire, was founded by the Reverend Henry Townsend of the English Church Missionary Society.<sup>222</sup> The paper, named *Iwe Irohin fun awon Egba ati Yoruba*, which is Yoruba for “newspaper for the Egba and Yoruba people,” was published in the Yoruba language. (The Egba are a subgroup of the Yoruba, Nigeria’s second largest ethnic group found in the western region of the country).

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<sup>219</sup> Frank O. Ugboajah, “Four Options for Press Regulation,” in *Communication Training and Practice in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives* ed. Frank O. Ogboajah, Ikechukwu E. Nwosu and Tom Adaba (Nairobi, ACCE, 1987), 130.

<sup>220</sup> Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

<sup>221</sup> Adigun A. Agbaje, *The Nigerian Press, Hegemony, and the Social Construction of Hegemony, 1960-1983* (Ontario, Canada: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 41.

<sup>222</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 130. The first printing press to start a newspaper was brought to the city of Calabar in Nigeria’s deep south by the Reverend Hope Waddell of the Presbyterian Mission from England in 1846, a few years earlier than the Reverend Townsend, but didn’t start publishing a newspaper until some years after. See Chris Ogbondah, “Nigerian Journalism: A Bibliographical Essay,” *International Communication Gazette* 36 no. 3 (1985), 175-191. It is also worthy of note that forms of newspaper existed in northern Nigeria earlier than 1859, calling into question the consensus in Nigerian press history that 1859 is the year the first newspaper was published. This controversy will be expanded in subsequent sections of this chapter.

In a letter to the Church Missionary Society, the Reverend Townsend wrote: “I have set on foot a Yoruba newspaper.... My objective is to get the people to read... to beget the habit of getting information by reading.”<sup>223</sup> Media historians have posited that this missionary paper was the first indigenous language newspaper in the whole of Africa.<sup>224</sup> It is also the continent’s oldest surviving newspaper, although it has had hiccups and undergone several changes in ownership and management.<sup>225</sup> The significance of this paper is broad. It inaugurated the first modern means to construct a Nigerian national identity, and thus a public sphere, analogous in many ways to Benedict Anderson’s account of how “print capitalism” in Europe helped create “imagined communities” that transformed hitherto diverse communities into nations.<sup>226</sup> It was also arguably the first modern means of mass communication to supplant talking drums and other forms of pre-colonial, informal, and interpersonal rural communication in Nigeria,<sup>227</sup> although Akinfeleye asserts that “evidence exists of irregular ‘newspaper’ publishing ventures before 1859 [in Nigeria].”<sup>228</sup> What Akinfeleye is perhaps referencing is the tradition of religious periodical publishing in the Hausa language of northern Nigeria since about the fourteenth century.

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<sup>223</sup> Uche, Luke U. *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1989), 93.

<sup>224</sup> Robert L. Nwankwo and George T. Kurian, “Nigeria,” *World Press Encyclopedia* ed. George T. Kurian (New York: Fact on File, 1982).

<sup>225</sup> According to Ralph Akinfeleye, “copies of the *Iwe Irohin*... can still be found on sale in several Nigerian newsstands, particularly in the southwestern states of Nigeria.” See Ralph Akinfeleye, “Religious publication: Pioneers of Nigerian Journalism,” in *Mass Communication in Nigeria: A Book of Readings* ed. Onuora E. Nwuneli (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985), 31.

<sup>226</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York, NY: Verso, 1983), 44-46.

<sup>227</sup> See Festus Eribo, “Internal and External Factors Affecting Press Freedom in Nigeria,” in *Press Freedom and Communication in Africa*,” eds. Festus Eribo and William Jong-Ebot (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997).

<sup>228</sup> Akinfeleye, Religious publications, 28.

### 3.3 Contested Provenance: The Rise of the Press in Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigerian media historians often contest the accuracy of the claim that *Iwe Irohin* is Nigeria's first newspaper. They claim that a newspaper had been published in their part of the country through an improvised Arabic orthography called *Ajami* many centuries before the Reverend Henry Town set foot in Nigeria<sup>229</sup> As Abdullah Uba Adamu notes,

Of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Muslim Hausa have, arguably, the most extensive and well-established literary tradition. This was made possible by [the people's] contact with Islam as far back as 1320...which exposed the area to literary polemics and activities of the Muslim world at large. Thus, while most Nigerian communities glorified their literary antecedents through extensive collections of oral traditions and folklores, the Muslim Hausa, in addition to extensive collections of similar oral traditions, had the instrument to write down their literature through the medium of the Arabic language earlier than all the [other] groups.<sup>230</sup>

Although religious pamphlets and texts had been produced in northern Nigeria for ages, northern Nigerian media historians contend that the first publication that comes close to being called a newspaper was the *Kano Chronicle*, published monthly in Hausa and Arabic around 1503, a fact that leads Gausu Ahmad to argue that “the *Kano Chronicle* could be rightly regarded as the first newspaper in the territory that was later to be known as Nigeria, contrary to popular [claims] among Nigerian media historians.”<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> For a thoughtful and perceptive account of the history and use of Arabic script to write sub-Saharan African languages, see Muolaye Hassane, “Ajami in Africa: The Use of Arabic Script in the Transcription of African Languages,” in *The Meanings of Timbuktu* eds. Souleymane Shamil Jeppie and Bachir Diagne (Cape Town, South Africa: The Human Sciences Research Council, 2008).

<sup>230</sup> Abdallah Uba Adamu, “Istanci, Imamanci and Bollywoodanci: Media and Adaption in Hausa Popular Culture,” in *Hausa Home Videos: Technology, Economy and Society* eds. Abdallah Uba Adamu, Adamu M. Yusuf and Umar Faruk Jibril (Kano, Nigeria: Center for Hausa Cultural Studies, 2004).

<sup>231</sup> Gausu Ahmad, “Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo: From Colonial Service to Community Beacon,” in *Indigenous Language Media in Africa* ed. Abiodun Salawu (Lagos, Nigeria: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 2006), 99.

But this claim is problematic on many levels. Even though media scholars have not yet reached a definitive consensus on what kinds of publications qualify to be called newspapers, Otto Groth's time-honored criteria for determining a newspaper are generally used. According to the German scholar, the criteria for adjudging whether a print publication qualifies to be called a newspaper are: (1) the paper must be published periodically, "at intervals not less than once a week"; (2) everyone who has the means to buy the paper should have access to it; (3) it must have some appeal for large, diverse segments of the society by varying its content; and (4) it must be "timely with some continuity of organization."<sup>232</sup> The *Kano Chronicle* did not meet most of these conditions. Although it was a monthly publication, which means it had some frequency of appearance, "its circulation was restricted within the circles of the ruling class of [the] Kano city-state."<sup>233</sup> Besides, its editorial content was not about news or everyday happenings in the society. Historians say its thematic preoccupations were myths of origin, genealogies of rulers, methods of succession of kings, Islamic rites, accounts of battles, and news about immigration to the city state of Kano.<sup>234</sup> These subject-matters were clearly not intended for a popular audience, a critical element in the conception of a newspaper. The paper's palace-centered editorial content and its exclusivity to the ruling circles contrast sharply with the demotic appeal of the Reverend Henry Townsend's *Iwe Irohin*. It is therefore contentious to assert that *Kano Chronicle* was the first newspaper in Nigeria.

In northern Nigeria, the first attempt at publishing a truly modern, mass-market newspaper, if we accept Goth's categories for classifying print publications as newspapers, was

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<sup>232</sup> Cited in John R. Bittner, *Mass Communication: An Introduction* 5<sup>th</sup> edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1989), 22.

<sup>233</sup> Ahmad, "Gaskiya TaFi Kwabo," 98.

<sup>234</sup> H. R. Palmer, *Sudanese Memoirs, Being Mainly Translations of a Number of Arabic Manuscripts Relating to the Central and Western Sudan* (London: Frank Cass, 1967).

the short-lived *Jaridar Nigeriya Ta Arewa*, which literally translates as “the newspaper of northern Nigeria.” It was published in 1932 simultaneously in Hausa, Arabic, and English.<sup>235</sup>

Unlike the *Kano Chronicle*, its editorial content reflected the quotidian concerns of the average northern Nigerian. As Ahmad notes, “Its main contents were social news such as retirements, government policies, security matters, trade, agriculture and other development news.”<sup>236</sup> In an interesting way, this echoes Habermas’ account of the content of eighteenth-century European newspapers in coffee houses.

In January 1939, six years after *Jaridar Nigeria Ta Arewa* ceased publishing, the colonial government in northern Nigeria decided to establish an exclusively Hausa-language newspaper called *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* (which translates as “the Truth is worth more than money”) ostensibly to counter unsettling Nazi propaganda at the time, which suggested that northern Nigeria was going to be ceded to the neighboring central African nation of Cameroun, then under the German sphere of influence.<sup>237</sup> Dr. Rupert M. East, a high-ranking colonial officer in northern Nigeria and brain behind the establishment of the paper, informed a certain Abubakar Imam who would be the paper’s first editor that the colonial administration would like to “establish a Hausa language newspaper in order to counter the German propaganda on Hitler’s activities and plans for Africa.”<sup>238</sup> He identified the propaganda as the insidious rumor being systematically spread in northern Nigeria by the German secret service that Britain and Hitler

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<sup>235</sup> I. Y. Yahya, *Hausa a Rubuce: Tarihin Rubuce-Rubuce Cikin Hausa* (Zaria, Nigeria: Northern Nigerian Publishing Company, 1988).

<sup>236</sup> Ahmad, “Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo,” 101.

<sup>237</sup> Garba D. Shehu, “The Role of Mass Media in National Development: A Case Study of Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo,” M.A. Thesis, Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1991.

<sup>238</sup> Quoted in Abdulrahman Mora ed., *The Abubakar Imam Memoirs* (Zaria, Nigeria: Northern Nigeria Publishing Company Ltd., 1989), 31.

had reached “an understanding” that northern Nigeria would now fall under German colonial occupation. This propaganda was said to have created panic in northern Nigeria and the “need was therefore strongly felt for a more effective local language newspaper to counter such adverse propaganda, hence the establishment of *Gakiya*.”<sup>239</sup>

Although the well-known, Westernized Hausa writer Abubakar Imam was chosen as the paper’s editor, the colonial administration insisted that a colonial officer by the name of L.C. Giles be the deputy editor, “apparently to ensure conformity of the paper with the set colonial objectives.”<sup>240</sup> In addition, every correspondent for the paper also had to be adjudged trustworthy by the traditional rulers, who usually worked in cahoots with the British colonial administration in northern Nigeria through what is known as “Indirect Rule.”<sup>241</sup>

According to northern Nigerian media historians, there were other reasons for the setting up of *Gaskiya* by the colonial government that were not explicitly stated. I. A. Yahya identified at least three other reasons for the establishment of the paper. The first was as a propaganda instrument to encourage northern Nigerian males to enlist in the British colonial army to fight in World War II. The second was to counter the fierce opposition to colonialism by the emergent nationalist press in southern Nigeria. And the third was to integrate the predominantly Muslim north into Western ways of life in ways that did not threaten the colonial project.<sup>242</sup> As Mora

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<sup>239</sup> Ahmad, *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo*,” 102.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>241</sup> Indirect Rule was the British policy of co-opting pre-colonial traditional power structures in colonial administration where such structures already existed and inventing them where they did not exist. The colonial conquerors wanted the cooperation of the former ruling class (for personal profit and safeguarding much of the dynastic heritage) of the country in order to prevent the risk of a rebellion led by these former rulers. For an excellent analysis of the British policy of indirect rule in Nigeria, see Anthony Nwabughuogu, “The Role of Propaganda in the Development of Indirect Rule in Nigeria,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14 no. 1 (1981): 65-92.

<sup>242</sup> Yahya, *Hausa a Rubuce*.

notes, the editorial content of the early edition of the paper consisted largely of colonial government propaganda, propaganda against Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, and mobilization of the locals for war.<sup>243</sup> If we were to employ Habermas' categories, *Gaskiya* would not qualify as helping to establish a public sphere because it was owned and operated by the state—and a repressive, gate-keeper colonial state at that. However, even though the paper was distrusted by the masses and by critical elements of the emergent northern Nigerian educated elite, some of them “fully availed themselves of the opportunity the paper offered in their fight against some of the colonial policies.”<sup>244</sup> After the departure of the British in 1960, the paper was handed over to the northern Nigerian government and is still a state-run newspaper to this day. This makes it the oldest surviving newspaper that has been published continuously under the same ownership in Nigeria.<sup>245</sup> Let us now return to the *Iwe Irohin* and show how its establishment and editorial choices conduced to the emergence of a different type of public sphere in southern Nigeria.

### **3.4 *Iwe Irohin* and the First Southern Nigerian Public Sphere**

Unlike in northern Nigeria, the first modern means of mass communication in southern Nigeria was not directly affiliated with the colonial government, although, as will be shown in subsequent sections of this chapter, missionary activities in the colonized parts of the world were often inextricably linked with the colonial project. What is important, though, is that because of the invisibility of the role of the colonial state in the setting up of *Iwe irohin*, the paper initially

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<sup>243</sup> Mora, *The Abubakar Imam Memoirs*.

<sup>244</sup> Ahmad, “Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo,” 97.

<sup>245</sup> Mohammed Haruna, “The Life and Times of Abubakar Imam: Lessons for Today,” *Weekly Trust*, April 30-May 6, 2005.



enjoyed tremendous credibility among southern Nigerians. Nigerian media historians note that, in its reader catchment area, *Iwe Irohin* was regarded as second only to the Bible in inerrancy.<sup>246</sup> Akinfeleye, quoting media historian Esuakema Uton, points out that “Nigerians looked at the news items in *Iwe Irohin* in just the same manner that they would comprehend their preacher’s first sermon on the first Sunday of the New Year.”<sup>247</sup> It must be the novelty of the printed word in a predominantly oral culture that contributed to this excessive faith in the newspaper.

American median historian Frank Luther Mott recorded parallels in the early period of American newspapers. The origins of the American press, he said, are shrouded in claims to divinity. According to Mott, Benjamin Harris, the first person to publish a newspaper in the United States, gave three principal reasons for the establishment of America’s first newspaper: (1) to record “memorable occurents [sic] of Divine Providence”; (2) to aid understanding of public affairs at home and abroad; and (3) and to work “towards the curing, or at least the charming of that spirit of lying, which prevails among us.”<sup>248</sup> Writing in the *North American Review* in 1866, James Parton also stated: “The skilled and faithful journalist recording with exactness and power the thing that has come to pass, is Providence addressing men.”<sup>249</sup> In fact, Mott relayed an instructive anecdote of a Baptist clergy: “a newspaper having been brought into the room, he held out his hand to receive it, saying, ‘Be kind enough to let me have it for a few

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<sup>246</sup> Akinfeleye, “Religious Publications,” 30.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *The News in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952), 34.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 33.

minutes, till I see how the Supreme Being is governing the world.”<sup>250</sup> It was this milieu that inaugurated what Mott calls the dogma of journalistic inerrancy in nineteenth-century America.

Perhaps because of the enormous goodwill that the *Iwe Irohin* enjoyed, Nigeria’s early media historians appear to discountenance any suggestion that there was a connection between the nascent British colonial project in Nigeria and the setting up of the indigenous language newspaper by missionaries. They narrativize the introduction of the press in Nigeria in the same benign and humanitarian terms as the missionary gentlemen who set it up. For instance, eminent press historian Fred Omu asserted that missionaries

[E]mbarked upon programmes of Western education and general enlightenment in Sierra Leone and subsequently in what became the colonies of Nigeria, Gold Coast and Gambia. Their most enduring weapon was the school but journalism played an important role. The newspaper had been established as an essential instrument of mission work outside Britain as a result of the effective use which the British humanitarian movement made of it in mobilizing support for their programmes.<sup>251</sup>

Similarly, notable Nigerian press historian Dayo Duyile gave the following account of the processes leading to the establishment of Nigeria’s first newspaper:

On 17 December 1842, he [Reverend Townsend] arrived at Badagry and worked with many Sierra Leonian freed slaves and natives of Badagry.... Rev. Townsend left for Abeokuta where he lived the rest of his missionary life, and there in 1854 he established a small printing press. Five years after, he set up an African Christian newspaper, the *Iwe Irohin*.... His motive, among others, was to excite the intelligence of the people in his area of operation and to get them to read.<sup>252</sup>

It is obvious that the laudatory accounts of the motivations behind the emergence and activities of the newspaper are no more than minor variations of the perspectives of the originator of the paper. The newspaper has been presented as the product of the humanitarian endeavor of a

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 6.

<sup>252</sup> Dayo Duyile, *Makers of the Nigerian Press: A Historical Analysis of Newspaper Development, the Pioneer Heroes, the Modern Press Barons and the New Publishers from 1859-1987* (Lagos: Gong Communications Ltd, 1987), 6.

missionary gentleman who wanted to “excite the intelligence” of the natives and “beget the habit of getting information by reading.” However, more critical analyses of the paper found that its editorial focus was broader than that. According to Jibrin Ibrahim, it covered

Commercial news about local produce prices of palm oil, etc; announcements from local chiefs and from the Government of Lagos Colony; news of the movement of government and commercial representatives... agricultural and craft exhibitions, and progress made by mission schools.... The *Iwe Irohin* even carried advertisements from local firms and government agencies.... It was a faithful reporter and commentator of the political development of the times.<sup>253</sup>

This catalogue of the editorial content of the paper demonstrates the inaccuracy of what Mohammed Musa and Jibril Mohammed call the “ecumenical theory of the origin of the [Nigerian] press”<sup>254</sup> that historicizes the establishment of *Iwe Irohin* in terms of its preoccupation with Christian evangelization and humanitarianism while ignoring the “the extraordinary connection between Christian missions and the goals of colonialism.”<sup>255</sup> Musa and Mohammed are not alone in calling into question the de-linking of missionary activities with colonialism. Many scholars have demonstrated that Christian evangelical activists in colonized parts of the world were often working in tandem with the colonial administrators of their home countries. As Bob White notes, Protestant Christian missionaries were so involved with the British colonial enterprise that it was customary to refer to them as Britain’s “unofficial partner” in the colonial project.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Jibrin Ibrahim, “Towards a Political Economy of Mass Communication in Nigeria,” Paper Presented at the Graduate Political Economy Seminar, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria on November 5, 1979.

<sup>254</sup> Mohammed Musa and Jibril Mohammed, “The Political Economy of Media Ownership in Nigeria,” in *Who Owns the Media?: Global Trends and Local Resistances* ed. Pradip Thomas and Zaharom Nain (London: Zed Books, 2004), 232.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, 231.

<sup>256</sup> Bob W. White, “Talk about School: Education and the Colonial Project in French and British Africa (1860—1960),” *Comparative Education* 32 no.1 (1996), 18.

Certainly, news about product prices, the reporting on the progress of the colonial enterprise and other metropolitan business enterprises, advertising the goods of local firms or the service of colonial governments are outside the purview of pure Christian evangelical activities; they are, according to Ibrahim, “the direct requirements of capitalism moving and transforming from its phase of primitive accumulation into competitive capitalism.”<sup>257</sup> Encouraged by the success with his Yoruba-language newspaper experiment, the Reverend Townsend, who “had some connections with newspaper work in Exeter where his brother was a newspaper publisher,” introduced an English edition, called the *Early Dawn*, one year later.<sup>258</sup>

His experiment in newspapering was fairly successful because the southwestern Nigerian city of Abeokuta, where the paper was located, had a sizable number of natives who were literate in both English and the Yoruba language.<sup>259</sup> Prior to the arrival of Townsend in the city, there had been a steady stream of immigration of freed slaves from England and the West Indies by way of the West African nation of Sierra Leone. Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital city, was founded through a resettlement program of London’s “black poor” who had joined the British Army upon promise of freedom from slavery.<sup>260</sup> Most of these literate ex-slaves traced their ancestry to western Nigeria and chose the cities of Abeokuta and Lagos as their new homes. It is these returnees who worked to invent, systematize, and popularize Roman orthography for the Yoruba language and spread literacy both in Yoruba and English.

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<sup>257</sup> Ibrahim, “Towards a Political Economy of Mass Communication in Nigeria,” 8.

<sup>258</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 7.

<sup>259</sup> See R.O. A. Aluede, “Regional Demands and Contemporary Educational Disparities in Nigeria,” *Journal of Social Science* 13 no. 3 (2006):183-189.

<sup>260</sup> Martin Killson, *Political Change in a West African State: A Study of the Modernization Process in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 1966).

However, two major events caused a hiatus in the operations of *Iwe Irohin* after eight years of continuous publishing (1859-97).<sup>261</sup> First, its relative discursive inclusivity had become a source of worry for the colonial government. Nigerians increasingly deployed the medium to oppose colonial policies. After only three years in the newsstands, the colonial officer in charge of Nigeria, Governor H.S. Freeman, filed a complaint against *Iwe Irohin* with the Colonial Office in London although no formal action was taken against the paper and its owner. But on many occasions Reverend Townsend had been reprimanded by his own Christian Missionary Society “at the prompting of the Colonial Office.”<sup>262</sup>

In 1867, the offices of the paper were burned by irate Abeokuta natives ostensibly because the paper took sides in local political disputes.<sup>263</sup> When the paper returned to the newsstands many years later, it was not under the same management. The birth and death and birth of this missionary indigenous paper are significant in the formation of the Nigerian public sphere and in the evolution of its media system. As Omu correctly notes,

The missionary newspapers may not have exerted a very wide influence on West African society but there can be no doubt that they introduced the first generation of educated Africans to what had become an intrinsic part of enlightened society in Europe and other lands. Their example gave inspiration to African people who inherited the idea of the newspaper and came to employ it as the chief weapon by which they were to exercise their power of participation in the government of their land.<sup>264</sup>

This poignant observation captures the spirit behind the emergence of the nationalist press in Nigeria. As we have seen, the public sphere in the period under review was very limited and still

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<sup>261</sup> Abiodun Salawu, “Paradox of a Milieu: Communication in African Indigenous Languages in the Age of Globalization,” in *Indigenous Language Media in Africa* ed. Abiodun Salawu (Lagos, Nigeria: Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 2006).

<sup>262</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 8.

<sup>263</sup> Akinfeleye, “Religious Publications.”

<sup>264</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 8.

hampered by a severe “deliberation deficit,”<sup>265</sup> as evidenced in the burning down of the newspaper as a consequence of disagreements with its editorial policies. During the period of the flowering of the nationalist press, however, we see a more engaged and discursive public sphere that took on the colonial administration in sustained rhetorical battles without recourse to violence.

### 3.5 The Emergence of the Nationalist Press

As pointed out earlier, indigenous newspapering in Nigeria and, in fact, in the whole of Anglophone West Africa, was animated largely by nationalist sentiments. As William Hatchten observed, “To study either nationalism or the press in British West Africa is to study the other.”<sup>266</sup> The first attempt to publish an independent English-language newspaper that was not owned by Christian missionaries or the colonial government started in 1863 with the founding of the *Anglo African* by a mixed-raced Jamaican émigré named Robert Campbell who humorously described himself as “one-quarter Negro, one-quarter English and half Scotch.”<sup>267</sup> Significantly, the emergence of the *Anglo African* is a direct consequence of the growing dissatisfaction with the hypocrisy and double standards in the editorial direction of Townsend’s *Iwe Irohin* and *Early Dawn*. Campbell was said to be the first to publicly proclaim that “Townsend’s reputation for

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<sup>265</sup> Deliberation deficit is often theorized as the absence of the culture of serious democratic discussions among a people without threats of violence, cynicism and name-calling. Although this term has traditionally been applied to societies that are thought to lack a history of the Habermasian public sphere, it is not unusual to apply it to the decline of communicative rationality in modern societies that tout themselves as democratic. In his *Civility and Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, for instance, uses the term to denote the progressive decline of the culture of rational debate in the United States and in Eastern Europe.

<sup>266</sup> William Hatchten, *Muffled Drums* (Ames, Iowa, 1971), 144.

<sup>267</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 20.

forthrightness and sagacity was a myth.”<sup>268</sup> And his opinions gained wide popularity when it later emerged that there was indeed a disjunction between the principles of Christian humanism missionaries preached and their endorsement of racist colonial policies. This, coupled, with the expansion of literacy in Lagos and other western Nigerian cities and the growth of the printing industry, encouraged the emergence of the *Anglo African*. Although the paper lasted only two years, it laid the groundwork for the growth and flourishing of the nationalist press fifteen years later.

On November 10, 1880, a prosperous Nigerian, who was half Sierra Leonean, by the name of Richard Beale Blaize who had worked as an apprentice in *Anglo African*, founded the bi-monthly *Lagos Times*. Blaize made it clear that his venture into newspapering was not actuated by “the hope of large pecuniary returns.”<sup>269</sup> In its inaugural editorial, the *Lagos Times* declared:

We are not clamoring for immediate independence...but it should always be borne in mind that the present order of things will not last forever. A time will come when the West Coast will be left to regulate their [sic] own internal and external affairs.<sup>270</sup>

This declaration set the tone for the nationalist, anti-imperialist fervor of Nigerian newspapers.<sup>271</sup> It inspired the emergence of the more radical *Lagos Observer*, recognized as “one of the symbols of the intellectual aggression which characterized political developments in the two decades of the nineteenth century.”<sup>272</sup> Many more indigenous nationalist newspapers, such as the *Lagos Weekly Record*, the *Lagos Daily News*, the *Nigerian Chronicle*, the *West African Pilot* and so on

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>270</sup> Uche, *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria*, 93.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 30.

sprang up in the 1900s and committed themselves to “raising consciousness to a high level in editorials and special columns devoted to anti-colonial issues.”<sup>273</sup>

The colonial administration was predictably discomfited but, given its public pretenses to democracy, rule of law, and of “civilizing the natives,” it initially chose to take the line of least resistance. It responded to the challenges these oppositional papers posed in four ways. Initially, it paid for a column to publicize government notices and to counter nationalist propaganda in selected radical newspapers. When that did not work, it sponsored Nigerian citizens to set up pro-government newspapers to counter the propaganda of the nationalist, anti-imperialist press. For instance, in 1914, the year Nigeria was formally named, a newspaper called the *Nigerian Pioneer* was formed by a certain Kitoyi Ajasa. The paper consistently supported the colonial government and challenged the nationalist press. But following concerted attacks on the paper by the nationalists, it soon lost credibility. The nationalist *Weekly Record*, for instance, dismissed the *Nigerian Pioneer* as “a thorough-going lickspittle journal—sworn to the blind defense of governmental policy whether right or wrong, good or bad—the greatest enemy and traitor of its race.”<sup>274</sup>

In light of the loss of credibility of the *Nigerian Pioneer*, the colonial administration devised a different strategy: in 1925, it encouraged private English businessmen from Britain to team up with a group of Nigerian businessmen under the aegis of the Lagos Chamber of Commerce to start a new, professionally run, and well-edited daily newspaper called the *Daily Times*. However, as Omu points out, “from the point of view of political development, the paper

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<sup>273</sup> Toyin Falola, *The History of Nigeria*, 83.

<sup>274</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 42.



was not of much importance.”<sup>275</sup> The colonial government complemented its encouragement of the *Daily Times* with its total control of the broadcast industry. As Uche points out, the “colonial government controlled the broadcasting medium (radio)... to refute the charges that the nationalists and their press were leveling against it.”<sup>276</sup>

Finally, they turned to overt repression. In response to the unremitting nationalist attacks on the colonial government, the government not only withdrew advertising patronage from the nationalist press, it also passed a whole host of draconian press laws. The government, for instance, criminalized the publication of any news that pilloried or embarrassed the government or its officials.<sup>277</sup> It also appointed a press censor whose job was to “seize printing presses, confiscate newspapers and impose a bond of 250 pounds on ‘undesirable’ publishers.”<sup>278</sup> When this did not work, it serially arrested, charged, and convicted journalists with sedition, and tortured others. But this repressive clampdown on the nationalist press did little to daunt the resolve of its practitioners; it only compelled them to go underground to continue their nationalist agitations.<sup>279</sup>

This history is worth recounting because, as subsequent sections will show, it not only set the template for subsequent government-press relations in Nigeria, it defined the contours of the tenor and nature of public sphere debates in the country. Most important, as Philippa Hall points

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 62. The paper is published to this day. It was taken over by Nigeria’s central government between 1975 and 1999. It has now been privatized and operated by private citizens. Interestingly, all through its history, the paper has been aloof from popular agitations and supportive of government even when it is not owned by government.

<sup>276</sup> Uche, *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria*, 97.

<sup>277</sup> Chris Ogbondah and Emmanuel U. Onyedike, “Origins and Interpretations of Nigerian Press Laws,” *African Media Review* 5 no. 2 (1991): 59-70.

<sup>278</sup> Aje-Ori Agbese, *The Roles of the Press and Communication Technology in Democratization: The Nigerian Story* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), 47.

<sup>279</sup> Nwankwo and Kurian, “Nigeria.”

out, it “could be argued that this [nationalist] press constituted an emerging public sphere, in so far as it mediated the interests of Nigerian[s]... within the colonial state and was organized to express public opinion... albeit among a small section of the population.”<sup>280</sup>

It needs to be pointed, though, that not all the nationalist agitation in the press was actuated by a patriotic zeal to dislodge colonialism. A lot of it was self-interested, and some of it was inspired and circumscribed by commercial interests. Hall has shown, for instance, that “editors and owners of the Nigerian private press had a primary interest in expanding indigenous trade, and editorials resisted or supported colonial policy as means to this end.”<sup>281</sup> She also calls attention to the fact that the dependence of the Nigerian nationalist press on European advertising revenues for their sustenance meant that “criticism of British policy was often muted by the need for commercial presses to retain European advertising revenues.”<sup>282</sup>

In the same vein, Mohammed Musa and Jibril Mohammed point out that the nascent colonial-era Nigerian elite were attracted to journalism only because of the injustices they personally suffered at the hands of British colonial administrators. “As for anti-racism, scores of skilled Africans resigned their appointments in the colonial service in favor of journalism, now seen as a thriving alternative occupation. But most importantly, journalism became the latest avenue, after the schools and churches, for decisive ‘counter-hegemonic’ campaigns within the colonial order.”<sup>283</sup> However, native Nigerian journalists still suffered a colonially engineered cultural capital deficit. In the words of Obafemi Awolowo, a foremost Nigerian nationalist and

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<sup>280</sup> Philippa Hall, “‘Think Imperially’: The Private Press Mediation of State Policy and the Global Economy within Colonial and Postcolonial Nigeria,” *Journal of African Media Studies* 1 no. 2 (2009): 249.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, 249.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>283</sup> Musa and Mohammed, “The Political Economy of Media Ownership in Nigeria,” 237.

Premier of Nigeria's Western Region in the 1960s, who also took to journalism to ventilate nationalist angst against colonial oppression, Nigerian journalists "were regarded as the flotsam and jetsam of the growing community of Nigerian intelligentsia."<sup>284</sup>

Whatever the case, the important thing was that, in many significant respects, the nationalist press, for all its structural defects, led to the development of a virile, if limited, public sphere of debate in which Nigerians, as colonial subjects disallowed from participating in the electoral process, could repugn the legitimacy of colonial policy by counterpointing the European rhetoric of "freedom, democracy and Christianity" with "the hypocrisy of an authoritarian colonial state based upon race superiority."<sup>285</sup> The next section shows, however, that the post-independence press, which replaced the nationalist press, did not necessarily expand the public sphere in any qualitative way.

### **3.6 The Post-Independence Press: From Nationalism to Regionalism**

After independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria's press tradition changed radically. The mostly adversarial reportorial temperament of the nationalist press disappeared.<sup>286</sup> The emergent post-independence national media, no longer faced with a common colonial enemy, took a different form: they now reflected the divisive, regionalist, and ethnic-based character of the emergent ruling elite. Particular newspapers were identified with particular political parties, which were invariably formed along the ethnic and religious fault-lines that were exploited, exacerbated, and in some cases created, by the departing colonizers. This

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<sup>284</sup> John D. Chick, "The Nigerian Press and National Integration," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 9 no. 2 (1971), 125.

<sup>285</sup> Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria*, 128.

<sup>286</sup> Idowu A. Sobowale, "The Historical Development of the Nigerian Press," in *Mass Communication Culture and Society in West Africa*, ed. Frank Ugboajah (Oxford: Hans Zell, 1985).

tradition started in the late 1950s, when the British colonizers allowed some form of self-governance to the three regions they created—the Northern Region, the Western Region, and the Eastern Region— prior to the granting of full independence, and peaked in the 1970s.

An important hallmark of the regionalist press era was that newspaper ownership shifted from private hands to regional governments.<sup>287</sup> This was not surprising: many of the nationalist crusaders who used the press to fight colonialism became the political leaders of the new nation. For instance, Mr. Nnamdi Azikwe, publisher of the implacably anti-imperialist *West African Pilot*, became the Eastern Region's premier and later Nigeria's first ceremonial president. Mr. Obafemi Awolowo, publisher of the hitherto fiercely nationalistic *Nigerian Tribune*, became the Western Region's first premier. Unfortunately, these activist-journalists-turned-politicians used their presses to cultivate the social basis of their legitimacy through appeals to the prevalent primordial divisions in the society: ethnic differences, regional rivalries and Muslim-Christian religious divides.

The government of the Eastern Region opened the floodgates to the emergence of regionalist newspapers when, shortly after independence, it established the *Eastern Outlook* (which it later renamed *Nigerian Outlook* to give it the semblance of a pan-Nigerian outlook). In 1961, the central government, which was dominated by northerners, established the *Morning Post* to counter the propaganda of the *Outlook*. Two years later, in 1964, the government of the Western Region established the *Daily Sketch* which, along with the *Nigerian Tribune*, defended the sentiments of the people of the Western Region, who are predominantly Yoruba. (The *Nigerian Tribune* was and is still owned by the Awolowo family). Although the *Morning Post* propagated northern Hausa Muslim viewpoints in national debates, the Northern Regional Government still went ahead to set up the *New Nigerian* in 1966 to, according to British

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<sup>287</sup> Uche, *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria*.

journalist Charles Sharp, who helped set up the paper, “reflect the dignity and aspirations of the north.”<sup>288</sup>

It is significant that although the press during this period (between 1960 and 1966) jettisoned all pretenses to nationalism and engaged in long-drawn partisan fights, the central government did not enact any laws to curtail the freedom of the press. No newspaper was shut down for expressing strong opinions against the government and no journalists were jailed. This fact inspired Frederick Schwartz to assert that the press “was probably the most potent institution supporting democratic freedom in Nigeria.”<sup>289</sup> But this freedom lasted for only about six years.

In 1966, the military overthrew the abrasive and feuding politicians of what Nigerians like to call the First Republic and suspended the constitution, but the regional newspapers continued to exist nonetheless. The Midwestern Region, which was carved out from the Western Region in 1963, also set up its own regional newspaper, the *Observer*, in 1968. The regionalist newspapers continued to be deeply and unabashedly partisan, but still retained what Minabere Ibelema calls the “advocatorial press tradition” of the nationalist years.<sup>290</sup> In an apt observation of the character and performance of the Nigerian press during this era, Rosalynde Ainslie noted that the regionalist press, for the most part, produced polemical journalism that was highly personalized, unsparingly abusive of political opponents and deficient in rational public sphere debates.<sup>291</sup> That was scarcely surprising because, as Uche points out, any newspaper that didn’t

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<sup>288</sup> Charles Sharp, “Gaskiya Corporation and the Establishment of the Ahmadu Bello University Press, Creation of a Daily Newspaper to Serve Northern Nigeria and the Possible Amalgamation of *Daily Mail*, Kano,” Memorandum Submitted on Instruction of the Minister of International Affairs, Norfolk, England, 1963.

<sup>289</sup> Frederick Schwartz, *Nigeria* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965), 162.

<sup>290</sup> Minabere Ibelema, “The Nigerian Press and June 12: Pressure and Performance during a Political Crisis,” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 4 no. 4 (2003), 173.

<sup>291</sup> Rosalynde Ainslie, *The Press in Africa: Communications Past and Present* (London: Gollanze, 1966).

take explicitly regional and ethnic perspectives on the issues of the day risked being “labeled a saboteur and an unpatriotic element.”<sup>292</sup>

The second phase of the regionalist era began when Nigeria’s four regions were further sub-divided to twelve states. This gave rise to what Ibelema calls “the state-oriented press” where “each state sought to establish its own news media.”<sup>293</sup> The South-Eastern State established the *Chronicle*, the Western State continued to own the *Daily Sketch*, Kwara State came up with the *Nigerian Herald*, the Benue-Plateau State set up the *Nigerian Standard*, the East Central State established the *Renaissance*, and Rivers State set up the *Nigerian Tide*. In 1976, the Federal Military Government took over the *New Nigerian*, which was owned by the Northern Region that had been further subdivided into many states. The military also bought a sixty percent share in the *Daily Times*, the most influential, nationally circulated, and only privately owned newspaper at the time. Ibelema points out that “the acquisitions were made the same year that the federal government-owned daily *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post* ceased publication after years of falling circulation and revenue losses.”<sup>294</sup> The federal government bought the papers precisely to undercut the influence of the regional newspapers, which were very critical of the center. In truth, though, the federal government was little more than the aggregation of the interests of the predominantly Muslim north, which had always been disadvantaged in media ownership owing to the low literacy rates in the region. Had the north had nearly as much vibrant media presence as the other regions, the northern-controlled federal government might not have needed to have its own newspapers.

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<sup>292</sup> Uche, *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria*, 99.

<sup>293</sup> Ibelema, “Nigeria Press and June 12,” 173.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

The regionalist phase of the Nigerian press was characterized by two contradictory editorial impulses. It was simultaneously adulatory and critical of people in authority. Philip Elliot and Peter Golding, for instance, made this observation of the Nigerian press between the late 1960s and the early 1970s:

[...] in the Nigerian media, the largest number of stories was devoted to the action of political leaders, endlessly recording their minor speeches and airport statements, meetings and ceremonial activities. Thus, as in the West, political action is defined and portrayed by activities of incumbent elites....Conflict and drama are provided by the familiar concentration on events and personalities.<sup>295</sup>

However, apt as the observations were, they did not capture the sometimes adversarial nature of even the state-owned press. As Uche observes, one of the main reasons for the relative vitality and staying power of the state press was “their policy to even bite the fingers that fed them; at times their anti-government stance on certain issues even embarrass[ed] the governments.”<sup>296</sup>

Frank Ugboajah singles out the *New Nigerian* in this regard. He notes that “of Nigerian newspapers, one of the most critical is *New Nigerian*. Its anti-government opinion on some volatile issues of development in the Nigerian society is noticeable.”<sup>297</sup>

The military governments reacted to the occasional independence of the state-owned press by borrowing the tactics that the colonial administrations used to suppress the nationalist press. Shortly after the military took over power, it promulgated the Defamatory and Offensive

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<sup>295</sup> Philip Elliot and Peter Golding, “Mass Communication and Social Change: The Imagery of Development and the Development of Imagery,” in *Sociology and Development* ed. Emanuel Jehuda De Kadt and Gavin Williams (London: Tavistock, 1974), 247.

<sup>296</sup> Uche, *Mass Media, People and Politics in Nigeria*, 99.

<sup>297</sup> Frank Ugboajah, “Nigerian Media Behavior on Development Issues of Conflict [sic],” *Instant Research on Peace and Violence* 6 no. 4 (1976): 183. For a first-hand account how the *New Nigerian* opposed government policies in spite of being subsidized by the federal government, see Mamman Daura, “Editing a Government Newspaper in Nigeria,” in *Reporting Africa* ed. Olav Stokke (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), 43. In this article, he describes his experience of editing a newspaper “owned and subsidized by the Government yet we criticize their action.” He points out that it is an “anomaly neither properly understood by the people generally nor particularly liked by some government officials.”

Publication Decree, which conferred unlimited powers on government to arrest any journalist whose news reports or analysis were deemed to constitute a threat to national security.<sup>298</sup> The next military regime that succeeded the first one (which lasted only six months) came up with an even more draconian law. It enacted the Newspapers (prohibition of Circulation) decree, known more popularly as Decree 17. This decree “authorized the government to ban and prohibit the circulation of newspapers” when such newspapers carried editorial content that compromised national security or embarrassed the government.<sup>299</sup> Newspapers were also required to sign every edition of their publication and to submit them to the government for vetting after publication.<sup>300</sup>

In a particularly dramatic case in 1973, Minere Amakiri, a journalist for the Rivers State-owned newspaper was arrested, stripped naked, whipped, jailed, and had his beard and head shaven with a pocket knife for writing a true story that teachers in the state had not been paid their salary for months. The military governor was particularly irked and embarrassed because the story appeared on his birthday.<sup>301</sup> In light of these crude repressions of the media and the self-censorship that ensued, coupled with the severely limited reach of the existing state newspapers, a need arose for the emergence of newspapers that were not state-run.

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<sup>298</sup> Eribo, “Internal and External Factors Affecting Press Freedom in Nigeria.”

<sup>299</sup> Agbese, *The Role of the Press*, 48.

<sup>300</sup> Nwankwo and Kurian, “Nigeria.”

<sup>301</sup> Chris Ogbondah, “The Pen is Mightier than the ‘Koboko’: A Critical Analysis of the Amakiri Case in Nigeria,” *Political Communication and Persuasion* 8 (1991): 109-124.



### 3.7 The Birth of the Independent Press

The emergence of the independent press coincided with, if not inspired by, the restoration of democratic rule in 1979.<sup>302</sup> This era is characterized by the growth and flowering of what one might broadly describe as a commercial press that sought to rise superior to the prevalent divisions in the polity, however unsuccessfully, for profit—reminiscent, in some ways, of the context of the emergence of the penny press and the decline of the partisan press in nineteenth-century America.<sup>303</sup> With the military government’s arbitrary take-over of the *Daily Times*, the erstwhile nationally circulating daily newspaper, and its usurpation of the *New Nigerian*, northern Nigeria’s only daily newspaper and one of the nation’s most influential newspapers, there emerged a vacuum.

This vacuum was filled by wealthy Nigerians who, in partnership with professional journalists, established advertiser-funded, profit-driven newspapers. The *National Concord*, established by the late multi-billionaire Moshood Abiola in 1980, blazed the trail in independent, commercial newspaper publishing. Its success spawned another independent newspaper, the *Guardian*, which was formed in 1983 by millionaire Alex Ibru in partnership with Dr. Stanley Macebuh, a seasoned and well-regarded journalist. These papers effectively displaced the state-run newspapers, especially the nationally circulating *Daily Times* and *New Nigerian*.

The fact of their being commercial did not, however, preclude the emergent privately owned press from being implicated in the partisan politics of the Second Republic, as the civilian

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<sup>302</sup> After 12 years of rule, the military decided to voluntarily hand over power to civilians. A radical military head of state had been assassinated in a coup in 1975 after only six months in office. Olusegun Obasanjo, his deputy who became head of state, immediately started a transition program that culminated in the hand-over of power to civilians.

<sup>303</sup> For a concise yet perceptive history of the penny press in America, see Susan Thompson, *The Penny Press: The Origins of the Modern News Media, 1883-1861* (Northport, Ala: Vision Press, 2004). For a critical perspective on the popular notions of the penny press, see John C. Nerone, “The Mythology of the Penny Press,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 no. 4 (1987): 376-404.

rule between 1979 and 1983 is called in Nigerian political parlance.<sup>304</sup> The *National Concord*, for instance, came to be known to have sympathies with the ruling party of the time, the National Party of Nigeria. Similar to the situation during the First Republic (that is, the period of civilian rule between 1960 and 1966) the press was profoundly partisan. This fact led the London-based international human rights organization called Article 19 to observe that the “period of multi-party civilian rule (1979-1983) was not a highpoint in Nigerian press history because all but a few newspapers aligned themselves with fiercely competing and often corrupt political parties.”<sup>305</sup> However, it is also the case that during this brief period of the restoration of constitutional rule, the press was relatively free and the public sphere was significantly healthier than during the military era. Governments responded to criticisms either by setting up their own newspapers or by influencing news coverage and punditry in the independent media. Public debates in the media were robust, if raucous, and journalists were never arrested for their often hard-hitting philippics against political opponents.

That ended in late 1983 when the military struck again, ending five years of constitutional rule.<sup>306</sup> However, rather paradoxically, the return of the military, with all its notorious high-handedness against the press, saw the growth and flowering of a new phase of vibrant, independent, commercial newspaper publishing. For instance, a corps of rebellious journalists who were uncomfortable with the editorial direction of the *National Concord* decided to resign from the paper and found Nigeria’s first weekly news magazine called *Newswatch* in 1984. According to Ray Ekpu, one of the magazine’s pioneer editors, *Newswatch* was conceived

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<sup>304</sup> The military again overthrew the civilian government in 1983 and continued to rule until 1999.

<sup>305</sup> Article 19, *Truth From Below: The Emergent Press in Africa* (London: Article 19, 1991), 51.

<sup>306</sup> Interestingly, the military, in overthrowing the civilian government, used censorious, partisan news reports against the central government by the opposition press as a basis for taking over. The military called itself a “corrective regime.”

by a “gang of disgruntled journalists who were far from satisfied with the exiting state of things in the Nigerian press and who hoped through their new, independent magazine, they could contribute to the practice and growth of journalism in Nigeria.”<sup>307</sup> This trailblazing initiative came to define the contours of the independent press era. Professional journalists henceforth did not depend on wealthy businessmen to set up newspapers and magazines for them; they set them up themselves and sought social and editorial distance from the prevailing partisanship in the polity. Notable national newspapers formed by professional journalists were *Vanguard* (1984), *This Day* (1995), *Daily/Weekly Trust* (1998), *Tell* (a breakaway from *Newswatch* in 1991) and *TheNews* (another breakaway from *Concord* in 1993).

Significantly, this era is characterized by three fundamental features. First, it witnessed the dramatic diminution of the presence and influence of government-owned newspapers and the rise and popularity of the privately owned commercial press which, though not immune from the political, regional, and ethnic rivalries in the country, were not necessarily defined by them. Second, this era saw the phenomenal incursion into journalism of what Dapo Olorunyomi, a former editor with one of the emergent radical news magazines, called “a well-educated and politically committed crop of reporters.” He notes that, “Not only were these young men and women prowling their beats with the confidence of brilliant college graduates, they had also undergone an activist baptism of fire from the anti-apartheid and student movements.”<sup>308</sup> This fact is congruent with Richard Flacks's findings on how the entry of young graduates who were animated by the radicalism in U.S. campuses in the 1960s significantly transformed the

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<sup>307</sup> Quoted in Agbese, *The Role of the Press*, 49.

<sup>308</sup> Dapo Olorunyomi, “Defiant Publishing in Nigeria,” in *Journalism in Peril* eds. Nancy J. Woodhul and Robert W. Snyder, 53-63 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

professions.<sup>309</sup> Third, the period witnessed an extreme radicalization in the editorial temperaments of significant portions of the independent press in ways that are reminiscent of the era of the nationalist press, though this also brought with it an unprecedented government repression of the press.

For instance, in 1984, shortly after the military overthrew the democratically elected government, it arrested and imprisoned two journalists with the *Guardian* newspaper, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor, for allegedly publishing incorrect information about staff deployment in the external affair ministry of the government. In a particularly bizarre case, in 1986, the military government murdered the America-trained, aggressively muckraking editor-in-chief of *Newswatch*, Dele Giwa, by a letter bomb.<sup>310</sup> A year later, the magazine he edited was proscribed for six months and its editors jailed for “publishing reports of a government commission before it was made public.”<sup>311</sup> In 1990, twenty-five journalists were arrested in one single day for reporting on an unsuccessful coup attempt. The *National Concord* was closed down in 1992 for publishing a story that embarrassed Nigeria’s then self-styled military president, Ibrahim Babangida. Several other independent papers were also proscribed when they launched virulent attacks on the military for voiding a presidential election it conducted in 1993, which Moshood Abiola, publisher of *National Concord*, won in a landslide.

But it was not just the press that was subjected to brutal suppression. Readers of the radical media were punished as well. For instance, in 1993, a group of Nigerians was arrested for

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<sup>309</sup> Richard Flacks, *Youth and Social Change* (Chicago: Markham, 1971). An instructive study also discovered that increase in levels of higher education is more conducive to the sustenance of press freedom than economic prosperity (See David H. Weaver, Judith M. Buddenbaum, and Jo Ellen Fair, “Press Freedom, Media, and Development, 1950- 1979: A Study of 134 Nations,” *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 104-117.

<sup>310</sup> Mercy Ette, “Agents of Change or Stability: The Nigerian Press Undermines Democracy,” *The Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics* 5 no. 3 (2000):67-86.

<sup>311</sup> Ogbondah, “The Pen is Mightier than the ‘Koboko’,” 111.

reading photocopies of an edition of the *TheNews*. The military government's agents had thought they had seized and burned every copy of the paper. In 1995, the military government's security forces arrested and detained a news vendor for transporting several thousand copies of *TheNews*, *Tell*, and *Tempo*—three of the most adversarial news weeklies in Nigeria at the time. When the news vendor was formally charged in court, the presiding judge asked the prosecutor if the news magazines the news vendor was caught transporting to other parts of the country had been formally banned by government. His response was that the magazines were “simply not patriotic.”<sup>312</sup> In another incident, a newspaper vendor was arrested for selling the radical *Tempo* weekly tabloid, which the government said contained “seditious materials” that had the capacity to cause “disaffection among members of the public and make them rebel against the authority of the Federal Government.”<sup>313</sup> At other times, “security forces harassed, arrested and beat anyone found in a medium's premises, or anyone related to wanted journalists.”<sup>314</sup>

The military government also invoked the anti-press laws that had been in the law books since colonial times and came up with newer, crueler ones. For instance, in 1993, the government enacted the Treasonable Offenses Decree, which imposed the death penalty on anyone who was found guilty of writing or speaking of Nigeria in ways that compromised its territorial integrity and internal cohesion. This was obviously a trap for the independent press since, in any case, a government prosecutor could go after a news vendor for merely transporting news magazines that the government deemed “unpatriotic.” As if that was not harsh enough, the same year, the government also enacted what it called the Newspaper Decree 43, which required

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<sup>312</sup> Anthony Collins, *Words of Fire: Independent Journalists Who Challenge Dictators, Drug Lords, and Other Enemies of a Free Press* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>313</sup> *A Report by the Press Freedom Committee of the Nigerian Union of Journalists* (NUJ, Lagos, 1993), 8.

<sup>314</sup> Agbese, *The Role of the Press*, 52.

all publications in the country to register with the military government's ministry of information for the sum of \$1000. This move appeared to be borrowed from the colonial era, when the colonial government made it mandatory for the nationalist newspapers to register with the government before they could legitimately publish their newspapers. But these measures obviously did not work because the independent press continued to flourish, so in the late 1990s the government imposed a hefty valued-added tax on newsprint. This dramatically drove up the cost of newspapers and magazines and made them exclusive to the people at the upper end of the social scale.

These repressive measures, however, made the press even more vibrant and more adversarial and gave rise to the blossoming of what has been called guerilla journalism in Nigeria, which "involved a hit-and-run in which journalists operating from hideouts continued to publish oppositional and critical journals in defiance of the state."<sup>315</sup> As Ibelema aptly notes, this extraordinary robustness of the Nigerian press in the face of atrociously brutal military dictatorships "demonstrates that under certain circumstances a vibrant press can co-exist with harsh censorship, albeit at high human cost. Similarly, whereas the military government's despotism and the country's economic difficulties would have predicted substantial reduction in the number of media outlets, there was actually a major expansion in both print and broadcast outlets."<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Ayo Olukotun, "Authoritarian State, Crisis of Democratization and the Underground Media in Nigeria," *African Affairs* 101 (2002), 317.

<sup>316</sup> Ibelema, "The Nigerian Press and June 12," 195.

### 3.8 The Rise of Guerilla Journalism

The government-engineered rise in the cost of newspaper and magazine production, the mass proscriptions of radical newspapers and magazines and the arrest of their reporters and editors provided the locomotive force for the emergence of a vibrant underground press in the late 1990s and contributed significantly to the dislodgement of military totalitarianism in 1999, considered by some to be the “most significant democratic struggle in Nigeria since colonialism ended.”<sup>317</sup> Interestingly, the inspiration for this kind of journalism derives in large part from the adversarial anti-colonial journalism of the nationalist era. Nosa Igiehor, *Tell's* executive editor, told a Nigerian researcher that he found motivation for the kind of insurgent journalism he practiced from “Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and other nationalists of the colonial era.”<sup>318</sup>

What particularly redounded to the success and wild popularity of the underground press was the fact that they practically served as the sole arena for the ventilation of popular sentiments, especially in light of the fact that the broadcast industry was controlled by the government and there was no popularly elected parliament. As Ogbondah puts it, in the absence of a popularly elected parliament, the press became “the people’s parliament” and the “most effective channel to express their wishes and grievances.”<sup>319</sup>

The major publications associated with this phase of Nigerian journalism are *Tell*, *TheNews*, *Tempo*, and *Razor*—all news weeklies. There were many other episodic, underground newspapers that perpetually changed their names, mastheads, and locations in response to repression from the military. There was an underground radio station called Radio Kudirat,

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<sup>317</sup> Hall, “Think Imperially,” 257.

<sup>318</sup> Ibelema, “The Nigerian Press and June 12,” 174.

<sup>319</sup> Ogbondah, “The Pen is Mightier Than the ‘Koboko’,” 121.

named for the wife of Moshood Abiola who was shot in cold blood by agents of the military for leading the fight for the restoration of her husband's voided electoral mandate. Given the increasing precariousness of radical publishing and the ever more vicious desperation of the military junta, these news magazines decided to invent unconventional means to put out their news. Nosa Igiebor, editor-in-chief of *Tell*, told Ayo Olukotun, how they did it.

We sat down and assessed the situation. Their [the military government's] business was to ensure that we didn't publish. Ours was to ensure that we came out without fail. This meant reorganizing our approach to producing. Rather than stay on one spot and become sitting ducks for state security [operatives], we had to be several steps ahead of them, by spreading out and operating in several centers or cells. If we use [one] house this week, we change the next week and use another house. We of course had to preserve the anonymity of the owners and venues of our cells.<sup>320</sup>

These perpetually migratory, unorthodox news practices that Igiebor outlined became the modus operandi of all the insurgent news magazines. The core of their strategy, according to Ayo Akinkuotu, another *Tell* editor, was the "duplication of offices.... At critical times in Abacha's five-year tenure, the magazine was forced to operate over seven 'bush offices.' Some were procured in extreme emergencies while others were evacuated without notice."<sup>321</sup> They abandoned the comfort of their newsrooms and held editorial meetings during soccer games, in sports facilities, theaters, hotel lobbies, taxicabs, or other places that could guarantee a reasonable concealment of their identities. To avoid arrest by the military government's security agents, the guerrilla journalists "sometimes distributed their publication using a hired ambulance or water truck."<sup>322</sup> Babafemi Ojudu, an editor with *TheNews* and *Tempo*, recalled that he basically lived a nomadic life; his handbag was his office, he avoided his home, and even from

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<sup>320</sup> Olukotun, "Authoritarian State, Crisis of Democratization and the Underground Media in Nigeria," 322.

<sup>321</sup> Ayo Akinkuotu, *Tell*, August 31, 1998, p. 33.

<sup>322</sup> Tokunbo Ojo, "The Nigerian Media and the Process of Democratization," *Journalism* 8 no. 5 (2007): 548.



time to time donned camouflage to escape the notice of security agents.<sup>323</sup> But the guerilla journalists also sometimes depended on the protection of government security agents who secretly sympathized with their crusade and from whom they got sensitive government secrets.

As Tokunbo Ojo put it,

Sometimes the methods used by the underground media bordered on the unethical, but they seemed justified in the interests of public service and liberation of the country from the shackles of military dictatorship. Much of the information published underground was obtained by clandestine methods, including secret tape-recording of government meetings and gaining access to classified or confidential documents through disguised identities or through the cooperation of insiders. The stories also made use of documents leaked by whistleblowers and pro-democracy activists, as well as interviews with victims of government abuses.<sup>324</sup>

This insurgent, narrativistic, personalized, and explicitly partisan journalism of the military-era underground press in Nigeria ended in 1999 when the military government was compelled to organize elections and hand over power to civilians again. The 1999 military-organized elections saw many pro-democracy activists and friends of the guerrilla journalists in elective and appointive positions. The enemy was defeated and replaced by friends. This effectively led to not only the death of guerrilla journalism but the cooptation of its practitioners in the new democratic epoch. So from 1999 to the mid 2000s, the Nigerian media landscape was overcome by an unprecedented quietude and complacency. The critical gaze that the media had fixed on people in positions of authority was lowered. The disappearance of the critical press and the cooptation of many of its strongest advocates led to the untrammled blossoming of high-profile corruption in high places.

Nevertheless, as we will see in chapters four and five, the tradition of guerrilla journalism reincarnated in the online alternative journalism of the Nigerian digital diaspora. In a way, the

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<sup>323</sup> Collings, *Words of Fire*:

<sup>324</sup> Ojo, "The Nigerian Media and the Process of Democratization," 548.

guerilla press in Nigeria is the precursor to the kind of diasporan online journalism this project investigates. It is important for now to state that, along with sustained civil society agitation, guerrilla journalism contributed to the defeat of military totalitarianism and the restoration of democratic rule in 1999. But the triumphalism and self-congratulation that this feat inspired also led to a premature abandonment of their struggle. Olukotun notes that the guerilla journalists' "relative closeness to the political establishment has diluted their focus and mission," arguing, however, that "the precedent of an underground media system makes it easier for one to rise again."<sup>325</sup> And this is precisely what has happened between 2005 and now. The main difference is that the underground media rose again in an electronic form and from citizen journalists in the diaspora.

Although the press has been relatively free since the return of civilian rule in 1999, it has, for the most part, engaged in self-censorship.<sup>326</sup> This is probably a consequence of the need to escape the time-honored accusation that the strident strictures of the press on the failings of political elites during civilian rule have often provided the alibi for the military to stage a comeback. Commenting on this, Ette remarks that the "adversarial attitude of the press toward politicians also weakened press support for democracy. This was a manifestation of an attempt by Nigerian journalists to emulate the antagonistic and cynical attitude that journalists in the West tend to adopt for the coverage of politics."<sup>327</sup> Given the immense sacrifices that the

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<sup>325</sup> Olukotun, "Authoritarian State, Crisis of Democratization and the Underground Media in Nigeria," 341.

<sup>326</sup> According to Freedom House's mapping of historical trends in press freedom, in 1984, Nigeria's press was "partly free," in 1989 it was "free"—the only one of its kind on the African continent—and it regressed to being "partly free" in 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2007. See Freedom House, "Freedom House's Annual Survey of Global Media Independence: An Historical Review, 1984-2007," <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=359>; accessed February 28, 2010.

<sup>327</sup> Ette, "Agent of Change or Stability?" 82.

independent press made toward the overthrow of military totalitarianism, this kind of criticism can have a restraining effect on their investigative editorial temperaments.

It could also be that the independent press was overcome by the smug self-satisfaction that came from the shifting of political power to Nigeria's southwest, which is home to the guerrilla press and many of Nigeria's independent media. Although the attacks of the press were mostly on the military as an institution, these attacks often assumed ethno-religious dimensions because the military dictators that have ruled Nigeria since 1966 have been northern Muslims (except for the first military coup in 1966, led by Christians from the south, which was crushed after only six months, and again between 1975 and 1978 when a southern Christian became head of state after a Muslim military head of state was assassinated). So it is entirely possible that the comfort of the election of a southern born-again Christian can induce a crippling, unaccustomed complacency.<sup>328</sup>

However, behind the façade of the new democratic government hid many issues that needed to be investigated. Although some sections of the independent media indeed rose to the challenge of calling attention to governmental indiscretions, their efforts were not sufficiently robust.<sup>329</sup> This is also perhaps because since 1999 many wealthy politicians, some then elected state governors, have set up influential newspapers that compete with the independent media. For instance, Nigeria's most widely circulated newspaper today, the *Sun*, is published by the former governor of the southeastern state of Abia. Other influential papers published by former and current state governors are the *Independent* (owned by James Ibori, former governor of the oil-

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<sup>328</sup> After eight years of a southern Christian presidency, a northern Muslim was elected president in 2007. An informal power-sharing arrangement among the polite elite will rotate the presidency from north to south every eight years.

<sup>329</sup> For the most part, it is the independent media in the north that have become critical of government. This may very well be because the president was a Christian southerner.

rich southern state of Delta), the *Nation* (owned by Bola Tinubu, the former governor of Lagos State, Nigeria's commercial nerve center and most populous state), and the *Compass* (owned by Gbenga Daniel, the current governor of the southwestern state of Ogun). The crowding of the media landscape with these mouthpieces of often corrupt politicians further contributes to demoting investigative journalism to the backburner, even more so since the core of the editorial staff of these newspapers are drawn from the independent, commercial, including the previously guerrilla, press. Furthermore, the void this situation created provided the entry point for the diasporan online media I will be examining in subsequent chapters.

In light of the foregoing review of the history of the Nigerian press, it seems fair to say that the Nigerian press was born out of missionary evangelism and the necessity for colonial propaganda, remade by the contingent nationalism of an emergent marginalized local elite, matured in party politics, radicalized in advocacy anti-military journalism and weakened by the smug self-satisfaction that resulted from their role in the restoration of constitutional rule. But a new, transnational dimension is emerging in the history of the Nigeria media, and this is the birth and flowering of online journalism by Nigeria's expanding diaspora in the West, especially in America, which the next chapter examines. In order to properly contextualize the emergence of this diasporan online journalism, it is appropriate to introduce the reader to the history and character of the Nigerian diaspora in America, which is at the vanguard of the nascent transnational online journalism that this study explores.

### 3.9 The Nigerian Diaspora in America

The last two decades have witnessed the phenomenal migratory flows of Africans to the West, especially to the United States, at a proportion outpaced only by the Transatlantic Slave Trade.<sup>330</sup>

In the case of Nigeria, which leads all African countries in migratory flows to the United States,<sup>331</sup> this deterritorialization has had and continues to have a profound impact on the politics of the domestic public sphere. Many scholars have studied how Nigerians in the diaspora, using the transnational cultural and political capital that their privileged territorial displacement has conferred on them, established strategic linkages with domestic activist civil society groups to form the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), which became a central and symbolic locus of political mobilization in the long and arduous struggle to dislodge totalitarian military regimes in Nigeria in the 1990s.<sup>332</sup> As would be expected, when democratic rule was restored in 1999, the newly elected government acknowledged the struggles of Nigerians in the diaspora by formalizing associative relations with them. The government inaugurated the Nigerians in

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<sup>330</sup> See John A. Arthur, *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000). Arthur points out that although African immigration is still numerically insignificant in comparison with migrations from Latin America and other parts of the world, the period beginning from the early 1990s represents the most massive influx of sub-Saharan Africans into the United States since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Also see Paul T. Zeleza, "Contemporary African Migration in a Global Context," *African Issues* 30 no. 1 (2002): 12-25; Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome, "The Antinomies of Globalization: Some Consequences of Contemporary African Immigration to the United States of America," *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration* 1 no. 1 (2002), [africamigration.com](http://africamigration.com).

<sup>331</sup> See Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffery G. Williamson, "Out of Africa? Using the Past to Project African Emigration Pressure in the Future," *Review of International Economics* 10 no. 3 (2002): 556-573. Also see Joseph Takougang, "Contemporary African Immigrants to the United States," *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration* 2 (2003), [africamigration.com](http://africamigration.com). Nigeria leads in African immigration to the United States precisely because it is the most populous country in Africa and has the advantage of being English speaking, having been colonized by Britain.

<sup>332</sup> For a comprehensive review of the role of civil society groups and the Nigerian diasporic public sphere in the restoration of constitutional rule, see Ebenezer Obadare, "Second Thoughts on Civil Society: The State, Civic Associations and the Antinomies of the Public Sphere in Africa," *Journal of Civil Society* 1 no. 3 (2005):267-281; Matthew Todd Bradley, "Civil Society and Democratic Progression in Postcolonial Nigeria: The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations," *Journal of Civil Society* 1 no. 1 (2005): 61-74; Raphael C. Njoku, "Deconstructing Abacha: Demilitarization and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria after the Abacha Era," *Government and Opposition* 36 no.1 (2001): 71-96.

Diaspora Organization (NIDO) and even created liaison offices for Diasporan Nigerians in major Western embassies.<sup>333</sup>

However, while the political and economic consequences of the migratory flows of Nigerians to the United States have been captured fairly robustly in the scholarly literature on globalization,<sup>334</sup> there is scant attention to the transnational online journalistic practices of Nigerians in the diaspora and what impacts these practices have had and continue to have on not just the form and content of journalistic practices in Nigeria but also on the national post-military politics of the country.

The first noticeable wave of numerically significant Nigerian migratory flow to the United States began in the 1960s.<sup>335</sup> However, the United States did not become an attraction for permanent residence by Nigerians until the late 1980s. In the past, most Nigerians who came to the United States on student visas went back to the homeland upon completion of their studies. There were valid reasons for this. The Nigerian economy was vibrant then and could comfortably accommodate and sustain the middle-class aspirations that the foreign qualifications and exposure to life in the United States inspired. Sakah Mahmud, for instance, points out that in the early years of her independence, Nigeria actually attained “self-sufficiency in agricultural

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<sup>333</sup> See Jude Igbanoi, “How Nigerians in the Diaspora Significantly Aid our Development,” *This Day* February 19, 2007.

<sup>334</sup> See, for instance, Rachel R. Reynolds, “An African Brain Drain: Igbo Decisions to Immigrate to the US,” *Review of African Political Economy* 29 no. 92 (2002): 273-284; Theophilus O. Fadayomi, “Brain Drain and Brain Gain in Africa: Causes, Dimensions, and Consequences,” in *International Migration in and from Africa: Dimensions, Challenges, and Prospects* eds. A. Adepoju and T. Hammer (Stockholm: Population, Human Resources and Development in Africa, Centrum for Invandringsforskning, 1996).

<sup>335</sup> It’s important to mention that Nigeria’s first indigenous post-independence president, Nnamdi Azikwe, studied at the historically black Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, in the 1920s, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in 1930. See Lincoln University, “About Lincoln: A Legacy of Producing Leaders,” <http://www.lincoln.edu/about.html>; accessed March 28, 2007. For a history of Nigerian immigration to the United States, see Marcellina U. Offoha, *Educated Nigerian Settlers in the United States: The Phenomenon of Brain Drain*, Thesis (Ph. D.)—Temple University, 1989.

production, enough for both domestic consumption as well as for export.”<sup>336</sup> In addition to achieving self-sufficiency in food production, Nigeria also witnessed what has been characterized as “bonanza development,”<sup>337</sup> which Richard Joseph insightfully defined as “earnings from petroleum exports considerably above the country’s actual expenditure.”<sup>338</sup>

This rosy picture changed in the 1980s with the collapse of the economy in part because of IMF/World Bank-inspired structural adjustment programs<sup>339</sup> and the unprecedented institutionalization of venality at the highest levels of government by the totalitarian, unaccountable military regimes that seized power from the democratically elected government in 1983. Thus, from the late 1980s, a steady stream of Nigerians began to migrate to the United States and other parts of the Western world. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service figures, 112 immigrants admitted for legal permanent residence in 1986 identified Nigeria as their country of birth. By 2000, the figure rose to 4,355. The 2001 figures from the

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<sup>336</sup> Sakah S. Mahmud, *State, Class and Underdevelopment in Nigeria and Early Meiji Japan* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), 3.

<sup>337</sup> David G Becker, “Bonanza Development and the New Bourgeoisie,” *Comparative Political Studies* 15 (1982): 88.

<sup>338</sup> Richard Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria*: (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 236. The period witnessed what in Nigeria has come to be known as the “Udoji era” in reference to the recommendations of a certain Justice Udoji who recommended that the government increase the Nigerian national minimum wage exponentially in light of the windfall from crude oil sales. The implementation of this recommendation dramatically increased the size of the middle class and generally led to hitherto unthought-of improvement in the general standard of living in the country. The head of state of Nigeria at the time, General Yakubu Gowon, was often quoted as saying that Nigeria’s problem was not money but how to spend it.

<sup>339</sup> There is a vast array of literature on the devastating consequences on structural adjustment on Nigeria. Julius Kómoláfé, for instance, traces the nexus between the increased flow of Nigerian ethnoscaples to the West and the consequences of structural adjustment in his “Searching for Fortune: The Geographical Process of Nigerian Migration to Dublin, Ireland,” *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration*, 2003 - [africamigration.com](http://www.africamigration.com), [http://www.africamigration.com/archive\\_01/j\\_komolafe\\_searching.htm](http://www.africamigration.com/archive_01/j_komolafe_searching.htm). Also see Paul Mosley, “Policy-Making without Facts: A Note on the Assessment of Structural Adjustment Policies in Nigeria, 1985-1990,” *African Affairs* 91(1992): 227-240 and Adebayo Olukoshi ed. *The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Nigeria* (London: James Carey, 1993). For a neoliberal apologia of the politics and implementation of the structural adjustment program in Nigeria, see Peter Lewis, “From Prebendalism to Predation: The Political Economy of Decline in Nigeria,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 34 no.1 (1996):79-103.

U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services indicate that there are 134,940 legal permanent residents in the United States who were born in Nigeria.<sup>340</sup>

It is important to note that this figure excludes a large number of Nigerians who fall outside the classificatory category of “permanent legal resident.” For instance, it excludes thousands of undocumented people who are in the country because they overstayed their student, tourist or professional exchange visas, people who came to the United States illegally, and students who are studying in various colleges and universities in the United States and who are unlikely to return to the homeland in the immediate future upon completion of their studies. More importantly, the figure has not captured the thousands of Nigerians who immigrate to the United States on a yearly basis through the Diversity (Green card) Visa Lottery program.<sup>341</sup> If these people are taken into account, there are probably up to two million Nigerians living in the United States. If the present trend continues, it seems reasonable to expect that the United States will surpass Britain as the second home of Nigerians. But what kind of Nigerian immigrants live in the United States, and do their cultural assets enable them to influence the domestic public sphere through their media?

The demographic characteristics of Nigerian immigrants in the United States especially conduce to the cultural capital they wield in the homeland. Scholars who have studied Nigerian immigrants point out that they are usually middle-class professionals with at least a college

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<sup>340</sup> See Rachel Reynolds, “‘We are not Surviving, We are Managing’: The Constitution of a Nigerian Diaspora along the Contours of the Global Economy,” *City & Society* 16 no. 1 (2004), 6.

<sup>341</sup> As part of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, 50,000 diversity work visas (green cards) have been available yearly to people from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The National Visa Center of the State Department holds the lottery every year and chooses winners randomly from all qualified entries. Nigeria and Bangladesh have consistently been in the top 10 countries for lottery winners. For details, see Caroline B. Brettell, “Political Belonging and Cultural Belonging: Immigration Status, Citizenship, and Identity Among Four Immigrant Populations in a Southwestern City,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 50 no. 1 (2006): 70-99.



degree and are often significantly more educated than most immigrant groups in the United States.<sup>342</sup> The most recent statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau show that 43.8 percent of African immigrants (of whom Nigerians have an overwhelming numerical dominion) have obtained a college degree, compared with 42.5 of Asian-Americans, 28.9 percent for immigrants from Europe, Russia and Canada, and 23.1 percent of the U.S. population as a whole. As a *Chicago Tribune* columnist notes, “That defies the usual stereotypes of Asian-Americans as the only ‘model minority.’ Yet the traditional American narrative has rendered the high academic achievements of black immigrants from Africa... invisible, as if that were a taboo topic.”<sup>343</sup>

A distinctive feature of Nigerian immigrants in the United States, according to Rachel Reynolds and Scott Youngstedt, is that although their ancestral provenance is spatially located in a postcolonial periphery, they are usually “structurally integrated into communities at the core...working in finance, engineering, sales and management.”<sup>344</sup> This fact, which is in many respects congruent with the experiences of many highly skilled Third World immigrants who are “dislocated” to the First World, gives rise to a situation where “the familiar lines between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ center and periphery, West and non-West have to some extent become blurred.”<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> See Scott M. Youngstedt, “The New Nigerian Hausa Diaspora in the U.S.: Surviving and Building Community on the Margins of the Global Economy,” *City & Society* 16 no.1 (2004): 39-67. Also see Paul Stoller, *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Rachel R. Reynolds, “An African Brain Drain: Nigerian (Igbo) Decisions to Immigrate to the U.S.,” *Review of African Political Economy* 29 no. 92 (2002): 273-84.

<sup>343</sup> Clarence Page, “Black Immigrants Collect Most Degrees but Affirmative Action is Losing Direction,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 2007; <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/chi-0703180344mar18,1,2681158.column?coll=chi-news-col>; accessed February 18, 2010.

<sup>344</sup> Rachel Reynolds and Scott M. Youngstedt, “Globalization and African Ethnoscapes: Contrasting Nigerian Hausa and Nigerian Igbo Migratory Orders in the U.S.,” *City & Society* 16 no. 1 (2004), 7.

<sup>345</sup> Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, “Introduction: A World in Motion,” in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* ed. J. X. Inda and R. Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).

Like most deterritorialized communities and displaced populations, the Nigerian diaspora in the United States has a strong nationalist attachment to the homeland.<sup>346</sup> Even though the country is usually polarized in the homeland along ethnic and religious fault-lines, the reality of their shared experience of displacement in a strange cultural habitus has forced them to cultivate and nurture a diaspora romantic nationalism often lubricated by the instrumentality of hometown associations, the print media and lately the World Wide Web<sup>347</sup>—what Appadurai would call the “paradox of constructed primordialism.”<sup>348</sup> In fact, many Nigerian immigrants in the United States have transcended their previous diaspora nationalism that was disaffiliated from the politics of the homeland to one that actively engages with the domestic public sphere through transnational, diaspora-generated online media outlets.

As a consequence of these demographic characteristics of the Nigerian diaspora in the United States, members of this community have historically been media savvy and among the first to embrace the opportunities that the digital space provides for social interaction and the cultivation and nurturing of an idealistic diaspora nationalism. Misty Bastian’s research on the Nigerian Diaspora community in the United States shows that as early as the early 1990s the community had its newspapers, magazines, television and a listserv called Naijanet that were used to foster a sense of community and to familiarize members with “news from home.”<sup>349</sup> The first steps “toward developing a Nigerian online network took place in 1991” when a Nigerian at

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<sup>346</sup> Reynolds, “We are Not Surviving, We are Managing:”

<sup>347</sup> For a seminal and critically acclaimed ethnographic study of how the Nigerian Diaspora in the United States deployed the Internet to nourish their nostalgia for their homeland and to foster nationalist sentiments, see Misty Bastian, “Nationalism in a Virtual Space: Immigrant Nigerians on the Internet,” *West Africa Review* 1 no.1 (July 1999): 13, <http://www.africaresource.com/war/vol1.1/bastian.html>

<sup>348</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*: 28.

<sup>349</sup> Bastian, “Nationalism in a Virtual Space:”

Dartmouth College began forwarding to select friends e-mail news about the home country.<sup>350</sup> From this modest beginning emerged Naijanet, which Anna Everett described as “one of the Internet’s most robust and enduring Afrocentric virtual communities.”<sup>351</sup>

Bastian reports that since 1992 “Naijanet has spun off at least six related online networks,” and that at its height of influence and popularity in 1995 “Naijanetters” numbered approximately 750. During this period, too, Mary Ebeling informs us, the Nigerian Diaspora of the Ogoni ethnic minority extraction from the Niger Delta region of the country “used the Internet as a political mobilizing resource very effectively” to call international attention to the exploitation of their resources and the degradation of their environment by Shell Oil Company and the military regime of General Sani Abacha.<sup>352</sup>

The late 2000s saw the migration of most of the print media outlets of the Nigerian diaspora to the Internet and the emergence of new online newspapers with no offline antecedents. The dissolution of spatial and temporal boundaries that the Internet enables has conferred a hitherto unthought-of transnational social capital on the diaspora media in ways that fulfill Bastian’s 1999 vision of a convergence of Nigeria’s everyday realities, the concerns and content of the diaspora’s online media, and the domestic politics of the homeland. Writing in 1999, Bastian prognosticated that

The wiring of Nigeria itself is probably inevitable, especially under the climate of political transparency developing in the new Nigerian republic, and is awaited with great impatience by Nigerian academics and businesspeople alike. At the moment when virtual Nigeria becomes open to real Nigeria, there is the possibility of a new synthesis, a

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Anna Everett, “The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere,” *Social Text* 71, 20 no. 2 (2002), 139.

<sup>352</sup> Mary F. E. Ebeling, “The New Dawn: Black Agency in Cyberspace,” *Radical History Review* 87 (2003), 104.

drawing closer of the electronic world of the brain drain diaspora and the real worlds of both material diasporic experience and Nigerian quotidian life.<sup>353</sup>

The emergence of popular diaspora online newspapers that now engage in perpetual political and cultural dialogues with the homeland would seem to have bestowed an uncannily accurate materiality to Bastian's vision. There is now a robust synthesis between the digital media of the Nigerian Diaspora in the United States and the "quotidian life" of Nigerians in the homeland. With the progressive expansion of Internet facilities in country, this reality is expanding at a pace that probably exceeds Bastian's expectations.

The death of critical media in the Nigeria public sphere as a result of the defeat of military absolutism has fertilized the growth and flowering of diasporan citizen online journalism. The "brain drain" digital diaspora, as the next chapter shows, has now deployed its exilic cultural capital to fill a void that emerged in the media landscape of the homeland.

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<sup>353</sup> Bastian, "Nationalism in a Virtual Space:"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4 THE BEGINNINGS OF ONLINE JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

Two momentous developments have occurred in the Nigerian journalistic landscape in the last ten years: the migration of all major Nigerian newspapers to the Internet and the robust growth and flowering of diasporan online news outlets that have actively sought and captured the attention of both diasporan and homeland readers. On the surface, these developments seem contradictory, even counter-intuitive. The migration of news content from homeland legacy newspapers to the Internet should have functioned to satisfy the yearning for domestic news by diasporan Nigerians and therefore obviated the need for diasporan news outlets. Nevertheless, citizen diasporan news outlets not only compete with but vigorously undermine the credibility of homeland newspapers. As this and the next chapter will show, two fundamental factors account for this.

The first, as chapter three hinted, is the dearth—in fact, the death—of the brand of investigative and advocacy journalism that characterized the anti-colonial and anti-military eras, which found an especially concentrated expression in the guerilla press of the 1990s. The absence of a virile, uncompromised domestic watchdog media system that is committed to comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable in the face of the enormous venality that has accompanied Nigeria's return to democratic rule needed to be corrected.<sup>354</sup> Homeland

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<sup>354</sup> The Chicago journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne pointed out, at the turn of the century, that “the job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel explain that the essence of this quip, which has now metamorphosed into a journalistic maxim, is its dramatization of the role the press is expected to play in “watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.” See Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel, “Are Watchdogs an Endangered Species?” *Columbia Journalism Review* 40 no. 1 (May 2001): 50. Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 10, 2010). For other interpretations of this phrase, see Peter Benjaminson and David Anderson, *Investigative Reporting* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Ames: Iowa State University, 1990). Also see Leonard Ray Teel and Ron Taylor, *Into the Newsroom: An Introduction to Journalism* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chester, Conn.: Globe Pequot Press, 1988). For a somewhat similar death of watchdog journalism in a developing country, see Juliet Pinto, “Muzzling the Watchdog: The Case of Disappearing Watchdog Journalism from Argentine Mainstream News,” *Journalism* 9 no. 6 (2008): 750-774.

newspapers have proved either unwilling or unable to rise up to this challenge. The second reason for the rise and popularity of Nigerian diasporan online media is the technical deficiency of the Web sites of homeland newspapers. Their Web sites are neither updated in real-time nor are they sufficiently interactive and multi-platform in the fashion of contemporary legacy media Web sites in the West with which diasporan Nigerians have become familiar. So, in an interesting reversal, while the mainstream media in the West ventured into online journalism out of anxieties about the potentially disruptive effects that the emergent citizen online journalism might have on their professional authority,<sup>355</sup> the Nigerian mainstream media's lack of sophisticated Web presence partly inspired the emergence of Nigerian citizen online journalism, which now potentially disrupts the authority and dominant journalistic practices of the homeland mainstream media.

Mark Deuze identifies three features that are fundamental to the possibility and vitality of online journalism: interactivity (the ability for readers or audiences of online content to react to or interact with and even adapt news content presented to them), multimediality (the technical possibility for news content to be presented in multiple platforms such as text, video, audio, and animated graphics), and hypertextuality (being able “to connect the story to other stories, archives, resources and so forth through hyperlinks”).<sup>356</sup> Deuze explores these three broad characteristics in terms of four types of online journalism: “mainstream” news sites, “index and category” sites, “meta and comment” sites and “share and discussion” sites. “Mainstream” and

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<sup>355</sup> See Farooq A. Kperogi, “Cooperation with the Corporation? CNN and the Hegemonic Cooptation of Citizen Journalism Through iReport.com,” *New Media & Society* 13 no. 2 (2011): 314–329. Also see Jane B. Singer, “Changes and Consistencies: Newspaper Journalists Contemplate Online Future,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 18 no.1 (1997): 2–18 and Jane B. Singer, “Still Guarding the Gate? The Newspaper Journalist’s Role in an On-line World,” *Convergence* 3 no.1 (1997): 72–89.

<sup>356</sup> Mark Deuze, “The Web and its Journalisms: Considering the Consequences of Different Types of Newsmedia Online,” *New Media & Society* 5 no. 2 (2003), 206.

“index and category” sites, he points out, are characterized by “moderated participatory communication,” while “meta and comment” and “share and discussion” sites are characterized by an “unmoderated participatory communication.”<sup>357</sup> In reality, though, most online news sites are hybridized; they have a bit of all of these dimensions of online journalism.

John Pavlik, for his part, identifies three stages in the evolution of online journalism.<sup>358</sup> In the first stage, mainstream newspapers merely recycled their print content to the new online platform. This is often derisively called “shovelware” in industry vernacular.<sup>359</sup> The second stage in online journalism improved on the first and involved some interactivity with news content posted on news Web sites. Content was regularly updated on Web sites as news broke. So news appeared on news Web sites first before it appeared in the print editions. The third and current stage is very convergent; it features dynamic content that is not necessarily the same as the print content and that has a lot of multimediality. This is the contemporary phase of online journalism where lengthy interviews that cannot be published in whole due to the traditional constraints of newspaper space are posted online, where the audio and video files of interviews published in print can be uploaded onto news sites, and where exclusively video- and audio-based or photographic reports that can not possibly be captured by the print medium are featured on the Web. It is anybody’s guess what the next stage will be. So, online journalism evolved from textuality to hypertextuality and finally to multimediality. While some people prognosticate that the next stage might witness the death of the traditional media, others caution against such

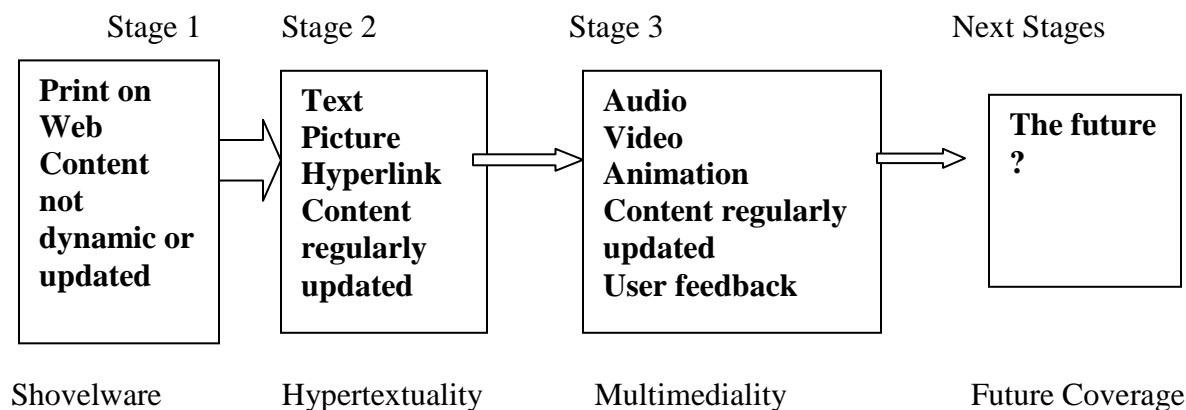
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<sup>357</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>358</sup> John V. Pavlik, “The Future of Online Journalism,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 36 no.2 (1997): 30–38.

<sup>359</sup> Mark Deuze, “Journalism and the Web: An Analysis of Skills and Standards in an Online Environment. *Gazette*, 61 no. 5 (1999): 373–390. Also see Pablo J. Boczkowski, “The Development and Use of Online Newspapers: What Research Tells Us and What We Might Want to Know,” in *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*, L.A. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds), 270–86. London: Sage, 2002. He cites several studies that show that a vast majority of newspaper Web sites were no more than “shovelware.”

gloomy, apocalyptic projections, insisting instead that “newspapers can coexist with the Internet while surrendering some tasks, such as archiving factual background, becoming instead more analytical advocates.”<sup>360</sup>



**Table 1: Three Stages of Online Journalism**<sup>361</sup>

The Web sites of Nigerian homeland newspapers fail the requirements of Deuze’s multimediality and hypertextuality and seem to be stuck in Pavlik’s first stage in the evolution of online journalism. The defunct *Post Express*, the first Nigerian newspaper to migrate its content to the Internet in 1996 under the direction of the late Dr. Stanley Macebuh,<sup>362</sup> merely recycled its

<sup>360</sup> John Nerone and Kevin G. Barnhurst, “Beyond Modernism: Digital Design, Americanization and the Future of Newspaper Form,” *New Media & Society* 3 no. 4 (2001), 467[467-483]. For other lively debates about the future of the newspaper in the age of the Internet, see Bob Franklin, “The Future of Newspapers,” *Journalism Practice* 2 no. 3 (2008): 306-317; Martin Conboy and John Steele, “The Future of Newspapers,” *Journalism Studies*, 9 no. 5 (2008): 650-661; Robert G. Picard, “Shifts in Newspaper Advertising Expenditures and their Implication for the Future of Newspapers,” *Journalism Studies*, 9 no. 5 (2008):704-716; and Tanjev Schultz and Paul S. Voakes, “Prophets of Gloom: Why Do Newspaper Journalists Have So Little Faith in the Future of Newspapers?” *Newspaper Research Journal* 20 no. 2 (1999): 23-41.

<sup>361</sup> Table adapted from Daniela V. Dimitrova and Matt Neznanski, “Online Journalism and the War in Cyberspace: A Comparison between U.S. and International Newspapers,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2006): 248–263.

<sup>362</sup> The Sun News, “Stanley Macebuh (1942-2010),” <http://www.sunnewsonline.com/Webpages/opinion/editorial/2010/mar/17/editorial-17-03-2010-001.htm> (accessed



print content to the Web. Since then, subsequent Nigerian newspapers that appeared on the Web, for the most part, also repurposed static shovelware from their print versions. There were exceptions, though. The Nigerian *Guardian*, which prides itself on being “the flagship of Nigerian journalism,”<sup>363</sup> used to be interactive. The online forums and chatrooms it created for discussing its news content were so popular between the late 1990s and the early 2000s that it was the first port of call for homesick Nigerians living in the West. A participant in the chatroom discussions who lived in the UK at the time called it the “rallying point for Nigerians at home and abroad to meet and discuss common issues of national importance.”<sup>364</sup> However, realizing that its forums had become wildly popular, the paper decided to commercialize participation. It required people to pay upfront before being allowed to participate in the online discussion forums. The paper lost nearly all of its participants. Nobody was prepared to pay a fee in order to be able to discuss across spatial and temporal boundaries. Instead, this move to commercialize participation in the *Guardian*’s chatrooms inspired diasporan Nigerians to set up their own discussion groups.

To require people to pay a fee before interacting with a newspaper’s content was a thoughtless and unimaginative business strategy. The *Guardian* could have used one of the many strategies the DailyMail.co.uk deployed to earn money from its message boards, including advertising overlays and sponsorship, use of “intelligent hyperlinks” within postings, etc.<sup>365</sup>

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April 10, 2010). This newspaper editorial asserts that “the *Post Express* (Post Express Wired) was the first [Nigerian] newspaper to be published on the Internet.”

<sup>363</sup> See Ette, “Agents of Change or Stability: The Nigerian Press Undermines Democracy.”

<sup>364</sup> Uche Nworah, “The Impact of the Internet on Journalism Practice in Nigeria,” accessed April 7, 2010 from <http://www.nathanielturner.com/journalisminnigeria.htm>.

<sup>365</sup> Neil Thurman, “Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of User Generated Content Initiatives by Online News Media,” *New Media & Society* 10 no. 1 (2008):139–157.

Now, the Nigerian *Guardian*'s Web site does not even provide any kind of platform to interact with or comment on its stories. It has reverted to posting shovelware versions of its print edition and does not even have a functional, intuitive search feature, nor does it have an online archive of its content—all features that are basic and integral to the architecture of the Web sites of almost all mainstream Western news media.

A recent notable case of a Nigerian newspaper that could be said to be in the second stage of Pavlik's periodization of online journalism is the Abuja-based *Leadership* newspaper. The paper's Web site provided a robust platform for readers to react to and interact with its stories. Reader comments were uncensored and unfiltered. However, in time it attracted Internet trolls who turned the forum into avenues for throwing caustic vitriol not only at the writers, editors, and reporters of the paper but also at other Nigerian ethnic groups. The site was also hacked through the message boards.<sup>366</sup> The paper took a decision, after about one year of uncensored comments, to require that readers be registered first before they can have the right to post comments on the site. The policy drove most readers away.

Other Nigerian newspapers that currently experiment with some form of interactivity in their Web sites are *Daily Trust* (based in Abuja, Nigeria's federal capital), *P.M. News*, *Vanguard*, *Punch*, and the *Nation* (all based in Lagos) and the up-and-coming multi-media news platform called *NEXT*, which is led by Dele Olojede, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Nigerian journalist who served as the foreign editor for *Newsday*. At the time of writing this, *NEXT* is the only mainstream Nigeria-based daily newspaper that streams video and audio, that is updated in real

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<sup>366</sup> Many Nigerian newspapers, because of their rudimentary technical capacities, get hacked through the feedback mechanisms they provide on their sites. That is why many of them have backed out of providing interactive features to their site. A recent example is the case of the up-and-coming Abuja-based *People's Daily* newspaper, which was shut down for more than a week because it was hacked through the reader comments section. After getting back up, it banned reader comments entirely.

time, and that is truly hypertextual and fully searchable.<sup>367</sup> Most of the other Nigerian papers with an online presence are stuck in the first stage of online journalism.

In many ways, the majority of Nigeria's mainstream newspapers are guilty of the criticisms that media critic Jon Katz leveled against the U.S. media in the late 1990s. He criticized U.S. newspapers for remaining "insanely stagnant in an interactive age."<sup>368</sup> Donald Matheson attributes this to the mainstream media's tendency to have a "rather static core set of news practices" and to place "other journalistic practices at its margins."<sup>369</sup> Business and technology columnist Dan Gillmor, for his part, attributed the slow adoption of the blog by the mainstream media to their "innate conservatism" and asserted further that "when big media companies consider having a conversation with their audience, they tend not to push many boundaries."<sup>370</sup> These criticisms now seem dated in reference to the mainstream media in the West, but they are still apt in reference to the mainstream media in Nigeria. In the case of Nigeria, however, it seems more plausible to implicate low technological development and print journalists' unease with Internet technology for this state of affairs than the "static core of news practices" or an "innate conservatism."

It is precisely this structural and functional deficiency of traditional homeland newspapers that provided the fillip for the emergence, popularity, and acceptance of citizen

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<sup>367</sup> The homepage of *NEXT*, which came on board in 2009, can be found at [www.234next.com](http://www.234next.com). It is bankrolled by former minister of the Nigerian Federal Capital Territory Nasiru el-Rufai who found himself outside the orbit of power and became a virulent critic of the government of the day. He was on self-exile in the United States and the United Arab Emirates. With the death of President Umar Musa Yar'adua on May 5, 2010, he returned to Nigeria and is back in the political mainstream.

<sup>368</sup> Cited in Donald Matheson, "Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism," *New Media & Society* 16 no. 4 (2004): 444.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid*, 446.

<sup>370</sup> Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2004), 112.

media by Nigerians who reside outside the shores of their native country; diasporan citizen online newspapers merely took advantage of the weak online presence of Nigerian newspapers to establish their relevance. Most of the Web sites that will be profiled in the next section clearly belong in the third stage of Pavlik's mapping of online journalism. Their content is active and updated in real time. They are hypertextual, interactive, and multi-media. Because of these qualities, they have beaten homeland newspapers, except perhaps *NEXT*, in breaking regular, routine news stories. Typically in moments of political crisis the most popular diasporan Web sites almost always shut down because of high traffic. Unlike the Web sites of homeland newspapers, the diasporan online media outlets also provide video and audio clips of newsworthy events, such as the video tape of a Muslim governor caught dancing with Arab prostitutes and spraying money with reckless abandon at a Dubai night club<sup>371</sup> and an audio tape of a serving Nigerian governor detailing plans on how he intended to rig elections using thugs dressed in fake military attire who would intimidate voters. This quality—that is, accompanying stories with multimedia features—redounds to the popularity and credibility of diasporan online news sites. Most mainstream Nigerian newspapers have no technical capability or expertise, for now, to report on the kinds of news stories that involve video and audio components and animated graphics even if they so desired, and this is precisely why the institutional media in the homeland are such poor competitors to their diasporan online counterparts.

#### **4.1 Profiles of the Diasporan Online Media**

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<sup>371</sup> SaharaTV, "Borno Governor, Senator Ali Modu Sheriff Dancing and Spraying Dollars in Dubai," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRCuvQZPlgw> November 05, 2008 (accessed April 10, 2010).

As Chapter Three illustrates, members of the Nigerian diaspora, especially in the United States, are early adopters of the discursive facility of the Internet. They have used it for debates and for sharing information about the homeland and their immigrant/exile conditions. However, it was only from 2005 onward that this technology has been deployed in a transnational fashion: to engage with, and even influence, the politics of the homeland while being physically displaced from it. The most notable of the online diaspora newspapers are Elendu Reports,<sup>372</sup> Sahara Reporters,<sup>373</sup> the Times of Nigeria,<sup>374</sup> the Nigerian Village Square,<sup>375</sup> HuhuOnline,<sup>376</sup> and PointBlankNews.<sup>377</sup> There are many others such as Empowered Newswire<sup>378</sup> (which operates like a wire service agency), USAfricaonline.com (which prides itself on being the “first African-owned U.S.-based professional newspaper to be published on the Internet”)<sup>379</sup> and IReports-NG.com<sup>380</sup> but, in the main, their influence in the Nigerian domestic public sphere has been peripheral at best and nonexistent at worst. By far the most influential Nigerian diasporic electronic newspapers are the first six identified above. Since their forceful emergence in 2005 and beyond, they have continued to break sensitive news stories that have radically altered the journalistic practices and politics of Nigeria, as the case studies will show. These diaspora news

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<sup>372</sup> The homepage of this online paper can be found at <http://www.elendureports.com/>

<sup>373</sup> Check the site at <http://www.saharareporters.com/>

<sup>374</sup> [www.timesofnigeria.com](http://www.timesofnigeria.com)

<sup>375</sup> [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com)

<sup>376</sup> [www.huhuonline.com](http://www.huhuonline.com)

<sup>377</sup> [www.pointblanknews.com](http://www.pointblanknews.com)

<sup>378</sup> [www.empowerednewswire.com/](http://www.empowerednewswire.com/)

<sup>379</sup> See <http://www.usafricaonline.com/news.html>

<sup>380</sup> This up-and-coming, muckraking outlet (which can be found at <http://ireports-ng.com>) is published from Noblesville, Indiana. It has existed since 2008 but only began to attract attention when it exposed massive corruption scandals in the *Punch* newspaper, one of Nigeria’s most notable daily newspapers. This scandal is one of the case studies explored in this study.

outlets have gone beyond being instruments for the construction of subjectivities in the migratory settings of their owners and consumers to being active change agents in the domestic politics of the homeland. The next section profiles these sites and highlights some of their major news stories.

## 4.2 Elendu Reports

Elendu Reports is published from Lansing, Michigan and is associated with Jonathan Elendu, a former newspaper journalist with the Nigerian *Daily Times*. The fact of his being a previous newspaper journalist who is now involved with citizen and alternative journalism brings to mind Tony Harcup's caution against the "binarism" so often evident in the conceptualizations of alternative and mainstream media formations. Harcup's research suggests that "there may be some crossover of ideas, content, style, and, not least, people between what may be termed the alternative and what may be termed the mainstream; that some of the alternative media's 'hybridized voices' ... may on occasions resonate within the mainstream."<sup>381</sup> This is certainly the case with Elendu Reports, and it was especially true in the early period of its emergence. Although the site is owned by Elendu, a former reporter-turned-citizen-journalist who is now a legal permanent resident in the US, some of the most momentous news reports and investigations on the site were contributed by diverse citizen reporters who had no previous journalistic training or experience.<sup>382</sup> This illustrates "the existence of what might be termed a continuum, with people, ideas and practices moving along this continuum, in both directions."<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Tony Harcup, "'I'm Doing this to Change the World': Journalism in Alternative and Mainstream Media," *Journalism Studies* 6 no. 3 (2005), 370.

<sup>382</sup> Among the prominent citizen journalists that made Elendu Reports a hit with Nigerians at home and in the diaspora is a certain Omoyele Sowore, a former student union activist who studied geography in the university. He later relocated to the United States and earned a master's degree in public policy from Columbia University. Sowore

It is not only in the professional profile of its key personnel that Elendu Reports can be said to represent a continuum between mainstream and alternative journalism practices. Even the structural configuration of the site maintains a kinship with the Web sites of homeland newspapers. For instance, unlike other diasporan citizen media sites, it does not post video and audio content. Nor does it have a mechanism for readers to interact with its stories in the form of reader comments. However, its content is updated in real time, making it a resource for domestic newspapers in Nigeria and a port of call for Nigerians in search of up-to-date news about the homeland.

Since its inception on May 20, 2005 to January 2011 when this study was concluded,<sup>384</sup> *Elendu Reports* has conducted nearly 900 investigative political stories and over 400 interviews (which solicit questions from readers—its most interactive feature) that have had major impacts in the homeland. A few of them will be cited. The first major story that the news outlet broke, titled “Carlton Masters: Obasanjo’s Multi-Million-Dollar Lobbyist,” was an investigative story on the shady dealings between Nigeria’s former president Olusegun Obasanjo and the Atlanta-based Goodworks International, LCC founded by Mr. Andrew Young, the former United States Ambassador to the United Nations. Carlton Masters, a co-founder of Goodworks, Elendu Reports alleged, helped launch a presidential library campaign for Nigeria’s then president where he blackmailed Nigerian public and private enterprises to contribute millions of dollars to the project in violation of Nigeria’s laws. Wole Soyinka, Africa’s first Nobel Prize winner in

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later fell out with Elendu and set up his own independent citizen media site called Sahara Reporters, which will be profiled in the next section.

<sup>383</sup> Harcup, “‘I’m Doing this to Change the World’,” 370.

<sup>384</sup> The site actually started on November 30, 1999 but closed shop the same day after publishing just five low-impact stories that seemed like regular homeland newspaper stories. It reemerged in 2005 and has remained consistent since then. Its popularity peaked in 2006 and has been on the decline ever since.

Literature, described this as an act of “executive extortion.”<sup>385</sup> The story also alleged that oil contracts running into several millions of dollars were awarded to Goodworks without due process.<sup>386</sup> One of Nigeria’s most widely read newsmagazines, *The News*, picked up the story and reproduced it verbatim.<sup>387</sup> Other daily newspapers followed suit later. The story was significant because it ruptured the image of transparency and honesty that the president had managed to build around his public persona over the years.<sup>388</sup> *Elendu Reports* took advantage of the Freedom of Information Act in the United States to check the records of Goodworks and exposed many shocking details of the morally questionable relationship between Nigeria’s president and his lobbyists in America. This became grist in the editorial mills of local Nigerian newspapers. In fact, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* picked up the story too from the reporting of *Elendu Reports*.<sup>389</sup>

Similarly, when Louisiana Congressman William Jefferson was embroiled in a bribery controversy that also implicated Nigeria’s then vice president, Atiku Abubakar, local Nigerian newspapers depended on *Elendu Reports* for updates on the story. In the past, they would have had to depend on Western news agency reports, and if the news agencies did not show an interest

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<sup>385</sup> Gabriel Omoh, Sina Babasola and Hector Igbikiowubo, “Obasanjo’s Library Fund is Executive Extortion – Soyinka,” *Vanguard*, May 17, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200505171507.html>).

<sup>386</sup> See Jonathan Elendu, “Carlston Masters: Obasanjo’s Multi-Million Dollar Lobbyist,” May 20, 2005, [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=33)

<sup>387</sup> See Farooq A. Kperogi, “Guerrillas in Cyberia: The Transnational Alternative Online Journalism of the Nigerian Diasporic Public Sphere.” *Journal of Global Mass Communication* 1 no. 1 (2008): 72-87.

<sup>388</sup> For other stories that graphically exposed the president’s corruption, see Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “War on Corruption: Obasanjo is Complicit,” *Elendu Reports*, September 06, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=61&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=61&Itemid=33)); Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “War on Corruption: Obasanjo’s Oily Hands,” *Elendu Reports*, September 10, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=33)).

<sup>389</sup> See Mae Gentry and Shelia M. Poole, “GoodWorks Draws Criticism: Andrew Young's Lobbying Firm under Fire for Ties with Nigerian President Obasanjo.” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 18, 2007 [www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/atlanta/stories/2007/03/17/0318etgoodworks.html](http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/metro/atlanta/stories/2007/03/17/0318etgoodworks.html) - 44k -(accessed April 10, 2010).



in the story it would never have been reported in the local media. But a distinctly Nigerian journalistic reporting and interpretation of the Jefferson bribery case, using the journalistic resources of the United States, altered the nature and character of reportage on the issue in the Nigerian local press. An evaluation of the archives of major Nigerian newspapers at the time of the incident showed that the reporting and interpretive frameworks of *Elendu Reports*, not U.S. news agencies or newspapers, informed the local reporting of the issue.

Another major story that the citizen media site broke in 2005 was the involvement of former President Obasanjo's 28-year-old son in the acquisition of multi-million-dollar property in New York. The reporters showed documents to substantiate their claims. The news became so widespread in Nigeria that the government was forced to respond to the allegations in the domestic press, even though most domestic newspapers initially ignored the story for fear of falling foul of Nigeria's notoriously slippery libel laws. The government's spokesperson said the son of the president acquired the property with a mortgage from a U.S. bank. This turned out to be false. Not familiar with the nature of record keeping in the United States, the government did not realize that citizen reporters at *Elendu Reports* could easily disaffirm their claims by investigating the lending history of the president's son. The reporters' investigation showed that the president's son did not get a mortgage to buy the property.<sup>390</sup> The local media got interested in the story and picked it up. It became a major embarrassment for the government.

The newspaper also broke sensational stories about the U.S. investments and bank accounts of serving Nigerian governors and other important government officials. The Nigerian constitution forbids elected officials from keeping foreign bank accounts. Violation of this

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<sup>390</sup> See Jonathan Elendu and Sowore Omoyele, "Olu Obasanjo's House: Lies, Half-truths, and Threats," *Elendu Reports*, September 12, 2005  
[http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=64&Itemid=33)

policy, the Nigerian constitution says, is sufficient ground for the impeachment and removal of elected officials and for other kinds of stern disciplinary measures against appointed government officials.<sup>391</sup> It also published pictures of the insanely expensive homes purchased by Nigerian governors and ministers in Potomac, Maryland, and in London.<sup>392</sup>

In time, however, Elendu Reports began to soften its criticism of the governor of the northwestern state of Sokoto about whom it had done a series muckraking of reports. Its reports had been picked up almost entirely by *TheNews* and the *Nigerian Tribune* and became the basis for a motion to probe the governor by the Sokoto State House of Assembly, as the legislative arm of the state government is called. The legislative committee that investigated the governor “tendered in evidence to the Committee... copies of *TheNews* magazine, the *Nigerian Tribune*, excerpts from *Elendureports.com* and other newspaper publications.”<sup>393</sup> Curiously, shortly after he was exculpated by a pliant, rubber-stamp committee that putatively investigated him, the then

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<sup>391</sup> See Segun O. Osoba, “Corruption in Nigeria: Historical Perspectives,” *Review of African Political Economy* 23 no. 69 (1996): 371 – 386.

<sup>392</sup> See, for, instance, this series of exposés about the corrupt property purchase of governors in the U.S, particularly in Potomac, Maryland (a reason it’s dubbed the “Potomac bug”) and London: Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “Potomac Mansions: Kalu and Atiku are Neighbours,” *Elendu Reports*, August 30, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=58&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=58&Itemid=33)); Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “More Corrupt Deals of Bayelsa Governor Uncovered,” *Elendu Reports*, September 30, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=73&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=73&Itemid=33)); Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “Sokoto Governor Has His Share of London,” *Elendu Reports*, August 04, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=76&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=76&Itemid=33)); Omoyele Sowore and Jonathan Elendu, “ ‘The House is Mine’: Sokoto Governor,” *Elendu Reports* October 6 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=77&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=77&Itemid=33)); Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “Sokoto Governor Paid £500,00.00 More for House,” *Elendu Reports*, October 9, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=79&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=79&Itemid=33)). Jonathan Elendu and Omoyele Sowore, “Bayelsa Governor’s ‘Modest’ Mansion in Potomac,” *Elendu Reports*, October 13, 2005 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=82&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=82&Itemid=33)). In all of these exposes, documents and pictures were used to prove allegations. Many of the indicted owned up to their corruption but explained it away.

<sup>393</sup> Jonathan Elendu, “Bafarawa Cleared By House of Assembly,” *Elendu Reports*, February 27, 2006 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=177&Itemid=29](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=177&Itemid=29)).

governor called Jonathan Elendu to tell him that “the State Assembly has cleared me from the trouble you started for me.... I am obviously very happy as you can tell.”<sup>394</sup> Subsequent stories published on the site whitewashed the governor.<sup>395</sup> And advertorials from the governor began to appear on the site with a regularity that many observers found curious. It later emerged that Jonathan Elendu had struck a deal with the governor to become his “media consultant.”<sup>396</sup> Omoyele Sowore, Elendu’s main partner, was disillusioned and scandalized. He subsequently stopped any professional association with Elendu Reports.<sup>397</sup> In 2006, after leaving Elendu Report, he set up SaharaReporters.com.

Elendu Reports, as has been shown above, exposed corruption and challenged abuse of power in radical ways, although its credibility has been tainted over the course of its existence. Perhaps it is not surprising that the site turned out to be not the alternative news site that people assumed it was—or that it started out as. The site indicatively describes itself as a “for-profit company” but solicits contributions from members of the public, and insists that “your contributions to the sustenance of Elendureports.com does [sic] not entitle you to anything or create any obligations between you, the publisher, editors, and staff of Elendureports.com.”<sup>398</sup> Surprisingly, the site has almost no ads as of May 2010. It does not even have the easy-to-get

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> The governor invited Elendu to Sokoto and he wrote an incredibly laudatory account of the governor’s governance. See Jonathan Elendu, “A Visit to the Seat of the Caliphate,” Elendu Reports, March 26, 2006 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=186&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=186&Itemid=33)).

<sup>396</sup> Mike Jimoh, “Blogger/Blackmailer Unmasked,” Nigerian Village Square, March 03, 2007 (accessed April 11, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/j2/articles/nvs/bloggerblackmailer-unmasked.html>).

<sup>397</sup> Jonathan Elendu, “Sowore Disengages From Elendureports.com,” Elendu Reports, January 4, 2006 (accessed April 11, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=150&Itemid=33](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=150&Itemid=33)). The story says Sowore announced his disengagement by email “which he distributed to his friends,” indicating that the disengagement was acrimonious.

<sup>398</sup> See the front page of the site, [http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1) (accessed April 12, 2010).

Google ads to which many Web sites and blogs subscribe in order to earn some revenue, although Websiteoutlook.com, a site that purports to be able to estimate the real-time worth of Web sites, claims that Elendu Reports generates daily ad revenue of \$8.6 and is worth \$6278.<sup>399</sup>

Although Elendu Reports' credibility has been badly besmirched by its questionable association with a governor it has reported to be corrupt, the Nigerian federal government still found the owner of the site a sufficient source of concern to arrest and detain him when he traveled to Nigeria. Details of this will be discussed at the end of this chapter. As I will show in Chapter Six, ElenduReports exemplifies the difficulties of identifying what constitutes alternative journalism. The main personality associated with the site was a former mainstream newspaper journalist who chose to expose corruption in his homeland in ways that ruffled the composure of the elite. Additionally, the site, by not having ads, gave the impression that its politics and editorial choices were motivated by lofty, progressive ideals. In time, however, it became profoundly implicated in the ills it fulminated against. Thus, it ultimately became no different from the homeland legacy media whose loss of critical, investigative reporting tradition was the basis for the popularity of the site. This shows the fluidity and hybridity of journalistic genres and the inappropriateness of the binaries between alternative journalism and mainstream journalism. It also illustrates that overt aversion to advertising is not necessarily an indication of principled editorial independence.

### **4.3 SaharaReporters**

Sowore Omoyele, a New York-based activist and permanent U.S. resident who had no previous mainstream journalistic training or experience broke away from *Elendu Reports* to set

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<sup>399</sup> Websiteoutlook, <http://www.Websiteoutlook.com/www.elendureports.com>; accessed May 10, 2010.

up the *Sahara Reporters*. Sowore, a former radical president of the University of Lagos students' union government, drew national and international media attention in 1992 when he led thousands of students to protest against military rule. Police opened fire on the student protesters and killed seven of them. Sowore miraculously survived the bloodbath and became a media sensation. Before he relocated to the United States in 1999, he had been illegally imprisoned and tortured by the law enforcement agents of Nigeria's military regimes at least eight times.<sup>400</sup> The journalistic practices of the site he founded are consciously modeled in the tradition of "guerrilla journalism" in Nigeria—unconventional, uncompromising, adversarial advocacy journalism that was used by certain weekly newsmagazines to confront brutal military dictatorships in Nigeria in the 1990s.<sup>401</sup> The site's "About Us" page sums up its founding philosophy and identity thus:

Sahara Reporters is an online community of international reporters and social advocates dedicated to bringing you commentaries, features, news reports from a Nigerian-African perspective. A unique organization, founded in the spirit of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, comprising of ordinary people with an overriding commitment to seeking the truth and publishing it without fear or favor. Because *its core members are unapologetic practitioners of advocacy journalism*, Sahara Reporters also serves as an umbrella outlet for objective reporting of verifiable and accurate news and untainted social commentaries for anyone wishing to exercise their freedom of speech in the public interest and common good [emphasis mine].<sup>402</sup>

Of all the Nigerian diasporan online media currently in existence, Sahara Reporters is the closest approximation to the previously adversarial but now mainstream Nigerian guerrilla newsmagazines. In fact, it has turned out to be more influential and more adversarial than these

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<sup>400</sup> ChatAfrik, "Omoyele Sowore," accessed April 24, 2010 from <http://www.chatafrikarticles.com/categories/Article-Writers-Profile/Omoyele-Sowore/>. For a really intriguing account of the life and times of Sowore as a student union activist see the account of one his childhood friends, Tunde Oyedoyin, "Omoyele Sowore: The 10-Year-Old Boy Who Became an Activist," accessed April 24, 2010 from <http://www.chatafrikarticles.com/categories/Article-Writers-Profile/Omoyele-Sowore/>.

<sup>401</sup> For a fascinating account of this brand of journalism by a former editor of one of Nigeria's "guerrilla" newsmagazines, see Dapo Olorunyomi, "Defiant Publishing in Nigeria," *Media Studies Journal* 10 no. 4 (1996): 65-74.

<sup>402</sup> Sahara Reporters, "About Sahara Reporters," [http://www.saharareporters.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=584](http://www.saharareporters.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=584) (accessed April 12, 2010).

erstwhile alternative media platforms. Amory Starr has pointed out that the Web has now become a veritable extension of the alternative press.<sup>403</sup> But in the Nigerian case, it is not an extension but a reincarnation and intensification of the alternative press. The site's explicit revolutionary inclinations and almost compulsive opposition to all governments in Nigeria mark it out as the most "alternative" of all the Nigerian diasporan media. Evidence of its revolutionary commitments came to light in the story of a young Nigerian who applied to work for the site as a citizen reporter from Nigeria. The young Nigerian who described himself as a faithful reader of the site recalled his experience: "I wanted to be a Sahara reporter. I scribbled down an application letter and sent by email, in a minute I got a reply to my mail." The response he received, which he reproduced in his article, graphically captures the uncompromisingly adversarial editorial philosophy of the site. It reads:

Dear you,  
 This is to acknowledge receipt of your application to the organization.  
 As part of [our] company policy, eligible candidates must possess the following: A penchant for government dirty news, ownership of a covert camera, ownership of dual passports, ownership of a face mask, ability to pick up arms and revolt, ability to incite the public against the government, [and] guerilla warfare experience will be an added advantage.  
 If you meet the above mentioned qualifications, please feel free to give us a call.  
 Regards,  
 The Sahara team<sup>404</sup>

The writer said he was perplexed. He said he expected to read about educational qualifications and years of journalism experience as yardsticks to measure his suitability for "admission into an enviable organization like Sahara Reporters." He ended his rumination by criticizing the Sahara Reporters brand of journalism. "My fellow Nigerians, yes we know all is not well with our

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<sup>403</sup> Amory Starr, *Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), ix.

<sup>404</sup> Joshua Ocheja, "Nigeria at the Mercy of Sahara Reporters," <http://www.gamji.com/article8000/NEWS8584.htm> (accessed April 12, 2010). The editors of Sahara Reporters have never denied the letter. In fact, they published this account on their site.

nation [but] Sahara reporters is not doing us any good. We need to focus and re-strategize not with the likes of Sahara reporters exposing our weaknesses like a cancerous growth. Corruption and bad leadership [are] not exclusively Nigerian.”<sup>405</sup>

In an interview with *Tell*, one of the erstwhile “guerilla” newsmagazines, Omoyele Sowore was asked if he thought “Sahara Reporters does what Nigerian journalism is not doing? How well is SR doing?” His response was as insightful as it was viciously censorious of mainstream news practices at home:

Saharareporters is not a journalistic endeavor. It is a reportorial platform for Nigerian citizens. It is a place where citizens report news – where they report themselves. We do not lay claim to the practice of journalism. We do not write or keep journals. We report events, news and write reports of real time issues. *It is our response to the failure – the refusal or lack of will on the part of professional journalists – to report real news to the people.* The goal of Saharareporters is like asking citizens to prepare their own food instead of eating junk food. SR is doing well in that regard. We have broken the sound and speed barriers of reporting authentic, evidence-based news [emphasis mine].<sup>406</sup>

In the same interview, he told the magazine that “Nigerian journalism... is going through its worst moments today. There is a difference between journalism and the circulation of press releases written by state governors and their media aides.” When he was asked what message he had for Nigerian journalists, he said, “The message for them is on Saharareporters. They know how to get it.” And in response to a question about what awards he had won since starting Sahara Reporters, he said he did not venture into adversarial citizen journalism to garner awards.

I have received lots of threats: those are my awards for what I do. It comes with the territory. The threats and harassment, just like awards, are the inspiration that push this work. Each time I am threatened, I interpret it to mean that we must necessarily create a society where no one is threatened for expressing his or her opinion and for using his or her talents.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Tudun Adeyemo, “Why I Write: Omoyele Sowore,” *Tell*, September 7, 2009. The interview is republished on the reporter’s blog and can be found here: <http://tundunadeyemo.blogspot.com/2009/09/why-i-write-omoyele-sowore.html> (accessed April 24, 2010).

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

Similarly in an appeal for financial assistance on its site in 2008, Sahara Reporters announced, “We want to remain true to our dream of providing average readers with the tools that can help them make informed decisions about how their nations are run in the Sub-Saharan African region...” and vowed to “remain the authentic, independent, and investigative citizen reporters who unearth what has remained hidden from the public eye.”<sup>408</sup>

Sahara Reporters is far and above the most popular and the most politically consequential Web-based newspaper with Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora. It gets millions of hits in a month and its news stories generate hundreds of reader comments.<sup>409</sup> No other Nigerian Web site comes even close to this. It is highly interactive, hypertextual, and multimedia—all the elements of the third stage of online journalism identified by Pavlik. It also has a devastatingly effective photo essays section that graphically chronicles corruption among Nigerian elite and a huge “E-library” containing incriminating documents—such as convictions— against prominent government officials. More than any Nigerian media outlet—whether mainstream or citizen— it has a huge, fanatical online community of readers and commenters that also supports it financially through voluntary contributions. In moments of political uncertainty in Nigeria, the site literally shuts down due to extremely high traffic. For instance, when news from the grapevine filtered through that Nigeria’s then ailing but now dead president, Umar Musa Yar’adua, had been flown back from Saudi Arabia (where he was receiving treatment) to Nigeria in an air ambulance in order to stop his vice president from assuming acting presidential duties, millions of people turned to Sahara Reporters. The site crashed and had this message on its site:

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<sup>408</sup> Sonala Olumhense, “Our SaharaReporters,” *The Nigerian Village Square* August 10, 2008; accessed April 24, 2020 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/sonala-olumhense/our-saharareporters.html>.

<sup>409</sup> Sahara Reporters, “What About Sahara Reporters?” <http://www.facebook.com/#!/?page=1&sk=updates&tid=226337319625> (accessed April 24, 2010).



Please accept SR's apologies. As expected we were hit with high traffic leading our server resources to max out. We are gradually back online and should be fully back later today, check out [www.saharareporters.com](http://www.saharareporters.com) for the latest information on Yar'adua's mysterious and highly secretive return to Abuja early today!

This has happened more than ten times since the site has been monitored for this study. No other Nigerian news site witnesses this volume and intensity of Web traffic. Editors and reporters of local Nigerian newspapers monitor it closely for scoops and breaking stories that they consider “safe” to republish.<sup>410</sup> Although the site’s reportorial practices sometimes verge on premeditatedly extravagant exaggeration in its bid to run down corrupt governments, its credibility has not been called into question in any serious way. It exposes incumbents as much as it hits opposition politicians who actively seek office.

Increasingly, it is also attracting the attention of international news organizations like CNN and BBC, and international wire services like the Associated Press, Reuters, and AFP. When, on December 25, 2009, news of the Nigerian underwear bomber broke, for instance, American and other international news media, including wire services, turned to Sahara Reporters for inquiries on the background of the would-be bomber. In fact, the first photos of the would-be suicide bomber used in the Western media were obtained from the site.<sup>411</sup> This gave the site more international visibility and an added importance at home. Many Nigerians wrote articles to celebrate this feat.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Almost all Nigerian newspaper editors and reporters are “fans” of Sahara Reporters on Facebook. The site also has a “thin media” service in the form of a periodic newsletter of its current stories distributed to an email list to which many editors, reporters, and the general public are subscribed.

<sup>411</sup> See, TIME, “Who is Umar Faruk Abdulmutallab?” TIME, accessed April 24, 2010 from [http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1950292\\_2017642,00.html#ixzz0b8mAvQ6n](http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1950292_2017642,00.html#ixzz0b8mAvQ6n); Jon Gambrelle, “Bomb Suspect Came from Elite Family, Best Schools,” Associated Press, accessed April 24, 2010 from <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=9429039>.

<sup>412</sup> See, for instance, Akin Akintayo, “Nigeria: Sahara Reporters Comes of Age,” NEXT, January 03, 2010; accessed April 24 from <http://community.234next.com/content/nigeria-sahara-reporters-comes-age>.

The site's biggest draw is its uncanny capacity to exploit the discontent and intra-class wrangling of the Nigerian ruling elite to get sensitive scoops and its ability to "on several occasions...[report] stories months before they break in the local Nigerian media."<sup>413</sup> In an interview with another major Nigerian newspaper called the *Sun*, Sowore said he achieved that feat because he had "moles" even in the closets of Nigeria's presidents. "When Obasanjo was president, I had people among those who travel[led] with him that gave me information. And when I report[ed] it, everybody would be wondering where we got the information from. I have moles inside the closet of Obasanjo when he was president of this country. But we don't have to reveal such people."<sup>414</sup>

Sahara Reporters' first major story that shook the Nigerian state was an interview with the first son of Nigeria's president in 2006, Olusegun Obasanjo. The president's son made many shocking revelations about his dad, the country's vice president, and corruption in high places. He said, for instance, that his dad had a "libido problem," that his dad's close lieutenants desired to extend his stay in power beyond the two terms of four years mandated by the Nigerian constitution, and that the vice president of Nigeria at the time was corrupt and greedy.<sup>415</sup> The interview was reproduced in its entirety by almost all Nigerian newspapers and magazines. The

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<sup>413</sup> Sylva Nze Ifedigbo, "It's Been Three Years: An Anniversary Message To Saharareporters," January 24, 2009; accessed April 20, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/sylva-nze-ifedigbo/it-s-been-three-years-an-anniversary-message-to-sahararepor.html>.

<sup>414</sup> Jibola Oyekunle, "I Have Moles in OBJ's Home, Says Omoyele Sowore," *The Sun* Sunday, December 2, 2007; This interview can be found at [http://www.nigerianmuse.com/nigeria-watch/20071201202522zg/I\\_have\\_moles\\_in\\_OBJ\\_s\\_home\\_says\\_Omoyele\\_Sowore](http://www.nigerianmuse.com/nigeria-watch/20071201202522zg/I_have_moles_in_OBJ_s_home_says_Omoyele_Sowore) (accessed April 24, 2010).

<sup>415</sup> Omoyele Sowore/Sahara Reporters, "Exclusive and Explosive: Gbenga Obasanjo on Atiku, El-Rufai, Corruption, Otta, EPZ and More," *The Nigerian Village Square*, January 06, 2006; accessed April 24, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2241](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2241). Also see, Omoyele Sowore, "Gbenja Obasanjo Speaks: Atiku is Greedy," Sahara Reporters January 15, 2006; accessed April 24, 2010 from <http://www.saharareporters.com/interviews/interview-political/452-gbenga-obasanjo-speaks-atiku-is-greedy.html>.

presidency panicked and sought to control the damage of the allegations in the interview. The president's son later denied ever granting any interview to Omoyele Sowore and sued Sahara Reporters, including select Nigerian newspapers and editors that republished the interview.<sup>416</sup> In retrospect, however, almost all the issues revealed in that interview came to pass. The president and his vice president later fell out acrimoniously and publicly, it later emerged that top officials of the president were indeed trying to manipulate the Nigerian National Assembly to amend the constitutional provision that imposed presidential terms limits and, more sensationally, the president's son divorced his wife and told the court that his putative children were actually sired by his father, the former president.<sup>417</sup>

Some of the site's other major stories that called attention to it are the publishing of the pictures of a governorship candidate in morally compromising circumstances. Although the pictures were not reprinted in Nigerian newspapers because of their lurid nature, they were viewed widely by Nigerians at home. The pictures were printed off the Internet and widely distributed to people who had no access to the Internet. This scandal outraged the moral sensibilities of the establishment and caused the political party of the governorship candidate to withdraw his nomination for election.<sup>418</sup>

In 2007, the site also broke stories of allegations of certificate falsification against a governorship candidate and even the chair of the Independent National Electoral Commission,

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<sup>416</sup> See Rueben Abati, "The Gbenga Obasanjo 'Interview,'" [Nigerian] *Guardian*, January 13, 2006; accessed on April 24, 2010 from [http://www.nigerianmuse.com/opessays/?u=Abati\\_on\\_Gbenga\\_Obasanjo\\_interview\\_by\\_Sowore.htm&PHPSESSID=69a95bb996be7efdb8b862b2ff7fbdf8](http://www.nigerianmuse.com/opessays/?u=Abati_on_Gbenga_Obasanjo_interview_by_Sowore.htm&PHPSESSID=69a95bb996be7efdb8b862b2ff7fbdf8).

<sup>417</sup> See Jobola Ojekunle, "Treasonable Sex! 'You Slept with My Wife,' Gbenga Accuses Dad Ex-President Obasanjo and Father-in-law, Doubts Paternity of Kids, Seeks DNA Tests," *The Sun* January 13, 2008; accessed April 24, 2010 from [http://www.nigerianmuse.com/20080112230541zg/spotlight/Son\\_Gbenga\\_Accuses\\_Obasanjo\\_and\\_father\\_in\\_law\\_of\\_sleeping\\_with\\_his\\_wife\\_asks\\_for\\_paternity\\_test\\_and\\_divorce](http://www.nigerianmuse.com/20080112230541zg/spotlight/Son_Gbenga_Accuses_Obasanjo_and_father_in_law_of_sleeping_with_his_wife_asks_for_paternity_test_and_divorce).

<sup>418</sup> Kperogi, "Guerillas in Cyberia."

the organ of government charged with the responsibility of conducting elections at the federal level. Both the governorship candidate, identified as Andy Uba, and the chief electoral officer, Maurice Iwu, indicated in their resumes that they were educated in U.S. and British institutions respectively. But inquiries from these institutions by Sahara Reporters showed that the governorship candidate and the electoral umpire either fabricated some certificates outright or exaggerated their educational attainments. The story captured the imagination of the local media and the Nigerian public.

In spite of the site's uncompromisingly adversarial stance against government officials, it receives attention from official circles. For instance, Nigeria's then vice president Atiku Abubakar, who was at loggerheads with his boss over political differences, granted *Sahara Reporters* a full-length interview where he made stunning allegations against the president. A day after the interview was posted on its Web site, Nigerian newspapers picked it up and splashed it on their front pages. On a daily basis, government representatives respond to negative stories written about them. To their credit, Sahara Reporters gives them the right of reply.

Although Sahara Reporters is sustained mostly through donations from its readers, it also welcomes adverts on its site from different sources: Google Ads; U.S.-based online universities like Capella University, Phoenix University, etc; ads from Nigerian businesses such as banks and oil companies; and Nigerian politicians, including corrupt politicians. Interestingly, however, throughout the five-year period that this site was observed, there has never been an instance of a reciprocal editorial acknowledgement of the advertising patronage of corrupt politicians who advertise on the site. In fact, there have been instances when politicians placed ads on the site and the following day a very negative story about them would appear. A powerful instance of this concerns the governor of the oil-rich state of Delta in Nigeria's deep south, Emmanuel

Uguaghan. The governor's ads promoting his bid for a second term in office appeared on Sahara Reporters regularly for much of the year 2010. But in May of the same year a story broke which implicated the governor in a corrupt transaction involving his predecessor by the name of James Ibori.<sup>419</sup> He was exposed. But his ads continue to appear on the site nonetheless. Interestingly, many Nigerian print newspapers and magazines also advertise on the site. This is particularly true of emerging publications seeking to be noticed and also older publications that want to tickle potential readers' attention about scoops they have uncovered.

It is noteworthy that coming to terms with Sahara Reporter's brand of "insurgent journalism," as James Curran and Jean Seaton<sup>420</sup> call alternative journalism, did not occur as smoothly as my analysis might seem to suggest. It was first resisted by the mainstream domestic media; however, when the resistance had the effect of vitiating the credibility of the local newspapers because news-hungry Nigerians either rushed to Internet cafes to read the stories directly from the site or printed off the stories in bulk for sharing with people who could not afford the cost of reading a paper online, the newspapers were forced to reprint and occasionally add more local color to some of the stories published on the site. This is true for some of the other diaspora citizen media. In a bid to undermine their authority, however, the diasporan media are not usually given credit for the stories lifted from them; they are often just nebulously referred to as "agency reports" or "offshore news sites."

So the relationship between the "insurgent" Sahara Reporters and the local press is at best ambivalent. It is sometimes mutually beneficial (such as when the local press utilizes the

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<sup>419</sup> See SaharaReporters, "As London Case Winds Up, Details of Case Against Ibori Money-laundering Associates Exposed; Governor Uduaghan, David Edevbie also Cited," SaharaReporters, May 9 2010; accessed May 9 2010 from <http://www.saharareporters.com/real-news/sr-headlines/6037-as-london-case-winds-up-details-of-case-against-ibori-money-laundering-associates-exposed-governor-uduaghan-david-edevbie-also-cited.html>.

<sup>420</sup> See James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting, and New Media in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003).

investigative resources of the diaspora press to expose certain governmental corruption—and in the process give the diaspora press more “mainstream” national visibility) and at other times adversarial, such as when the domestic media ignore the exposés by the diasporic media of politicians connected to the owners of some Nigerian newspapers. Such a stance usually imposes strains on the credibility of the domestic press. Often, opposition politicians who benefit politically from investigative stories against politicians that the domestic press ignore recruit young men to make large printouts of the online stories and distribute to people free of charge.

What the profile of SaharaReporters tells us is that commercialism and critique are not mutually exclusive. The fact that the site accepts ads from corrupt politicians has not stopped it from exposing their sordid corruption. This fact is a challenge to the dominant strand in alternative media scholarship that insists that freedom from commercial pressure is the *sine qua non* of alternative journalism. Although advertising does indeed subtly (and in some cases overtly) control editorial content in media organizations, SaharaReporters has shown that it is possible to resist this control. The contrast between Elendu Reports and SaharaReporters is particularly noteworthy: although Elendu Reports does not accept advertising from any source, its editorial output has been found to be thoroughly compromised whereas SaharaReporters has shown remarkable editorial independence in spite of the fact that it accepts ads even from the people it torments through its adversarial journalism.

#### **4.4 The Times of Nigeria**

Another notable diasporan citizen media outlet that exerts some influence on politics and journalistic practices in the homeland is the Times of Nigeria (TON). Unlike Elendu Reports and Sahara Reporters, however, TON is not a muckraking news outlet. It is more mainstream and

traditional in its reportorial temperaments than all the diasporan citizen media examined in this study. Its strongest point from its inception has been its ability to break exclusive news stories about Nigeria. Started in 2005, it is owned by a Maryland-based Nigerian journalist by the name of Sunny Ofili who is a former reporter with the defunct *African Guardian*. He immigrated to the United States in 1993 “with the resolve to become successful in that country.”<sup>421</sup> The TON, which likes to call itself an “online newspaper,” describes itself as “an African initiative by journalists with significant experience in Africa and international coverage” and says its goal is to “break news as it happens. We will provide an authoritative, comprehensive, authentic and analytical coverage of the political process as well as other facets of life in Nigeria and the African continent.”<sup>422</sup> Elsewhere, it describes itself thus:

TheTimesOfNigeria.com is Nigeria’s first independent online newspaper committed to providing real time, dynamic and dispassionate news from Nigeria and Africa. We recognize that, often, news about Nigeria and indeed Africa lack [sic] depth and balance. We intend to remedy this anomaly. TheTimesOfNigeria.com will report Nigerian and African news events from an African perspective.<sup>423</sup>

The site’s strength, especially in its early days, was the richness and reliability of its news sources. Local newspapers look up to it for breaking news and for scoops. A measure of its acceptability in the political mainstream in the homeland was that all the major presidential candidates in the 2007 presidential elections in Nigeria advertised on its Web site. In fact, when Nigeria’s then ruling party presidential candidate, the late Umar Yar’Adua, physically collapsed during one of his campaign events prior to the elections and was rushed to a German hospital for

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<sup>421</sup> Anthony Akaeze, “How They Survived Hard Times in US,” *Newswatch* October 13, 2009; accessed April 24, 2010 from [http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1399&Itemid=48](http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1399&Itemid=48).

<sup>422</sup> See the paper’s company profile at [http://www.thetimesofnigeria.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=41&Itemid=67](http://www.thetimesofnigeria.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=41&Itemid=67).

<sup>423</sup> About US, “Title for The Times of Nigeria,” <http://www.aboutus.org/TheTimesOfNigeria.com>; accessed April 24, 2010.

medical attention, it was the Web site that broke the story before the local or other diasporan citizen media carried it. In time, rumors spread that the then presidential candidate had died in the German hospital where he was admitted. Even the normally authoritative Elendu Reporters at the time reported that Yar'adua had died.<sup>424</sup> Interestingly, when he heard news of his death while in his German hospital, the first news medium he called to confirm that he was alive was the *Times of Nigeria*.<sup>425</sup> A day after publishing the interview with the then presidential candidate on its home page, the local media picked it up and splashed it on their front pages.<sup>426</sup> The paper also has the distinction of having interviewed the Nigerian vice president, former presidents and military heads of state and several other top political figures.

Perhaps TON's strongest point is that it is the medium of choice for propaganda by Niger Delta militants protesting the desperate poverty amidst vast oil wealth in their communities and the unconscionable environmental despoliation of their farming communities by oil companies. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the most prominent group in the Niger Delta, often releases scoops to the TON first before any other media organization. For instance, in 2007, CNN asked its then African correspondent Jeff Koinange to do a story on Niger Delta militancy, which often involves the kidnapping of Western oil workers for ransom.<sup>427</sup> But Koinange and leaders of MEND could not agree on a time for them to take him round their base of operation. But because he had to meet his deadline, he arranged for a group

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<sup>424</sup> Jonathan Elendu, "Yar'adua Dead," Elendu Reports, March 7, 2007; accessed April 25, 2010 from [http://elendureports.com/index.php?Itemid=1&id=356&option=com\\_content&task=view](http://elendureports.com/index.php?Itemid=1&id=356&option=com_content&task=view).

<sup>425</sup> NVS News, "Breaking News Update: 'I'm Alive & Well, Yar'adua Speaks to TON,'" Nigerian Village Square, March 6, 2007; accessed May 11, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5213&catid=168&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5213&catid=168&Itemid=46).

<sup>426</sup> Kperogi, "Guerrillas in Cyberia."

<sup>427</sup> Jeff Koinange, "Big Guns, Big Oil Collide in Nigeria," CNN, February 12, 2007; accessed April 25, 2010 from <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/africa/02/06/btsc.koinange.nigeria/index.html>.



of youths to pose as members of MEND. He then interviewed them and sent a staged report to CNN as an authentic news report.

In the video, we see menacing, hooded “militants” dancing themselves to a state of “trance,” aiming their guns at purportedly kidnapped Pilipino oil workers, and insisting that they would only grant CNN an interview in the middle of the river for “spiritual” reasons—all plots to make the report seem real and make it conform to the prevalent fantasies about Africa in the West. The wild gyrations and exaggerated, even theatrical, show of militancy and bloodthirstiness of the people in the video were simply out of step with the image of a people who were angry. Naturally, the Nigerian government protested and charged that the report was staged. MEND also dismissed the report as staged. This created a strange positional confluence between the Nigerian government, which did not like the report because it portrayed the government in a bad light, and members of MEND who had hoped that CNN would tarry a little while, speak to the real MEND, and give wider publicity to their grouse against the Nigerian state.

CNN stood its ground that the report was real.<sup>428</sup> For a while, it seemed like both the Nigerian government and MEND were unfairly accusing CNN of reportorial fraud. Then MEND contacted the TimesofNigeria.com and gave them the log of the email correspondence between CNN reporter Jeff Koinange and their leader, a certain Jomo Gbomo. It turned out that CNN contacted MEND to arrange for CNN cameras to be brought to their operational base in the Niger Delta creeks, but both parties could not agree on the time for this to happen. In frustration, CNN’s Koinange got a group of Niger Delta youths, paid them some money and told them how to act and what to say for the report.

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<sup>428</sup> CNN.com, “CNN Denies Nigerian Allegations of Staging Report,” February 13, 2007; accessed April 25, 2010 from <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/africa/02/12/nigeria.reaction/index.html>.

In the email correspondence published by TimesofNigeria.com, Koinage told MEND's spokesman Jomo Gbomo that "CNN is been[sic] given the GREEN LIGHT to come into the Delta" and that he wanted to "check with you first and make sure this is a legitimate 'invitation' from you and that your [sic] aware of it." Gbomo responds: "Hi Jeff, do not waste your time with those criminals...misleading the Nigerian government and oil companies into believing they have a relationship with us. They can arrange a few boys who will take you on stage trips through Delta State alone. They do not represent MEND or the people of the Niger Delta." He advises CNN's Koinage to "kindly wait till I give you the green light to come down here" and then adds that the "Nigerian government has been working through such traitors to infiltrate and destroy our group." Koinage appeared to be convinced. He wrote: "In that case, my Brother, I shall wait for your WORD and will only come when you are ready for us," adding that he was getting "a lot of pressure from my headquarters in Atlanta to come and do this story."<sup>429</sup>

He apparently could not wait for the legitimate MEND. Perhaps because Koinage was "getting a lot of pressure from [his] headquarters in Atlanta to come and do this story," he dispensed with the real MEND and preferred to "arrange" a "stage trip" with "criminals." The result was a histrionic journalism on CNN that earned the condemnation of both the Nigerian government and MEND. But when Koinage was interviewed on CNN he lied, claiming that he had no reason to believe that he was not talking to the real MEND. The leakage of the email

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<sup>429</sup> This correspondence is no longer on Times of Nigeria's Web site. But it has been reproduced and archived in Elendu Reports. See Jonathan Elendu, "The Plot to Destroy Jeff Koinage," Elendu Reports, February 21, 2007, accessed April 25, 2010 at [http://www.elendureports.com/index.php?Itemid=1&id=349&option=com\\_content&task=view](http://www.elendureports.com/index.php?Itemid=1&id=349&option=com_content&task=view). I also wrote a three-part reflection on this in my weekly column in the Weekly Trust newspaper. See Farooq A. Kperogi, "CNN, Niger Delta and Western Media Portrayals of Africa (I)," *Weekly Trust*, February 24, 2007; Farooq A. Kperogi, "CNN, Niger Delta and Western Media Portrayals of Africa (II)," *Weekly Trust*, March 3, 2007; and Farooq A. Kperogi, "CNN, Niger Delta and Western Media Portrayals of Africa (III)," *Weekly Trust*, March 10, 2007. These articles are archived on my blog and can be found at <http://farooqkperogi.blogspot.com/2009/03/cnn-niger-delta-and-western-media.html>.

correspondence between him and MEND spokesman on the TimesofNigeria.com put a lie to his claim. He was later fired by CNN as a result of the report.<sup>430</sup> It is instructive that MEND did not choose a domestic Nigerian newspaper to leak the email correspondence to. Nor did it send the incriminating emails to CNN or any international news organization.

The Times of Nigeria has rich, colorful graphics, is interactive, and also streams video. It has citizen correspondents in Nigeria, especially in southern Nigeria, who compete with local newspapers for routine news stories. However, TON's editorial temperaments, for the most part, seem like those of traditional newspapers. It also seems to have a lot of connection with state governments in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta from where the owner of the site hails. Many state governments from that part of Nigeria, especially Delta State, advertise copiously on the site. This is perhaps not altogether unexpected. Many of the stories the site carries about the often corrupt state governments in the area are mostly uncritical at best and gushingly laudatory at worst. The advertising on the site by the state governments is clearly a reciprocal acknowledgement of the site's compliant reporting. In fact, on TON's Facebook page, it is a fan of many pro-government groups such as "Deltans Want Uduaghan Again," a Facebook group championing the re-election for a second term of the governor of the oil-rich Delta State, "Youth Alliance for Emmanuel Eweta Uduaghan," another propaganda group for the Delta State governor, "Atiku for President 2011," a Facebook group for the promotion of the presidential aspirations of Atiku Abubakar, Nigeria's corrupt former vice president, etc. In fact, on the site's

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<sup>430</sup> Nairaland Forum, "Jeff Koinange Sacked From CNN Over His Story On The Niger-delta Based Mend Group," accessed April 25, 2010 from <http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-57196.128.html>. Koinage apparently confessed to his mistress in an email communication that he indeed paid a group of people to stage the Niger Delta report. After he fell out with the mistress she blogged about this. See my reflection on this in my newspaper column, Farooq A. Kperogi, "Now That CNN has Finally Dismissed Jeff Koinage," *Weekly Trust*, June 12, 2007; archived on my blog at <http://farooqkperogi.blogspot.com/2009/03/now-that-cnn-has-finally-dismissed-jeff.html>.

front page, Ofili proudly proclaims himself the “Coordinator—Delta Professionals for Uduaghan.”

Interestingly, since the site’s founding in 2005, it has never exposed any act of corruption by any government. On the contrary, it often functions to refute unflattering stories published against certain government officers, especially anti-corruption stories by SaharaReporters and other muckraking citizen media sites. A sample of recent stories on the site proves this.<sup>431</sup> Perhaps because the site survives through direct advertising patronage from state governments in the Niger Delta, it does not solicit voluntary contributions from its readers like other diasporan citizen media do. It also does not have Google ads but has a lot of advertising from Nigerian banks. Websiteoutlook.com estimates that the site generates at least \$8.88 per day in revenue and puts its net worth at \$6482.4 as of May 2010.<sup>432</sup>

TimesofNigeria.com, clearly, is not an alternative media site in the sense that SaharaReporters is. It can, however, be said to be a site of resistance for Niger Delta struggles, a site for exclusive news about Nigeria’s political intrigues and a site of cynical official propaganda, although there is no evidence that it is bankrolled by any government. Its greatest significance in the media politics of Nigeria is that it has helped to broaden the availability of news. It obviously has access to top politicians in the country and to Niger-Delta militants and

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<sup>431</sup> See, for instance, The Times of Nigeria, “Delta Shares In Oceanic Not Used In Paying Ascot Loan,” April 18, 2010; accessed April 25, 2010 from <http://www.thetimesofnigeria.com/Article.aspx?id=2555>; The Times of Nigeria, “EFCC Continued Investigation In Delta Shows they Have No Evidence Against Me – Ibori,” April 22, 2010; accessed April 25, 2010 from <http://www.thetimesofnigeria.com/TON/Article.aspx?id=2565>. James Ibori, former governor of the oil-rich Delta State is being tried for corruption by Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and has become the byword for corruption in the country.

<sup>432</sup> <http://www.Websiteoutlook.com/www.thetimesofnigeria.com>. These figures, while providing a sense of the monetary worth of the site, are clearly unreliable. It seems reasonable to assume that the site must be making a lot more from the ads of Nigerian state governments and banks to make it dispense with Google ads, the traditional source of income for Web sites.

the advantage of its online platform makes it desirable. In this sense, it qualifies only as a citizen media site.

#### **4.5 The Nigerian Village Square**

The Nigeriavillagesquare.com was founded in 2003 by a group of immigrant Nigerians based in the United States. The main person associated with it is Philip Adekunle, a Chicago-based computer information systems specialist. The site was set up to serve as a locus for the untrammled exchange of ideas and opinions about the homeland by Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora.<sup>433</sup> It is the reinvention, in an electronic form, of the deliberative content of the “village square” in the pre-colonial African social formation where “people from all corners [met] at the Village Square after a hard day's work to sip unadulterated palm-wine, share news, gossip, jokes, music, dance, events and opinions.”<sup>434</sup> In many respects, the pre-colonial African village square that the owners of this Web site are making reference to has many resonances with the early European bourgeois public sphere that Habermas historicized; only that the African village square was pre-modern, pre-bourgeois and did not function as a counterweight to the ruling class, nor did it have any purposive, codified normative ideals that guided its deliberative practices. But it was a core cultural institution that was crucial to the intergenerational perpetuation of traditions, customs and mores, which were shattered with the advent of colonialism.

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<sup>433</sup> See The Nigerian Village Square, “About Us,” <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/about-us.html>

<sup>434</sup> Ibid. For another insightful fictional reconstruction of pre-colonial deliberative practices in what were called village squares in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa, read Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* London: Heinemann, 1986 (originally published in 1958).

The reincarnated village square in electronic form, however, both replicates and transcends the structures and discursive practices of its predecessor. Although the NigeriaVillagesquare.com has guidelines on the form of articles to be posted on its front pages and in its discussion forums, the site is largely unmoderated. It accepts opinion articles, news commentaries, trivia, and even fictional creative writing from all Nigerians and non-Nigerians interested in Nigerian affairs. Contributors to the site do not have to be subscribers or registered users to submit articles, although they need to be registered to participate in online discussions of materials posted on the site. This speaks to the site's inclusivity.

Although the site is not primarily a news site, it publishes breaking news stories, has a citizen media project called "iWitness,"<sup>435</sup> which collates reports from citizen reporters from all over Nigeria especially during periods of conflicts, and it is often the interim medium for many of the diasporan citizen media projects. For instance, after breaking with Elendu, SaharaReporters' reports were first published on the Nigerian Village Square for months before an independent Web site was secured for it. Huhuonline.com also first published its stories on the Village Square before getting its own independent site. Many of the strictly news citizen media sites still share their news stories on the Village Square's message boards, and a great number of politically consequential citizen reports that went on to change state policy started on this site.

The site also has links to the Web addresses of major Nigerian newspapers that have an online presence, periodically posts high-impact and controversial news stories both from the domestic newspapers and from diasporan online newspapers on its front page, and invites discussion from subscribers. This feature has made it one of the most popular Internet sites for Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora. The debates in the site's forums are not only robust,

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<sup>435</sup> The iWitness news site can be found here: <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/witness/>.

and sometimes frenzied, even emotional, but also evince a studious concern for civility in public discourse. Aware that Internet deliberation is easily susceptible to degenerate into ad hominem attacks, the site has what it calls the “Nigerian Village Square Publishing Guide,” which not only gives instructions on how commentaries should be posted on the site but also the ground rules for deliberation. It stresses the importance of eschewing emotive language and embracing what Habermas would call rational-critical debate. And one of the mechanisms established to ensure that this rule is observed is the formation of what is called the “village dumpster” where articles, comments and discussions that are deemed irreverent or overly personal and insulting are consigned.<sup>436</sup> The decision about what posts should be pushed to the “village dumpster” is often arrived at through the votes of registered members of the site. This structural check has imposed self-moderation on many discussions in the forum, but it also occasionally raises allegations of majoritarian tyranny.

It is instructive that over the years the site has transformed from being a mere cyber salon for quotidian dialogic disputations to a close-knit cyber community where deliberations and decisions about national politics take place. For instance, in 2006, when the immediate past president of Nigeria wanted to manipulate the national legislature to amend the constitution to allow him to run for a third term, “villagers,” as members of the discussion forums on the site call themselves, started an Internet petition drive to stop the move. They generated petitions from thousands of Nigerians in the diaspora and contributed money to send a representative to deliver the petition to the President of the Nigerian Senate and the Speaker of the House of

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<sup>436</sup> Isaac Olawale Albert, “Whose Deliberative Democracy? A Critique Of Online Public Discourses In Africa,” Nigerian Village Square, April 19, 2010; accessed May 11, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=15291&catid=67&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15291&catid=67&Itemid=46).

Representatives. It was also delivered to the president when he visited the United States.<sup>437</sup> This move generated publicity in the national media and contributed to the defeat of the president's third-term bid. Similarly, in the same year, when a Nigerian immigrant by the name of Osamuyia Aikpitanhi was murdered by Spanish immigration officers, the "villagers" not only vigorously deliberated on the issue, they contributed money and sent a delegation to Spain to demand an explanation on the circumstances of the death of their compatriot. The delegation also met with the parents of the deceased Nigerian and gave them a \$1,200 check that the "villagers" contributed. It was robustly covered by Nigeria's biggest, state-run television network, the Nigerian Television Authority, more popularly known by its acronym NTA.<sup>438</sup> Similarly, they had a meeting with Nigerian government officials and got the president and the Nigerian legislature to request that Spanish authorities explain the circumstances surrounding the death of the Nigerian and to pay compensation to the family if need be. Weeks after this visit, what would have been an ignored issue was elevated to a major diplomatic row between Nigeria and Spain.<sup>439</sup> At last, the Spanish government set up a commission to investigate the murder of the

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<sup>437</sup> Concerned Nigerians in Diaspora, "Letter to President Obasanjo on Third Term Agenda - On His Visit to the White House," Nigerian Village Square, March 29, 2006; accessed May 17, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2718&catid=111&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2718&catid=111&Itemid=46).

<sup>438</sup> Ahaoma Kanu, "NVS Members Donate \$1200 to the Aikpitanhi Family, NTA Goes Haywire," Nigerian Village Square, August 13, 2007; accessed May 10, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/nvs-projects/nvs-members-donate-1200-to-the-aikpitanhi-family-nta-goes-haywire.html>. "Haywire is used to mean "overly excited" in Nigerian English; it does not mean insane or stupid, as it does in American and British English.

<sup>439</sup> Shola Adekola, "FG Probes Killing of Nigerian Aboard Spanish Plane," *Nigerian Tribune* June 29, 2007; accessed May 13, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6476&catid=169&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6476&catid=169&Itemid=46).



Nigerian and issued an interim apology to the Nigerian government while the investigation was in progress.<sup>440</sup>

The “villagers,” many of whom have never met physically except through the virtual village square, directly intervene in many domestic political issues. Another prominent example is the petition drive that was started in the village square in the midpoint of 2007 to force the Nigerian Vice President to declare his assets. Although the Nigerian constitution does not require public officials to declare their assets publicly, Nigeria’s then newly elected president, in a bid to show his seriousness in fighting corruption, publicly declared his assets for the first time in the country’s history.<sup>441</sup> This singular act earned him praise, but it also paved the way for citizens to demand the same forthrightness from other elected representatives. The vice president insisted that because he was under no constitutional obligation to declare his assets publicly, he would not be railroaded into doing so. Again, members of the Nigerian Village Square started a petition drive to which hundreds of Nigerians in the diaspora appended their signatures. A representative physically went to Nigeria not only to deliver the petition but to attract wide media attention to this event.<sup>442</sup> This pressure contributed to forcing the vice president to publicly declare his

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<sup>440</sup> El Pais, Spain, “Aikpitanhi’s Death Causes Major Policy Change in Spain,” Nigeria Village Square. November 11, 2007; accessed May 13, 2010 from [http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7781&Itemid=46](http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7781&Itemid=46). The report was culled from a Spanish newspaper called *El Pais*.

<sup>441</sup> Bashir Adigun, “Nigerian President Declares Assets,” The Associated Press, June 28, 2007; accessed May 13, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6470&catid=169&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6470&catid=169&Itemid=46).

<sup>442</sup> Guardian Editorial, “DYA Campaign: The Vice President’s Assets,” [Nigerian] *Guardian*, August 8, 2007; accessed May 14, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6801&catid=111&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6801&catid=111&Itemid=46). “DYA” stands for “Declare Your Assets.”

assets.<sup>443</sup> Efforts were doubled to shame other well-placed public officers into publicly declaring their assets.

The media attention that the interventionist activities of members of the Nigerianvillagesquare.com has generated has given it a lot of visibility and clout in government circles, and many well-known personalities in government are known to be registered members of the forum either anonymously or with their full names. A case in point is that of Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi, the former spokesperson for the late Nigerian president, Umar Musa Yar'adua. In the wake of withering attacks against him over a frivolous trip he undertook to the United States,<sup>444</sup> he appeared in the forum in his name to defend himself.<sup>445</sup> In no way, however, can this be construed as an infiltration of the forum by the government. On the contrary, it represents a dialogue with citizens who would ordinarily not have had the privilege for this deliberative exchange had they sought the traditional means of communication with the government.

As most scholars argue, at the heart of most conceptions of the public sphere, especially the Habermasian one, is the idea of conversation, which this Internet forum seems to enhance in more ways than spatially bounded notions of deliberation can. Indeed many scholars contend that conversation in the public sphere is a precondition for democracy. Michael Schudson, for

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<sup>443</sup> P.M. News, "VP Jonathan Declare Assets," *P.M. News*, August 8, 2007; accessed May 14, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6804&catid=111&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6804&catid=111&Itemid=46).

<sup>444</sup> Empowered Newswire, "I am Here to Understudy the Americans--Adeniyi, Yar'Adua's Spokesman, on US Visit," Nigerian Village Square, September 4, 2007; accessed May 15, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7094&catid=22&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7094&catid=22&Itemid=46).

<sup>445</sup> Olusegun Adeniyi, "Why the Hell Am I Here?" Nigerian Village Square, September 07, 2007; accessed May 15, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7117&catid=336&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7117&catid=336&Itemid=46).

instance, notes that “Democracy is government by discussion.”<sup>446</sup> Bruce Ackerman also states that “Dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship.”<sup>447</sup> This Internet discussion group does certainly make possible the type of categories necessary for most, if not all, of Habermas’ “ideal speech situation” to occur.

The communicative acts that take place in this Nigerian virtual village square confirm, to a large degree, that the Internet is capable of facilitating discourse that replicates the central construction of rational-critical debate and that, in a variety of ways, approximate the prerequisites of the Habermasian public sphere. It is discursively inclusive, as evidenced in its policy of not moderating its discussions and in not requiring potential contributors of articles to the site to be registered members. Participation is also entirely voluntary and not the product of coercion by government or corporate interests, and the site’s deliberative practices have so far had impacts on governance in the homeland. What is more, although members of the forum come from different social backgrounds—professors in US, UK, and Nigerian universities, engineers, doctors, students, Nigeria-based working-class people, and so on—there has not been any record of open social discrimination in the discursive enterprise. However, although the main preoccupation of the forum is politics in the homeland, it also features short story fictions, trivia, and can sometimes get bogged down by petty personality disputes.

James Bohman notes that a crucial deficiency of Internet public spaces is that they have no linkages with structures of power, a condition, he says, that divests them of the capacity to “secure the conditions of publicity but also in order to promote the interaction among publics

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<sup>446</sup> Michael Schudson, “Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14 no. 4 (1997): 297-309.

<sup>447</sup> Bruce Ackerman, “Why Dialogue?” *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989):6

that is required for deliberative democracy.”<sup>448</sup> Bohman’s arguments are difficult to sustain when applied to the Nigerian Village Square since the activities of this Internet site generate a lot of media attention in Nigeria. Nancy Fraser’s recent exposition of what constitutes a transnational public sphere also strengthens the case for the Nigerian Village Square to be ascribed the status of a transnational online public sphere. According to Fraser, “a public sphere is supposed to be a vehicle for mobilizing public opinion as a political force. It should empower the citizenry vis-à-vis private powers and permit it to exercise influence over the state.”<sup>449</sup> This Web site’s continually productive engagements with the Nigerian state on domestic policy issues certainly elevate it to a politically consequential public sphere.

It must still be admitted, though, that the relative numerical inferiority of this Internet-based public sphere, and the uncertainty that it can sustain its activities, potentially detracts from its potency. Similarly, although many contributors to the forum are identifiable by their names, several others use anonymous handles. Scholars have debated whether the incidence of anonymity on the Internet invalidates the notion of conversation in news groups and chat rooms in the real sense of the word. This concern is perfectly legitimate, but, as Jodi Dean reminds us, “anxieties around authenticity on the Net function primarily to reassure our trust in the authenticity of other sorts of mediated interactions, indeed, to pathologize our justifiable paranoia.”<sup>450</sup> The point, therefore, is that while some of the Net’s shortcomings significantly detract from the Habermasian status of the public sphere that many scholars ascribe to it, there

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<sup>448</sup> James Bohman, “Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy,” in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* eds Nick Crossley and John M. Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004),146.

<sup>449</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 no. 4 (2007): 7.

<sup>450</sup> Jodi Dean, “Virtually Citizens.” 277-278.

are certainly important respects in which it fulfils this requirement, as the analysis of the Nigerian Village Square suggests.

The foregoing, though, does not seek to institute the relative discursive openness of the Nigerian Village Square as representative of the sort of interaction that takes place on all Nigerian online media forums. While several such examples abound on the Internet, there is also a multiplicity of Web sites that do not have deliberative democracy—or anything remotely related to that—as their *raison d'être*. Although it is incontestable that the Internet meshes with existing, even pre-existing, social functions and extends them in many fresh, sometimes new-fangled, ways, it does not fit easily in comparison to characteristically modern organizations or stereotypically idyllic early modern social and cultural institutions such as the Habermasian public sphere. The new peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the Internet can only become intelligible if a conceptual frame of reference is adopted that does not limit the discussion of the Internet from the outset to predetermined and pre-given patterns of interpretation. More importantly, the Nigerian Village Square has shown the possibility for the co-existence between online communities and citizen journalism. The site provides the platform for citizen reports, for discussions about politics in the homeland, and for direct action. This fits the outlines of the traditional conceptions of alternative journalism. However, the Village Square is a loose collection of disparate people and interests that are not all united by notions of progressive ideology like SaharaReporters is. In more ways than one, it problematizes the boundaries between alternative and citizen journalism in that it provides an arena for both forms of journalism.

#### **4.6 Pointblank News**

Pointblanknews.com was launched on January 20, 2007 by a Nigerian immigrant in the United States by the name of Jackson Ude.<sup>451</sup> Other people associated with the site are Oladimeji Abitogun and Churchill Umoren, who are also based in the United States.<sup>452</sup> The restlessly muckraking but sometimes over-the-top site is published in New York. It describes itself as

an independent online news magazine created to bring about more professionalism in online Journalism [sic]. It has no affiliation with any political party, ethnic groups; religious or social groups within the United States or any where [sic] in the world. PointBlankNews.com is primarily committed to the freedom of speech... fundamental human rights and the journalism ethical responsibility of balance[d] reporting [sic].<sup>453</sup>

It added that it is inspired by the desire to “promote developmental Journalism” and foster a platform “for people to be able to interact, share opinions and proffer solutions to the many political, social and economic problems facing Nigeria and Africa at large.”<sup>454</sup> It is curious, though, that an implacably anti-government, investigative online news outlet like Pointblanknews.com would choose a label like “development journalism” to describe itself. Development journalism has been conceived as a counterpoint to Western conceptions of news, which are said to stress displacement of routine, oddity, and conflict supposedly at the expense of “development,” which Third World countries are said to be sorely in need of. But this concept has been ridiculed as a cover-up for “government-say-so journalism.”<sup>455</sup> In fact, some scholars have pointed out that many repressive African governments have exploited the press to

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<sup>451</sup> Quarkbase, “Pointblanknews.com,” <http://www.quarkbase.com/pointblanknews.com>; accessed April 30, 2010.

<sup>452</sup> Oladimeji Abitogun left the team to found his own online citizen media, [www.sharpedgenews.com](http://www.sharpedgenews.com). Although it is modeled after SaharaReporters.com and Pointblanknews.com, its impact has been modest.

<sup>453</sup> Pointblanknews.com, “About Us,” <http://pointblanknews.com/about.html>; accessed April 30, 2010.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> Christine L. Ogan, “Development Journalism/Communication: The Status of the Concept,” *International Communication Gazette*, 29 no. 1-2 (1982), 3. [3-13].

“consolidate and perpetuate power in the name of development journalism.”<sup>456</sup> It is entirely possible that the site used the phrase “development journalism” out of ignorance of the term’s conceptual subtleties, historical trajectory, and ideological underpinnings.

The site is multi-media, allows for a robust interaction with its content, and liberally lifts stories from the Web sites of Nigeria’s domestic papers on its front page. But it also has an “exclusive news section” that contains only stories that the site’s citizen reporters have reported. Before venturing into online publishing, Pointblanknews.com’s editor-in-chief had edited the *African Post*, a periodic publication that catered to the Nigerian immigrant community in the Bronx area of New York. Prior to this, he had no journalistic experience. The major story that brought Pointblanknews.com to the attention of Nigerians at home and abroad was its exposé of a former Nigerian state governor, Orji Uzor Kalu, who was standing trial for corruption and who forged a letter from the Brigham Women’s Hospital in Massachusetts as a ploy to run away from the country. The letter, purportedly written by a Dr. Black to Orji Kalu, requested the former governor’s presence in the United States for his wife’s surgery. The letter reads in part:

Dear Kalu,

The Brain Tumour Programme [sic] at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Dana Farber Cancer Institute provides a multi-disciplinary brain tumour [sic] clinics in radiation therapy, chemotherapy and neurosurgery, a tumour [sic] board and radio surgery evaluation and is a closely-coordinated effort between Dana Farber Cancer Institute and Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

A comprehensive evaluation and long-time management of your spouse’s present health condition... necessitates a repeat of neurosurgery of the nervous system.... This decision was reached at our board meeting on Friday, July 27, 2007.

At present, based on our evaluation, Ifeoma’s basic cognition is inadequate to offer consent for this surgery to proceed. We, therefore, as required by Massachusetts General

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<sup>456</sup> Jerry K. Domatob and Stephen W. Hall, “Development Journalism in Black Africa,” *International Communication Gazette* 31 no. 1 (1983): 9-33. Also see Bala A. Musa and Jerry Domatob, “Who is a Development Journalist? Perspectives on Media Ethics and Professionalism in Post-Colonial Societies,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 22 no. 4 (2007): 315-331.

Law, request your presence to offer your consent as next-of-kin for this immediate needed care to proceed.

Please be advised that your immediate attention is required as the surgery is scheduled for Wednesday, August 8, 2007 at 6.30 a.m.....

On the basis of this fraudulent letter, Kalu asked the Federal High Court in Abuja to grant him permission to travel to the United States. "I have just received information through Victor Onochie (by fax) to the effect that my wife is due for a major surgery on 8th August in Brigham and Women's Hospital in Massachusetts, USA," he said in a sworn affidavit. But Pointblanknews.com found out that the letter from the Brigham and Women's Hospital was, in fact, a forgery. "When Pointblanknews.com confronted the Hospital with the letter," the online news outlet reported, "Dr. Kwan said, 'that is not Dr. Peter Black's signature. It is obviously forged. This hospital does not issue such letters.'" It further quoted the doctor to have said, "This is strange and we are not taking it lightly. We are looking into it and we might require the police to come in."<sup>457</sup>

Many mainstream and diasporan Nigerian newspapers, apparently instigated by the Pointblanknews.com scoop, did a follow-up and found exactly the same information: the letter was forged.<sup>458</sup> As a result, the former governor was denied permission to travel. The site also busted another corrupt former governor of Jigawa State in Nigeria's far north by the name of Saminu Turaki who also forged a letter from a Singaporean hospital to aid him in escaping trial

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<sup>457</sup> Pointblanknews.com, "U.S. Hospital Accuses Kalu of Forgery," <http://www.pointblanknews.com/os486.html>; accessed May 12, 2010.

<sup>458</sup> See Our Reporter, "Kalu's Wife Not Our Patient Now – US Hospital," *The Punch*, August 14, 2007; accessed May 12, 2010 from <http://www.punchontheWeb.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art2007081323505068>. Also see, SaharaReporters, "US Hospital Denies Knowledge of Surgery Letter on Kalu's Wife," August 08, 2010; accessed May 12, 2010 from <http://67.192.103.155/reports/exclusive/1871-us-hospital-deny-knowledge-of-surgery-letter-on-kalus-wife-.html>.



for corruption.<sup>459</sup> In fact, the entire mission of the site seems to be to expose corruption in high places, especially corruption with international dimensions. Of the 358 stories in the site's "exclusive news archive," 320 unmask high-level corruption in government at all levels.<sup>460</sup> It is no surprise that of all the diasporan online media outlets, it is this site the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria's anti-corruption agency, chooses to advertise with. The most prominent ad on the site's front page for much of the first quarter of 2010 is an ad from the EFCC. It also has context-specific text, image, and video ads from Google AdSense and other Web-based ad-serving applications.

However, the site's reports are not always accurate or responsible. Many of their sensational reports have turned out to be mendacious and scurrilous attacks on innocent people. The most outrageous of this was the site's allegations that the wife of *Vanguard* newspaper publisher, Mrs. Oyindamola Sam-Amuka, had murdered a 14-year-old boy for ritual sacrifice. "According to Pointblanknews.com extensive investigations, during the rituals, Oyindamola, a native of Owo in Ondo State, held onto the already hypnotized boy's head and chanted incantations before the helpless boy was eventually beheaded," the site alleged.<sup>461</sup> It said its citizen crime reporter in Nigeria "stumbled on the scene and surreptitiously captured everything with his lens. He also put a call across to police detectives who arrived at the scene, unfortunately at a time the boy had been beheaded. Four police detectives soon arrived from the

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<sup>459</sup> See Pointblanknews.com, "Turaki Plans Escape, Declares False Affidavit ...As Singaporean Hospital Denies Him," <http://www.pointblanknews.com/os614.html>; accessed May 12, 2010.

<sup>460</sup> To see a comprehensive list of the anti-corruption stories the site has published since its inception, go to Pointblanknews.com, "Exclusive News Archive," <http://www.pointblanknews.com/exclusivenewshome.html>; accessed March 12, 2010.

<sup>461</sup> Pointblanknews.com, "Vanguard Newspaper Publisher, Sam Amuka-Pemu's Wife in Ritual Killing ...14-yr Old Boy Beheaded ...Bribes Police with N4m," accessed March 12, 2010 from <http://www.pointblanknews.com/os1307a.html>.

Crime Investigation Department (CID) Panti, Lagos.”<sup>462</sup> According to the story, the newspaper publisher’s wife’s motivation for the crime was that “her husband was dating another woman whom she wanted the ritualists to kill through supernatural means. Besides, she took along names of some *Vanguard* directors and editors whom she believed were obstacles to her gaining financial control over the newspapers.”<sup>463</sup> It further alleged that the woman, upon being apprehended, bribed the police the sum of 4 million naira (equivalent to about \$50,000). The story was complete with pictures, which made it seem credible.<sup>464</sup>

Shortly after the story broke, the Pointblanknews.com citizen reporter was arrested by the police and charged with extortion and blackmail.<sup>465</sup> But the site vouched for the credibility of its story. While insisting that “Pointblanknews.com is owned and operated by a team of seasoned Nigerian Journalists based in the United States who have practiced both in Nigeria and in the United States with strict professional ethics and integrity,” it defended its decision “to publish the story of the alleged involvement of Mrs. Oyindamola Amuka-Pemu, wife of the Publisher of Vanguard Newspapers in the alleged killing of a 14 old year boy for ritual purposes... out of our responsibilities as journalists who owe it a duty to the public to inform and educate.”<sup>466</sup> It added matter-of-factly:

Since we live and work in the United States, we know the seriousness of corruption and we operate by the highest ethical standard possible. It is preposterous for Vanguard Newspaper, [and] the Amuka family to think or even imagine that we would blackmail

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> To see the pictures, check this link: <http://www.pointblanknews.com/os1307b.html>.

<sup>465</sup> Vanguard, “The Lies of www.pointblanknews.com: Police Report on Blackmailer Steve Chinuwa Ogwu and Others,” August 08, 2009; accessed May 12, 2010 from <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/06/08/the-lies-of-wwwpointblanknewscom-police-report-on-blackmailer-steve-chinuwa-ogwu-and-others/>.

<sup>466</sup> Pointblanknews.com, “Between Pointblanknews and VANGUARD Newspaper: An Anatomy of a Smear,” accessed May 12, 2010 from <http://www.pointblanknews.com/os1506.html>.

anyone for any reason. It is on record that we have exposed several corrupt public officers, (in and out of service), involved in cocktails of graft. We have never for once been accused of blackmail.<sup>467</sup>

However, while the back-and-forth exchanges and court case between Vanguard Newspaper and Pointblanknews.com raged, the boy whom Pointblanknews.com alleged has been beheaded by the wife of the *Vanguard* publisher appeared in court.<sup>468</sup> Pointblanknews.com was forced to eat humble pie and apologize for misleading their readers.<sup>469</sup> It was a high-impact story that kept the whole country on edge. It later came to light that Pointblanknews.com's citizen reporter in Nigeria (who also freelanced for local print publications) actually attempted to extort and blackmail the wife of the *Vanguard* publisher through a devious photoshopping that made it seem as if a boy's head was actually being beheaded by the woman for ritual purposes.

While it is entirely possible that the U.S.-based owners of Pointblanknews.com were not part of the extortion, this case dramatizes the negative uses to which diasporan online publications can be put. Their geographic distance from Nigeria and the insulation this affords them make them attractive media for blackmail, extortion, and mendacious reporting. This is particularly possible because the diasporan online media do not suffer any legal consequences for libelous publication, although as I will show in the concluding section of this chapter, there have been several attempts by Nigerian governments to sue many of the radical diasporan online media in U.S. courts.

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Vanguard, "Drama as Alleged Ritual Murder Victim Surfaces in Court," June 25, 2009; accessed May 12, 2010, from <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/06/25/drama-as-alleged-ritual-murder-victim-surfaces-in-court/>.

<sup>469</sup> The Vanguard wrote an editorial on the issue after Pointblanknews.com apologized. It called diasporan news site a "conceited medium of deceit, extortion and blackmail." See Vanguard, "Editorial: www.pointblanknews.com: Dealing with Online 'Character Assassins'," June 8, 2009; accessed March 12, 2010 from <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/06/08/editorial-wwwpointblanknewscom-dealing-with-online-%E2%80%9Ccharacter-assassins%E2%80%9D/>.

#### 4.7 Huhuonline.com

Huhuonline.com, published from Arlington, Massachusetts, by a former Nigerian newspaper journalist by the name of Emmanuel Emeke Asiwe, is the least editorially impactful of the six diasporan online media profiled in this study. This multi-media, highly interactive, and graphically rich medium started publication in 2007. Its editor-in-chief, Mr. Asiwe, apart from being a former reporter with *ThisDay* newspaper, one of Nigeria's notable newspapers that is nonetheless also notorious for gross ethical infractions and pro-government reporting, was also a media assistant to two government ministers.<sup>470</sup>

The site describes itself as “an independent e-news medium established for the purpose of presenting objective and impartial reporting of events” and brags that it is the “first news site to engage in the ground breaking idea of publishing wholly captioned pictures.”<sup>471</sup> Saying that it is “Renowned for hard truth,” the site claims “we owe allegiance to no political party, ethnic community, religious or other interest groups. Our primary goal is to fiercely promote justice, constitutionalism and free enterprise.”<sup>472</sup> This goal of fierce promotion of, among other things, “free enterprise” perhaps has roots in Mr. Asiwe's background as a former World Bank

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<sup>470</sup> Some Nigerian newspapers, of which *ThisDay* is a prime culprit, often fail to pay their reporters salary on the excuse that reporters' work ID cards are their “meal tickets.” As Omenugha and Oji explain, “In other words, the journalists are encouraged to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thus encouraging the popular brown envelope syndrome within journalism parlance in Nigeria.” “Brown envelope” is a euphemism for bribe-taking by journalists before stories are published. See Kate Azuka Omenugha and Majority Oji, “News Commercialization, Ethics and Objectivity in Journalism Practice in Nigeria: Strange Bedfellows?” *Estudos em Comunicação* no. 3 (2008), 18. Also see Onyisi Tony, “Mass Media Ethics: Analyzing the ‘Brown Envelope’ or ‘AWUFU’ Syndrome,” in *Mass Media and Marketing Communications*, ed. Ikechukwu Nwosu and Uchenna Ekwo (Enugu, Nigeria: Thoughts Communications Publishers, 1996); Adelusi Olufemi, “Poverty Militates Against Code of Ethics,” in *Ethics and Regulation: Formulating a Working Agenda for Journalists and the Media*, ed. International Press Centre (Lagos, Nigeria: IPC, 2000), 39-43.

<sup>471</sup> Huhuonline.com, “Who We Are,” [http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=4&Itemid=358](http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=4&Itemid=358); accessed May 13, 2010.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

consultant. He describes himself as “an alumni [sic] of Harvard Business School... [who] had a brief stint with the World Bank, before he veered into Journalism in 1998.”<sup>473</sup>

Apart from its multimedia, interactive, and graphic features, Huhuonline.com also utilizes “thin-media,” like Sahara Reporters, to disseminate its stories. But its thin-media updates are more frequent than Sahara Reporters.’ It has an extensive database of email addresses of Nigerians at home and abroad, which it uses to alert readers each time it updates its homepage with news and opinion articles. Sitelogr.com, a site that provides free data on every Web site on the Net, puts Huhuonline.com’s value at \$32,268 and estimates its daily income at \$44.<sup>474</sup> However, the reliability of this data is suspect since the site is not subscribed to any Web-based advertising programs such as Google AdSense. Most of the ads on the site are from Nigerian banks and the (Nigerian) Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. It is therefore conceivable that the site’s worth is much higher than sitelogr.com’s estimates.

The site’s editorial temperaments are a mix of radical and routine reporting. Although it is not known for independently digging up dirt on corrupt Nigerian politicians, it republishes anti-corruption stories published on SaharaReporters.com and Pointblanknews.com. A good portion of its content is also made up of stories culled from homeland newspapers. What it does best, however, is to break routine news stories before domestic newspapers and sometimes before other diasporan online media outlets.

Huhuonline.com first got noticed on an international scale when it exposed a series of corruption scandals in a Nigerian mega church based in South Africa. The church is called Christ Embassy Church. Huhuonline.com reported on the church’s “stage-managed miracles,” brazen embezzlement of church funds contributed by unsuspecting South Africans who believed in the

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> Sitelogr.com, “Huhuonline.com,” <http://www.sitelogr.com/s/huhuonline.com#>; accessed May 13, 2010.

“miracles” of its Nigerian pastor known as Chris Oyakhilome, the profligate and debauched lifestyles of its Nigerian pastors, and the impoverishment of its South African suckers. In a particularly dramatic example, it reported the case of

a lady that had been sitting on a wheel chair in the healing line... for hours while waiting for the man of God to come and minister to her. When nature called, she forgot she was supposed to act paralyzed. And there she was standing and running to the toilet. Minutes after that, she received serious tongue-lashing from the Healing School pastors for the great embarrassment she caused. No one really understood this because she was not allowed to return to the wheel chair as people had seen her dash off to the toilet. Her empty wheel chair was wheeled out of the room.<sup>475</sup>

In more than ten investigative reports, the site revealed other scandalous shenanigans of the church. Many newspapers in Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana reproduced the stories. This became the basis for the investigation of the activities of the church by the South African government.

But the site has also been known to be unashamedly partisan in its support for—and viciously scurrilous in its attacks against—certain personalities in Nigeria’s corporate battles for supremacy. For instance, when a crisis broke out between two Nigerian billionaires, Aliko Dangote and Michael Otedola, who were former business associates, over mutual allegations of share manipulation in the Nigerian Stock Exchange Market, Huhuonline.com consistently carried negative stories that demonized Dangote and exculpated Otedola.<sup>476</sup> It never made even the vaguest pretence to balance and fairness. Curiously, however, many Nigerian newspapers’

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<sup>475</sup> Huhuonline, “South Africans Vow to Sack Christ Embassy... As Authorities Humiliate Chris Oyakhilome at Airport,” <http://news.onlinenigeria.com/templates/?a=1855>; accessed May 14, 2010.

<sup>476</sup> See, for instance, Huhuadmin, “Dangote Group: Exodus Continues..... As Aliko Finds Solace in Drugs,” [http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=643:dangote-group-exodus-continues-as-aliko-finds-solace-in-drugs&catid=91:elibrary&Itemid=374](http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=643:dangote-group-exodus-continues-as-aliko-finds-solace-in-drugs&catid=91:elibrary&Itemid=374); accessed May 13, 2010; Huhuadmin, “How Aliko Dangote Blackmailed, Bribed his Way to NSE Presidency,” [http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=644:how-aliko-dangote-blackmailed-bribed-his-way-to-nse-presidency&catid=91:elibrary&Itemid=374](http://www.huhuonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=644:how-aliko-dangote-blackmailed-bribed-his-way-to-nse-presidency&catid=91:elibrary&Itemid=374); accessed May 13, 2010.

coverage of the controversy was shaped by Huhuonline.com's reporting.<sup>477</sup> The site always had exclusive reports that no other Nigerian media had, suggesting that the publisher of the site had a close relationship with one of the parties in dispute.

But perhaps what gave Huhuonline.com its greatest visibility was the arrest and detention of its editor-in-chief, Emmanuel Asiwe, by Nigerian security forces when he traveled to Nigeria in 2009. Nigeria's national security agency said he was being "questioned over matters of national security."<sup>478</sup> After pressure from human rights groups worldwide and from the United States government (Asiwe is a dual citizen of Nigeria and the United States), Nigerian courts declared his arrest illegal.<sup>479</sup> Arrest of U.S.-based Nigerian bloggers, as the next section shows, is only one of the several ways the Nigerian government has responded to the growing influence of diasporan citizen media in homeland politics.

#### **4.8 The Nigerian Government's Response to the Diasporan Citizen Media**

The reaction of the Nigerian governments and corrupt politicians to the piercing scrutiny of their activities has ranged from blackmail, arrest and detention of bloggers, attempts to block diasporan citizen media sites from being viewed in Nigeria, Web counteroffensives, hacking of the diasporan citizen media, and cooptation of oppositional bloggers, to the initiation of

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<sup>477</sup> See, for example, Emma Ujah and Peter Egwuatu, "AP Shares - Otedola Seeks N117 Billion Compensation," *Vanguard*, April 24, 2009; accessed May 14, 2010 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200904240020.html>. For a recap of the controversy, see "Tatiana Serafin, "Then There was One: Nigeria Loses One of its Billionaires as its Two Wealthiest Citizens Battle it Out," *Forbes.com* March 27, 2009; accessed March 14, 2010 from <http://www.forbes.com/2009/03/27/nigeria-dangote-otedola-business-billionaires-feud.html>.

<sup>478</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, "Second U.S.-based Nigerian Blogger Held," October 31, 2008; accessed March 14, 2010 from <http://cpj.org/2008/10/second-us-based-nigerian-blogger-held.php>.

<sup>479</sup> SaharaReporters, "Federal Court Declares the Arrest and Detention of US-based Blogger Emmanuel Asiwe Illegal," February 3, 2009; accessed March 14, 2010 from <http://67.192.103.155/news/663-federal-court-declares-the-arrest-and-detention-of-us-based-blogger-emmanuel-asiwe-illegal.html>.

expensive libel suits against the particularly radical online media like Sahara Reporters and Elendu Reports in its earlier form.

SaharaReporters's Sowore Omoyele revealed in an interview that the Nigerian government made several overtures to him and pleaded with him to "join them" in government.<sup>480</sup> In 2007, the then Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo sent a secret bill to the National Assembly (the Nigerian Congress) to give legal endorsement to block certain Internet sites from being viewed in Nigeria.<sup>481</sup> The exposé of this secret bill by diaspora online new sites, which was also published in the domestic press, thoroughly embarrassed the government. The bill was abandoned.

More recently, however, in response to the virulent criticism of government and the divulgence of acts of corruption in high places by Sahara Reporters, the Nigerian government sponsored an ad hoc organization with the paradoxical name of "Network for Good Governance" to attack the credibility of the online media outfit in Nigerian newspapers. In paid advertorials titled "Who is Behind Sahara Reporters?" that were published in major Nigerian newspapers, the group alleged the following:

That the Editor of SaharaReporters Mr. Omoyele Sowore who has no visible means of livelihood in New Jersey USA has over four properties in the United States is an indication that there are people funding him. And the question is who are they, what is their interest and why are they interested in bringing the government down?...The ideal thing would have been to ignore their puerile ranting and negative journalism, but greater wisdom demands that such tissues of lies be exposed to avoid unsuspecting public attaching weight to their lies.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> See Uche Nworah, "I have no Interest in Working for Obasanjo—Sowore Omoyele," <http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles/855/1/I-Have-No-Interest-In-Working-For-Obasanjo--Omoyele-Sowore/Page1.html>

<sup>481</sup> Ibanga Isine, "Federal Government Seeks Power to Intercept Internet Communications," *Punch* February 7, 2007.

<sup>482</sup> See Moses E. Ochonu, "SaharaRepoters' Strategic Sucesss," December 18, 2008; accessed May 12, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/moses-ebe-ochonu/saharareporters-strategic-success-12.html>.



The advertorial went on to list the putative properties Sowore owns in New York and New Jersey and charged that “It is a shame that a man like Omoyele Sowore who cannot shun illicit acquisition of wealth in favour of reputation is masquerading as an apostle of accountability and good governance. We must be vigilant!”<sup>483</sup> The problem was that the list of property Sowore allegedly owns is actually only a list of his past rented apartments. The first house listed in the advertorial “was the first apartment that [Sowore] was put in as a ‘pro-democracy refugee’ when he first arrived in this country in 2001. He was sharing it with three other co-refugees.”<sup>484</sup> The second property listed on the advertorial is a rented one-bedroom apartment he moved into after his initial stay at the “pro-democracy refugee” camp. The third house, funnily, was the Columbia University student housing where Sowore stayed when he was a graduate. And the fourth property was his then current rented apartment.<sup>485</sup> It turned out that the agents of the government merely entered his name on sites that offer a variety of people search tools and public records data. To their discredit, the government agents were not savvy enough to discriminate the information they got from their searches.

The inaccuracy of the charges against Sowore soon became public knowledge and the Nigerian government and its agents became the butt of jokes. A Nigerian professor of African history at Vanderbilt University wrote:

In a sense, then, the high-ranking Nigerian officials who commissioned such a shoddy inquiry are the second biggest suckers in all of this, next to Nigerian taxpayers whose monies were probably used to finance this charade. The smart crook at the dirty core of this mischief swindled the sponsoring officials by playing on their ignorance of advanced

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Mobolaji Aluko, “Re: SaharaReporters’ Strategic Success,” USAAfrica Dialogue Series, December 18, 2008; accessed May 12, 2010 from [http://groups.google.com/group/USAAfricaDialogue/browse\\_thread/thread/b0045233d98cd8db](http://groups.google.com/group/USAAfricaDialogue/browse_thread/thread/b0045233d98cd8db). He actually first arrived the United States in 1999, not 2001.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

public record-keeping and of the banality of the information marketed to them as a product of painstaking, esoteric inquiry. Given the desperate irrationality of guilt-ridden Nigerian officials, it is plausible that they even paid the opportunistic crook to travel to the US on a mission to uncover Sowore's purported property ownership only for him to simply steal into one of Nigeria's Internet cafes to do a simple people search on one of the search engines. A fancy printout from some foreign-managed search engine would have blown the desperate minds of his IT-challenged sponsors.<sup>486</sup>

The unintended effect of these mendacious and puerile charges against SaharaReporters was that it increased the site's popularity in Nigeria and galvanized its supporters in the diaspora to give it more financial support. Several commenters on the story said they had just donated to the site in protest. SaharaReporters itself not only exposed the government agents, the amount of money voted by government to fund the character assassination campaign, and the search engines used to carry out the "investigation" (which it famously called the use of "simple data Websites that offer 'fast-food' type information on individuals who live in the West – especially the US and the UK"), it used the moment to solicit financial support to do more investigative reporting on government corruption.<sup>487</sup> It showed, for instance, that all that the government agents did was to pay Intelius, a controversial Washington-based public record business, the sum of \$1.50 and then entered the names of Sahara Reporter's editor-in-chief, Omoyele Sowore. Sahara Reporters illustrated this by paying \$1.50 to Intelius and entering the name "Omoyele Sowore." It turned out that the list of so-called Sowore's choice properties that was published in Nigerian newspapers was "in the exact order provided by INTELIUS. One of the buildings, 547 Riverside Drive, New York, is a Columbia University student hostel."<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Ochonu, "Saharereporters' Strategic Success."

<sup>487</sup> Sahara Admin, "'Mercedes Jeep' Bribe: EFCC Chair Plans Arrest of Supplier, as EFCC's International Image Plummets," January 7, 2009; accessed May 15, 2010 from <http://www.saharareporters.com/real-news/hot-topic/436-qmercedes-jeepq-bribe-efcc-chair-plans-arrest-of-supplier-as-efccs-international-image-plummets.html?showall=1>.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

When attempts to diminish the credibility of the editor-in-chief of Sahara Reporters failed, the government made several attempts to hack the site “but [it] survived owing to the foresight of its managers.”<sup>489</sup> Not done, the government mandated its lawyers to threaten the US Webhost of Sahara Reporters with a lawsuit if they did not shut down the site. In a letter to the Webhost, written in all caps, the government agents claiming to be “solicitors and advocates” with Reardenilson and Associates wrote:

We are aware that Domains by Proxy is a reputable company. We are worried that a Web site <http://www.saharareporters.com/> hosted with Domains by Proxy is being used for subversive dissemination of information against the president and people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. We have read the terms of registration of Websites which say that any Website used for illegal purposes, morally objectionable/defamatory and libelous articles will be closed down. Please note that <http://saharareporters.com/> has violated the laws by writing articles that are treasonable offence [sic] in Nigeria. We therefore request that as a responsible company that you are to shut down <http://saharareporters.com/> immediately to avoid any legal proceedings which may affect your company and affect your business.”<sup>490</sup>

Although the law firm was apparently based in Nigeria, it nonetheless scared the US-based Webhosting company enough to warn SaharaReporters to desist from publishing libelous materials. It subsequently shut the site down.<sup>491</sup> In a widely distributed press release, Sahara Reporters said “our Webhosting company complained to us that our Website was 'abusing their server and using their cpu at 100%' and as such had to shut down SAHARAREPORTERS because it was rendering others sites on their server 'inoperable'.” It however dismissed this technical explanation for shutting the site as mere obfuscation, saying “There is a conspiracy to put our site out of existence. However, this will not happen, as such we will be working round

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<sup>489</sup> Sonala Olumhense, “Keep SaharaReporters Alive,” [Nigerian] *Guardian*, December 20, 2008. Also available at <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/sonala-olumhense/keep-saharareporters-alive-13.html>.

<sup>490</sup> Ochon, “SaharaReporters’ Strategic Success.”

<sup>491</sup> Againstbabangida.com, “FG Shuts Saharareporters.com,” accessed May 15, 2010 from <http://againstbabangida.com/home/307-fg-shuts-saharareporterscom>.

the clock to resume our activities online ASAP.”<sup>492</sup> It also asked for suggestions on how Sahara Reporters could get its own server and avoid having to go through third parties. The response was overwhelming: readers contributed funds to buy an independent server for the site.

Then the government’s battleground shifted. A string of threats against the site started. Several law firms in Nigeria and the US wrote to threaten legal action against SaharaReporters and also Elendu Reports. In fact, early in the life of SaharaReporters, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo’s “personal legal counsel on international matters” wrote a widely publicized press release asking the site to withdraw a “malicious defamation of President Olusegun Obasanjo.”<sup>493</sup> A month after, the same “personal legal counsel” to the president wrote a “cease and desist” letter to SaharaReporters regarding what the lawyer called the invasion of the privacy of a woman that SaharaReporters had identified as the president’s mistress, whom it said had been a beneficiary of many corrupt deals.<sup>494</sup>

In 2008, the director-general of a government agency called the National Food and Drug Law Administration, Dr. Paul Orhii, sued Sahara Reporters in a Texas court and asked for \$25 million in punitive damages. The Media Legal Defense Initiative, the London-based NGO that provides “legal support to journalists and media outlets who seek to protect their right to freedom of expression” said Dr. Orhii’s case was being handled by “the high-powered Cook law firm in

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<sup>492</sup> See NigeriansinAmerica.com, “The Haunted Guys at Sahara Reporters,” accessed May 13, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/vbulletin/showthread.php?t=7553>.

<sup>493</sup> Kunle Fagbenle, “Re: Malicious Defamation of President Olusegun Obasanjo,” November 7, 2006; accessed May 15, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4226&catid=111&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4226&catid=111&Itemid=46).

<sup>494</sup> Kunle Fagbenle, “Cease and Desist Letter: Re: Invasion of the Privacy of Chief (Mrs.) Lamide Adegbenro by www.saharareporters.com, et al,” Nigerian Village Square, December 13, 2006; accessed May 15, 2010 from [http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4512&catid=111&Itemid=46](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4512&catid=111&Itemid=46).

Houston.”<sup>495</sup> The NGO linked up with the US-based Media Law Resource Center, which provided Julie Ford, an experienced Texas-based media lawyer, to defend SaharaReporters for free. “She defended Mr Omoyele on grounds of personal jurisdiction, arguing that since the publication was clearly aimed at a Nigerian readership and the defendant had no links with Texas, the Houston courts had no jurisdiction.”<sup>496</sup> The judge was persuaded and the case was dismissed on March 31, 2009.<sup>497</sup> But this was not the end of the legal challenges that Sahara Reporters has had to contend with. The same month that the Texas judge dismissed the suit against the site, another U.S.-based lawyer for the Nigerian federal government sued Sahara Reporters in a Maryland court for libel.<sup>498</sup> Again in April 2010, Nigeria’s ambassador to the United Nations, Mrs. Joy Ogwu, notified SaharaReporters that she would begin a multi-million-dollar law suit against the Web site over “exposure of improper contracts awarded by her at the nation’s Permanent Mission.”<sup>499</sup>

Olumhense, a respected Nigerian journalist who now lives in New York, sums up the strategies of the Nigerian government against SaharaReporters in the following manner: “So that

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<sup>495</sup> Media Legal Defence Initiative, “Nigeria Case is Real-life Thriller: Africa Graft Story Ends up in New York, via Texas,” February Issue 01 February 2010- April 2010; accessed May 16, 2010 from <http://www.mediadefence.org/MDQ2/Nigeria-case-real-life-thriller.html>.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> NVS News, “US Court Dismisses Paul Orhili’s Lawsuit Against Saharareporters,” April 2, 2009; accessed March 17, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/newsflash/us-court-dismisses-paul-orhilis-lawsuit-against-saharareporters.html>.

<sup>498</sup> SaharaReporters, “FG grants Ugwuonye, Embattled Washington DC Lawyer who Withheld Embassy Funds, Authority to Sue Ambassador, Howard University Professor, and Saharareporters,” March 18, 2009; accessed May 17, 2010 from <http://174.143.70.126/news/1885-fg-grants-ugwuonye-embattled-washington-dc-lawyer-who-withheld-embassy-funds-authority-to-sue-ambassador-howard-university-professor-and-saharareporters.html>. The case is in progress at the time of writing this report.

<sup>499</sup> SaharaReporters, “Nigerian Ambassador to the UN, Joy Ogwu, to Commence Multi-million Dollar Lawsuit against SaharaReporters,” accessed April 30, 2010 from <http://www.saharareporters.com/real-news/sr-headlines/5880-nigerian-ambassador-to-the-un-joy-ogwu-to-commence-multi-million-dollar-lawsuit-against-saharareporters.html>.

is the line-up: technological warfare designed to make SR unpublishable; a scorched-earth campaign to discredit Mr. Sowore personally; a gigantic lawsuit by an interested party; and a political appeal to Internet hosts to take the site off the air.”<sup>500</sup> These actions are scripts created out of an elaborate \$5 million budget by the Nigerian government to dilute the growing influence of diasporan online citizen media and to “ensure that Websites like Saharareporters.com and others are stopped from taking root in Nigeria.”<sup>501</sup> Part of the plan included sponsoring rival diasporan citizen media and unleashing an army of pro-government commenters on the discussion boards of the radical and popular sites like SaharaReporters.com to subvert the growth of “critical blogging culture that is taking the Nigerian nation by storm and effectively replacing the mainstream local media.”<sup>502</sup> But this has not worked.

So the government experimented with a more desperate measure: the arrest of diasporan citizen journalists who traveled to Nigeria. The first diasporan citizen reporter to be arrested by Nigeria’s security forces was Jonathan Elendu, the owner of Elendureports.com. He was arrested when he traveled to Nigeria from his base in the US. He was accused of being the sponsor of a “guerilla news agency.”<sup>503</sup> The charge against him was later amended to include “money

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<sup>500</sup> Sonala Olumhense, “Popular Investigative Nigeria Website Sued For \$25 Billion,” *Black Star News* December 26, 2008; accessed May 17, 2010 from <http://www.blackstarnews.com/?c=135&a=5254>.

<sup>501</sup> Daniel Elombah, “Umaru Yar’adua Joins the ‘Battle on Cyberspace ’” June 17, 2009; accessed May 20, 2010 from [http://www.elombah.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=981:umaru-yaradua-regime-joins-the-cyber-battle&catid=25:politics&Itemid=37](http://www.elombah.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=981:umaru-yaradua-regime-joins-the-cyber-battle&catid=25:politics&Itemid=37).

<sup>502</sup> Sahara Reporters, “Umaru Yar’adua Regime Launches \$5 Million Online War,” June 16, 2009; accessed May 17, 2010 from [http://www.saharareporters.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3024:umaru-yaradua-regime-launches-5-million-online-war-&catid=1:latest-news&Itemid=18](http://www.saharareporters.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3024:umaru-yaradua-regime-launches-5-million-online-war-&catid=1:latest-news&Itemid=18).

<sup>503</sup> Ndesanjo Macha, “Nigerian Blogger Arrested for Sponsoring a ‘Guerilla News Agency’,” *Global Voices*, October 24, 2008; accessed May 18, 2010 from <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/10/24/nigerian-blogger-arrested-for-sponsoring-a-guerilla-news-agency/>.

laundering and sedition.”<sup>504</sup> It later emerged that the Nigerian government thought he was aligned with Sahara Reporters.<sup>505</sup> Curiously, the arrest of Elendu generated more buzz among Western media NGOs than it did in Nigeria. It was virtually blacked out in the Nigerian domestic media. A Nigerian writer wrote: “Although the incident took place within their vicinity at the Nnamdi Azikiwe airport Abuja, it was the online publications - Pointblanknews and Saharareporters that broke the news.” He added, “Even when the publisher was charged with sedition by the State Security Service (SSS), only *Punch* gave it wide coverage.”<sup>506</sup> He attributed the indifference to, or inadequate coverage of, Elendu’s arrest by Nigerian traditional journalists to the fact that journalists in Nigeria do not regard online journalists as colleagues.

However, it was not just the traditional Nigerian media that failed to show sufficient enthusiasm in publicizing Elendu’s arrest and detention; even diasporan Nigerians did not. For instance, a Facebook group set up to secure his release called “Free Nigerian Blogger Jonathan Elendu” had only fifty-nine members.<sup>507</sup> In fact, the discussions on many Nigerian online discussion boards were dismissive of Elendu’s brand of journalism. The following is a sample of comments on Nairaland.com, one of the most popular Nigerian online discussion forums:

I prefer to call it imaginative journalism, because the standards of that publication are so low!

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<sup>504</sup> Sokari Ekine, “Nigeria Joins List of Countries Harassing Bloggers,” BPS Media Shift, November 10, 2008; accessed May 19, 2010 from <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/11/nigeria-joins-list-of-countries-harassing-bloggers315.html>.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Hakeem Babalola, “Elendu Released: Nigerian Press Vs Citizen Online Press,” Nigerian Village Square, October 29, 2008; accessed May 18, 2010 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/hakeem-babalola/elendu-released-nigerian-press-vs-citizen-online.html>.

<sup>507</sup> Ekine, “Nigeria Joins List of Countries Harrassing Bloggers.”

Their stuffs [sic] sometimes reflect publicity stunts, they also churn out unsubstantiated facts, which is sometimes caused by Jonathan Elendu's hallucination, what one of my role model [sic] Edgar Hoover calls mental halitosis.

I think these guys are just 'sensational gangster-style' journalists. I thought I was over critical of the quality of Elendu's reportings [sic] until I read the views of other people. I can't substantiate this fact, but I believe Elendu is making money from the sensationalism...If you read his story about the Sokoto State government before and after his visit to the state (God knows what transpired during the visit, I hear journalists too collect brown envelopes) you will wonder where his objectivity lies.

He also seems to be partisan in his views of the Nigerian politics. I suspect he might be on some politician's payroll going by his write ups.<sup>508</sup>

This dismissive attitude toward Elendu is broadly representative of the opinions that many Nigerians expressed about his brand of journalism. Many critical readers recalled the mercurial twists in his site's editorial temperaments and attributed this to his choice to ingratiate himself to corrupt politicians whose muck he pretended to rake for the public good. It is no surprise that the credibility of his site has gone down the drain. In more ways than one, this illustrates the agential power of readers and of their capacity to discern and make judgments about the hidden messages encoded in news stories. For any online news outlet to survive and enjoy respect, it must continually win the trust and confidence of its readers.

Whatever the case is, the Nigerian diasporic Internet-based media are transforming both the form and content of Nigerian journalism in ways that at once enrich and complicate the dynamics of informational flow from the core—in this case, a privileged diasporic “peripheral core”— to the periphery where the ancestral roots of the migratory elite that are now spatially situated at the core are located. As we have seen, the Internet-based diaspora news outfits have become so influential that, in many cases, opposition politicians fed up with the domestic media's double standards and timidity— and even government officials hoping to fly kites or

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<sup>508</sup> Nairland.com, “Elendu Reports - Cutting Edge Investigative Journalism,” <http://www.nairland.com/nigeria/topic-2845.0.html#msg263767>; accessed May 15, 2010.



expose government secrets for personal gain—bypass the mainstream domestic Nigerian media and get across to territorially displaced citizen journalists in the diaspora. Once a story gets prominence in the diaspora online press, it almost always eventually becomes the editorial staple of the traditional domestic press at some point, even if there is initial reluctance from the domestic media to give such stories prominence.

It is anybody's guess where and how the emergent diaspora online journalism will end up. It seems reasonable to suppose, however, that the citizen media of the Nigerian diaspora will continue to make incursions into the mainstream of the Nigerian political arena in light of the restoration of constitutional rule in the country since 1999. In a significant respect, the profiles and activities of the diasporan online media examined here represent a rejection of the binarism between notions of the "diasporic public sphere" and the "domestic public sphere." Here, we are witnessing a progressive hybridization that dissolves the barrier between diasporic media and domestic media and ruptures the distinction between alternative journalism and mainstream journalism. The citizen media sites have annihilated the barriers of space and times and welded the home and the diaspora.

Similarly, many of the Web sites profiled here defy easy categorization. While a few can be safely described as citizen, non-alternative media sites, others straddle the categories. A Web site that started out as an unrelentingly adversarial and anti-corruption platform, and therefore deserving of being characterized as an alternative media site, became enmeshed in the moral putrefaction it called attention to. We have also seen Web sites that occasionally evince flashes of radicalism but relapse to the tepidity and safe editorial formulas of much of the homeland traditional media. But we have seen a Web site that is almost exclusively defined by its compulsively—and consistently—uncompromising opposition to governmental corruption.

However, all of these Web sites, in a sense, collectively constitute a challenge to the homeland media formation and to the political power structure. The fact that their emergence represents a novel dimension to the political economy of news flow in Nigeria is itself “alternative.” Yet, it is not “alternative” in the traditional conception of the term: it is not anti-capitalist, does not employ “native reporting” in the sense in which the term is generally understood, and is not always a purposively counter-informational storehouse. But, as the case studies in the next chapter reveal, the critical sections of the Nigerian diasporan citizen media formation not only expose corruption in government, they also bring to light the unreported corruption in the domestic mainstream media with the kind of effectiveness that alternative media in the West do not seem to have. As I point out in Chapter Six, these realities call for an expansion of the epistemological boundaries in the conceptions of alternative journalism.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **5 MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF THE DIASPORIAN CITIZEN MEDIA**

The online media of the Nigerian diaspora, as has been adverted in previous chapters, have competed favorably with, and in some cases actually supplanted, the homeland media in

charting the course of far-reaching national discourses and in confronting and exposing corruption both in government and in the media. Chapter Four illustrated some of the ways by which the diasporan news media exposed high-level corruption among the Nigerian domestic ruling elite, although some of the diasporan media, as we saw, were not always immune from the ills they railed against. This chapter will highlight and discuss four more case studies that instantiate the ever more rising significance of the Nigerian diasporan online citizen media. It will show that in addition to being consequential enough to cause governmental policy changes, the diasporan citizen media have also exposed corruption in the Nigerian press and thereby weakened the legitimacy of a hitherto vibrant but now thoroughly compromised traditional national media formation.

The case studies in this chapter will be organized and thematized as follows: cases where online citizen media stories have led to homeland governmental policy changes and cases where the diasporan online media exposed high-level corruption in the local media. All case studies selected for this chapter have had momentous consequences in the domestic public sphere and are likely to define the form and substance of the relational dynamics between the Nigerian diasporan online citizen media formation and the traditional media and politics of the domestic public sphere in the foreseeable future. How the diasporan citizen media chose to report on the cases highlighted in this chapter will enrich and complicate the extant literature on the modalities and singularities of citizen reporting and also illustrate how what Deborah Chung and her colleagues called “a form of amateur journalism” is challenging the role of traditional journalism in a transnational setting.<sup>509</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Deborah S. Chung et al., “Uses and Perceptions of Blogs: A Report on Professional Journalists and Journalism Educators,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 62, no. 3 (2007): 306.

## 5.1 How Diasporan Citizen Media Reporting Caused Governmental Policy Reversals

One dramatic case that exemplifies the power of the Nigerian diasporan online media to compel homeland government to reverse policy decisions is the controversy over a proposed “capacity building” training for Nigeria’s thirty state governors at Harvard University. On May 25, 2009, Bukola Saraki, governor of the north-central state of Kwara and chairman of the Nigerian Governor’s Forum—the ad hoc but nonetheless politically powerful association of all elected governors in Nigeria—announced, through his press secretary, that the governor’s forum had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Harvard University “on [the] provision of academic support for the governors on capacity building, best practices and good governance.”<sup>510</sup> The agreement, which the statement said had been signed on behalf of Harvard University by a Professor Robert Rotberg, who had been identified as the director of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, would have all of Nigeria’s thirty-six governors attend the training in batches.

This news outraged the sensibilities many Nigerians at home and abroad.<sup>511</sup> For many Nigerians, the purported training was no more than a convenient official cover for the governors to not only waste public resources but to invest their stolen wealth in America.<sup>512</sup> In a searingly biting piece, for instance, one Sam Amadi, a human rights lawyer who is also an alumnus of

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<sup>510</sup> ThisDay, “Governors Sign MoU with Harvard on Capacity Building,” ThisDay Online, <http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=144251> (accessed September 5, 2010).

<sup>511</sup> See, for instance, Sahara Reporters, “ARG to Governors' Forum: If You Must Go to Harvard, Resign!” SaharaReporters, June 8, 2009, <http://www.saharareporters.com/press-release/arg-governors-forum-if-you-must-go-harvard-resign> (accessed September 6, 2010). ARG stands for Afenifere Renewal Group. It’s the most politically powerful group in southwest Nigeria. Also see Kazeem Akintunde, “Outrage over Governors’ Harvard Programme,” *NewsWatch*, June 28, 2009, [http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1062&Itemid=47](http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1062&Itemid=47) (accessed September 6, 2010).

<sup>512</sup> To get a sense of the history and nature of corruption among Nigerian political elites, see M.A.O. Aluko, “The Institutionalization of Corruption and its Impact on Political Culture and Behavior in Nigeria,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 11 no. 3 (2002): 393-402.

Harvard University, captured the universal sentiments of many Nigerians about the vain, profligate Harvard adventure of Nigeria's notoriously corrupt governors:

It is irresponsible for a governor elected on guarantee that he possesses the expertise and virtues to provide public good to abandon his responsibility to attend a non-descript capacity building program in Kennedy School or in Cambridge University. Such a governor treats his or her responsibility flippantly and is in breach of the ethic of responsibility. It is even worse when the academic misadventure involves all the 36 state Governors.<sup>513</sup>

Amadi is here pointing to an emerging trend in Nigerian elite circles to acquire a Harvard education, however trivial and inconsequential, and advertise it as a badge of honor, as a basis to legitimize their continued exploitation of ordinary Nigerians. But to have all thirty-six of Nigeria governors attend a crash course at Harvard is the height of absurdity. Nigeria's most influential newspaper, the *Guardian*, was even more withering in its censure of the governors' "capacity training" agreement with Harvard. It described it as "offensive, self-demeaning, wasteful and most unacceptable. The MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] should be thrown into the dustbin where it rightly belongs."<sup>514</sup> In spite of the upsurge of opposition against the governors' proposed Harvard training, however, the governors insisted they would go ahead with it. They said it would be "funded by donor agencies and not from the states' coffers as wrongly reported [in the media]."<sup>515</sup> They even enlisted the support of U.S.-based Nigerians<sup>516</sup> and top Nigerian

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<sup>513</sup> Sam Amadi, "Who Needs Harvard Education?" AllAfrica.com, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200906250567.html> (accessed September 5, 2010).

<sup>514</sup> Guardian, "The Proposed Harvard Training For Governors," The [Nigerian] *Guardian*, June 11, 2009, Editorial.

<sup>515</sup> Razak Bamidele, "How we Planned to Fund Harvard Programme –Govs' Forum," <http://news.onlinenigeria.com/templates/?a=4841&z=12> (accessed September 6, 2010); Vincent Ikuomola, "Why Governors Seek Harvard Training," *The Nation*, June 23, 2009, <http://thenationonlineng.net/web2/articles/7566/1/Why-governors-see-Harvard-training/Page1.html> (accessed September 6, 2010).

<sup>516</sup> See, for instance, Johnson Ihemeremadu, "Much Ado About Harvard," *The Nation*, June 7, 2009, <http://thenationonlineng.net/web2/articles/9314/1/Much-ado-about-Harvard-/Page1.html> (accessed September 6, 2010) and Jidefor Adibe, "Nigerian Governors and the MOU with Harvard University: A Contrary View," HollarAfrica, <http://www.hollerafrica.com/showArticle.php?catId=1&artId=306> (accessed September 6, 2010).

newspaper columnists<sup>517</sup> to help justify the training. A cornucopia of articles on the Internet and in Nigerian newspapers began to appear in support of the governors' extravagantly wasteful and dubious Harvard training agreement. It is reasonable to assume that the write-ups were sponsored by the governors' forum, given the way Nigerian governors have become adept at manipulating journalists to doctor opinions in their favor through pecuniary gratification. The later portion of this chapter highlights the ways the governors do this.

However, the conversation changed when a Canada-based Nigerian by the name of Majek Adegba conducted what he called a "citizen investigation" about the so-called Memorandum of Understanding signed between Harvard University and the Nigerian Governors' Forum. The citizen investigation was a simple email requesting clarification from the authorities at Harvard University about the content and status of the memorandum. Mr. Adegba first sent an email to Harvard University's Communications Office seeking clarification on the nature and compass of the agreement the school signed with Nigerian governors. The office denied the existence of any agreement with Nigerian governors and directed him to contact the Kennedy School of Government's director, Robert Rotberg. The lengthy, angry email he sent to the school's director is worth quoting at some length because it gives expression to the feelings of a lot Nigerians about the purported training agreement Harvard signed with Nigerian governors:

You may be surprised to know that the trip to Harvard University may have cost the Nigerian taxpayers millions of dollars in airline tickets for the governors and their retinue of assistants/girlfriends, payment of bloated official allowances and hotel accommodation. [And] the trip may actually have been used as a cover for the primary purpose of squirreling looted funds out of Nigeria and into American bank accounts....

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<sup>517</sup> They got the editor of the thoroughly corrupt and compromised but popular *ThisDay* newspaper to defend the training agreement with Harvard in his column. See Simon Kolawole, "What's Wrong with Harvard?" *ThisDay*, June 14, 2009. "Some of our governors," he wrote, "don't just have any clue about development. They need help. If Harvard would help to polish their brains, please let them go!"

The real victims of the Harvard University jamboree are the ordinary Nigerian people who could have had several boreholes installed for them but for the jamboree. The real victims are the new born babies and mothers dyeing [sic] because of lack of basic medical supplies, including incubators. The victims may not be in front of you, you may never meet them, your knowledge of them maybe [sic] limited to figures/statistics, but they are real human beings. They are people's children, parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, husbands and wives. Think about them when you deal with these politicians. There is a groundswell of anger against your esteemed university. The perception is that your university is conniving with notorious Nigerian politicians to further deplete an already depleted treasury.<sup>518</sup>

The email was designed not only to prick the moral conscience of Harvard University for its questionable relationship with corrupt governors but to play on the heartstrings of university officials who signed the agreement. It does this by calling attention to the real material consequences of their action. The strategy worked. Less than one hour after he sent the email, Rotberg, the director of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, responded. He said his school did not sign an agreement to train Nigerian governors and that "there will never be an agreement."<sup>519</sup> What had happened, he said, was that after four Nigerian governors visited Harvard University, the governors and the school's Kennedy School of Government drafted a Memorandum of Understanding on mutual cooperation on good governance. Rotberg stated further:

The MOU was meant to be the first step in the exploration of a possible training program and as a means of signifying the intent on both sides to work together to craft such a program. Neither that document nor even the possibility of developing a joint Forum-Harvard Kennedy School training project had as yet been brought before the Kennedy School for consideration or approval, so it was premature for an announcement to have been made in Nigeria.<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Majek Adeg, "Citizen Investigation: Harvard University Denies Agreement with Governors," Nigerian Village Square, June 11, 2009, <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/patrick-nwadike/harvard-university-denies-agreement-with-governors.html> (accessed September 6, 2010).

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

Citizen reporter Adegba, who is an attorney in Canada, shared his findings with all the major U.S.-based Nigerian diasporan online citizen media.<sup>521</sup> The following day, all the major newspapers in Nigeria picked up the story.<sup>522</sup> For more than a week this was the grist in the editorial mills of most Nigerian newspapers. It is interesting that until an untrained citizen journalist conducted a random act of inquiry, it did not occur to Nigerian journalists to find out more information about the Harvard “capacity training” for governors, which had attracted a whirlwind of criticisms back home. All that the local media did was to provide a platform for the push and pull of arguments in favor of and against the issue, which did nothing to cause a policy shift. It took the casual act of journalism of one geographically displaced Nigerian to avert what would have amounted to a huge waste of national resources. Of course, the governors would devise more inventive ways to corruptly enrich themselves and waste public resources, but it is significant that this one was prevented by an individual through the instrumentality of a previously inconsequential diasporan citizen media formation.

It is apparent that Harvard was indeed interested in exploiting the greed and vanity of the Nigerian governors to make a quick buck. The director of the Kennedy School of Government admitted that there was indeed a Memorandum of Understanding with the governors. His only problem was that it was prematurely announced before it was concretized with the appropriate authorities. It is entirely conceivable that had the Nigerian diasporan “citizen investigator” not shamed Harvard University through his guilt-inducing emails, which he shared widely with the

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<sup>521</sup> See Majekodumi Adegba, “Harvard Denies Agreement with Nigerian Governors,” Sahara Reporters, June 12, 2009, <http://saharareporters.com/report/harvard-university-denies-agreement-nigerian-governors> (accessed September 6, 2010); Elombah.com, “Nigerians Kick Against Harvard Training for Governors,” June 14, 2009, [http://www.elombah.com/index.php/templates/ja\\_purity/images/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=960:nigerians-kick-against-harvard-training-for-governors&catid=25:politics&Itemid=37](http://www.elombah.com/index.php/templates/ja_purity/images/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=960:nigerians-kick-against-harvard-training-for-governors&catid=25:politics&Itemid=37) (accessed September 6, 2010).

<sup>522</sup> See, for instance, Olayinka Oyeboade, “Nigerian Governors’ Forum Lied—Harvard University,” *Punch*, June 13, 2009, <http://www.punchng.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art20090613644327> (accessed September 6, 2010).



Nigerian diasporan online media and which were subsequently picked up by the domestic media, the school would not have disowned the governors. For, although Harvard denied ever having signed an agreement for a periodic training of the Nigerian governors, the governors showed documentary proofs that such an agreement had indeed been signed.<sup>523</sup>

In the aftermath of the heat and embarrassment that the controversy generated, especially after Harvard disowned the governors, dissension ensued between the governors. One of the four governors who had widely been identified as the person who signed the agreement with Harvard on behalf of the governors' forum repudiated it. He said he did not need a Harvard education to govern his state.<sup>524</sup> The governor's forum fired back and accused him of duplicity. In the end, the governors collectively decided to cancel the program, both because Harvard University had earlier hinted that it was no longer interested in the partnership and because the intensity of the opposition against the training had heightened considerably after the result of the citizen investigation became more widely dispersed in the domestic public sphere.<sup>525</sup> This act of citizen inquiry achieved three things simultaneously: it shamed Harvard University into repudiating a questionable agreement with corrupt Nigerian governors, deprived the governors of the opportunity to waste public funds and stash even more in U.S. banks, and exposed the laziness and reportorial incompetence of the Nigerian national media, which could not perform a simple

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<sup>523</sup> Collins Edomaruse and Festus Akanbi, "Document Affirms Govs' Forum, Harvard Varsity Deal," ThisDay Online, June 14, 2009, <http://www.thisdayonline.com/nview.php?id=146038> (accessed September 6 2010).

<sup>524</sup> Sahara Reporters, "Adams Oshiomole Says Governors' Forum 'MOU' with Harvard is False," June 22, 2009, <http://www.saharareporters.com/press-release/adams-oshiomole-says-governors-forum-mou-harvard-false> (accessed September 6, 2010).

<sup>525</sup> Afrique en Ligne, "Nigerian Governors Forum Cancels Harvard Training after Storm," <http://www.afriquejet.com/news/africa-news/nigerian-governors-forum-cancels-harvard-training-after-storm-2009061529759.html> (accessed September 6, 2010).

act of sending inquiries to Harvard University to conform or disconfirm the claims of the governors.

In another respect, the simultaneous shaming of Harvard University and the Nigerian governors introduces a novel dimension to the theory of “boomerang effect,” which traditionally accounts for how local and international NGOs can cause dictatorial, unaccountable governments to change state policies through shaming them and provoking mass outrage against their policies in the global court of public opinion. In their seminal work, *Activists Beyond Borders*, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink observed that transnational advocacy networks have become core instruments for tilting the balance of power between states and individuals and for the “redistribution of knowledge”:

[I]n a world where the voices of states have predominated, networks open channels for bringing alternative visions and information into international debate. Political scientists have tended to ignore such nongovernmental actors because they are not ‘powerful’ in the classic sense of the term. At the core of the network activity is the production, exchange, and strategic use of information... When they succeed, advocacy networks are among the most important sources of new ideas, norms, and identities in the international system.<sup>526</sup>

Here, the authors are concerned primarily with how organized advocacy networks deploy the power of information to shame recalcitrant and dictatorial regimes. They point out that “voices that are suppressed in their own societies may find that networks can project and amplify their concerns into an international arena, which in turn can echo back into their own countries.”<sup>527</sup>

The authors characterize this strategic deployment of informational resources to effect policy changes in erring nation-states as “leverage politics” and argue that “by leveraging more powerful institutions, weak groups gain influence far beyond their ability to influence state

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<sup>526</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), x.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

practices directly.”<sup>528</sup> For them, this phenomenon is illustrative of the waning power of the nation-state because the increasing capacity of non-state actors to compel states to change policies undermines modern states’ “absolute claims to sovereignty.”<sup>529</sup>

But it is also often said that it is only weak, peripheral states that are subject to the boomerang effect of transnational NGO activism and that, more often than not, it almost always requires the overt and subtle threats of strong nation-states in the West for weak, erring, dictatorial nations in the developing world to give in to international pressures. As Chetan Kumar observes, the “right circumstances” that can enable transnational activism to effect the dislodgement of “nasty dictatorships” necessarily incorporate “a specific interest on the part of a major power capable of using force.”<sup>530</sup> And as Martin Shaw points out, “the activists of globalist organizations, such as human rights, humanitarian and development agencies, make a reality of global civil society, by bringing the most exposed victims among the world’s population into contact with more resourceful groups in the West.”<sup>531</sup>

Well, here a powerful educational institution like Harvard University, which is not only located in the West but is, in fact, one of the West’s most recognized intellectual powerhouses, has been shamed into reversing an agreement it entered into with corrupt governors of a Third World country, not through whipping up international public opinion against it but by merely creating an online citizen media buzz, which then reverberated to the local Nigerian media, with

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<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>530</sup> Chetan Kumar, “Transnational Networks and Campaigns for Democracy,” in A. M. Florini (ed) *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 136.

<sup>531</sup> Martin Shaw, “Civil Society and Global Politics: Beyond a Social Movements Approach,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 23 (1994), 655.

a potential to go beyond that. It is entirely conceivable that Harvard University quickly rescinded its agreement with the Nigerian governors because it did not want the story to be picked up both by the U.S. media and the U.S. blogosphere, which would have likely created a colossal public relations disaster for the institution. Whatever the case, the lone, random act of “citizen investigation” by a marginal diasporan Nigerian had the effect of shaming a corrupt local elite and a powerful institution in the West in ways that the Nigerian domestic media would have been incapable of doing, challenging Thomas Hargrove and Guido Stempel III’s conclusions that citizen media “presents little threat to mainline news media.”<sup>532</sup> This shows that the online citizen media of a politically consequential Third World diaspora can both instigate a conventional boomerang effect against their homeland governments and a reverse boomerang effect against powerful non-state actors in the West.

Another instructive, paradigmatic case of how diasporan citizen media reporting shamed the Nigerian government into reversing a governmental policy occurred in late 2009. Nigeria’s former Federal Capital Territory minister, Nasiru el-Rufai, and former chairman of the anti-corruption agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Nuhu Ribadu, emerged as prominent opposition figures against the government of Nigeria’s late president, Musa Umaru Yar’adua, whom the duo had helped to install. After these personalities fell out with the government of the day after a short honeymoon, they relocated to the United States from where they fought the government. They used foreign media organizations and the diasporan online media outlets for their battles.

In retaliation, the government charged el-Rufai to court in absentia over “abuse of office” and misappropriation of public funds. Sensing danger, he fled Nigeria to the United States. The

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<sup>532</sup> Thomas Hargrove and Guido Stempel III, “Use of Blogs as a Source of News Presents Little Threat to Mainline News Media,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 28 no. 1 (2007): 99-102.

new leadership of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission declared him wanted and enlisted the support of Interpol to have him arrested and deported back to Nigeria.<sup>533</sup> Nuhu Ribadu, a former police officer, was demoted, dismissed from the police, and declared wanted too. He fled to the United States because he was nearly assassinated while in Nigeria.<sup>534</sup>

Matters came to a head when the government gave a furtive directive that the two opposition figures should never be allowed to renew their passports in any Nigerian consular office in the West. The point of this directive was to get them stranded and unable to move around the world. Mr. el-Rufai went to the Nigerian High Commission in London to renew his passport, oblivious of the fact that a directive had been handed down that he and his friend should never be granted a passport renewal request. Officers at the High Commission told him his passport could not be renewed. “On further enquiries in the High Commission and Abuja, I confirmed that President Umaru Yar'Adua gave the order through the National Security Adviser, Abdullahi Sarki Mukhtar, and then to the Director General of the Nigeria Intelligence Agency, NIA, Mr. Imohe.”<sup>535</sup> Interestingly, news of the denial for him to renew his passport was carried only by the diasporan online news outlets and by *NEXT*, a newspaper in which the former minister has substantial investments. All the domestic media organizations blacked it out. However, when the government was compelled to deny el-Rufai's claims that he was denied the right to renew his passport at the instance of the government, all the local newspapers carried the

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<sup>533</sup> Kunle Olasanmi, “EFCC Declares el-Rufai Wanted,” *Nigerian Compass*, December 22, 2008, [http://www.compassnewspaper.com/NG/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6656:efcc-declares-el-rufai-wanted&catid=43:news&Itemid=799](http://www.compassnewspaper.com/NG/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6656:efcc-declares-el-rufai-wanted&catid=43:news&Itemid=799) (accessed September 21, 2010).

<sup>534</sup> Ise-Oluwa Ige & Ikechukwu Nnochiri, “FG After My Life over Ibori, Says Ribadu,” *Vanguard*, September 24, 2009, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/09/fg-after-my-life-over-ibori-says-ribadu/> (accessed September 21, 2010).

<sup>535</sup> Idris Akinbanjo, “Yar'Adua Denied me Passport - El-Rufai,” *NEXT*, <http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5460669-146/story.csp> (accessed September 26, 2010).

denial. The government said el-Rafai had never been denied passport renewal, nor had any directive been given that he or any other Nigerian should be denied one. It said the former minister merely wanted to whip up public sentiments against the government.

The back-and-forth between the spokespersons of the government and the self-exiled opposition politicians would have lost steam had SaharaReporters not stumbled on the original memo instructing all Nigerian embassies and high commissions in the West to refuse the reissuance or renewal of the passports of el-Rufai and Ribadu. The online citizen media outlet said it was in possession of original documents which instructed embassies and high commissions to deny both el-Rufai and Ribadu passport renewal privileges. “Referring to a ‘continuous and unyielding campaign of calumny against the Federal Government abroad’ by the two men, it said a decision had been taken ‘at the highest level’ to deny them ‘consular assistance of any form.’”<sup>536</sup> The site later published scanned copies of the original memos. Almost immediately, local newspapers in Nigeria, which had ignored the story, picked it up.<sup>537</sup> In no time, harsh criticisms of the directive filled Nigerian newspaper pages. Nigerians in the diaspora also initiated an online petition drive to compel the government to reverse its directive. The petition, which had hundreds of signatories, declared that based on reporting by SaharaReporters, it had “incontrovertible evidence” that the Federal Government of Nigeria had instructed its missions abroad not to renew the passports of certain citizens of Nigeria, saying it is a “tragic reminder of the dark days of brutal military dictatorship when the confiscation of the

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<sup>536</sup> SaharaReporters, “El Rufai, Ribadu: ‘No New Passport! No Renewal of Passport! No Passport!’ Yar’ Adua Orders,” October 10, 2009, <http://saharareporters.com/news-page/el-rufai-ribadu-%E2%80%9Cno-new-passport-no-renewal-passport-no-passport%E2%80%9D-yar%E2%80%99adua-orders> (accessed September 26, 2010).

<sup>537</sup> See, for instance, the story in the *Punch* newspaper: Olusola Fabiyi, “FG Stops New Passports for Ribadu, el-Rufai,” *Punch*, October 10, 2009, <http://www.punchng.com/Article2Print.aspx?theartic=Art200910102362065> (accessed September 26, 2010).

passports of political opponents, human rights activists and pro-democracy campaigners was the order of the day.” It concluded by saying,

We shudder at the thought that those of us in the Diaspora who criticize the government of the day for any reason may suddenly become passport-less and hence be unable either to carry out our jobs that require international travel, visit our families back at home, or worse still be subject to deportation by our host governments. We shudder at the thought of our Nigerian compatriots inside the country who can become shut in and hence cannot travel to visit their families abroad or carry out official or professional duties simply because their passports have been preemptively seized due to non-renewal.<sup>538</sup>

The Nigerian federal government was embarrassed by the exposé of its secret memo and the flurry of condemnations that followed. The then Nigerian president quickly disowned the memo and fired the director general of the Nigerian National Intelligence Agency, who purportedly originated the memo.<sup>539</sup> To save face, the president even ordered a probe into the activities of the NIA boss.<sup>540</sup> He then directed the foreign affairs minister to send a cable to all Nigerian consular services worldwide to ignore the previous memos that mandated them to deny consular services to the two opposition politicians. In a cable message, which was again intercepted and reproduced verbatim by SaharaReporters, the government said, “all Nigerian missions should give requisite consular assistance to *any Nigerian repeat any Nigerian* [emphasis original] that

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<sup>538</sup> Mobolaji Aluko, “Diaspora Petition To President Yar’adua Over Non-renewal Of Passport,” Nigerian Village Square, <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/mobolaji-aluko/diaspora-petition-to-president-yaradua-over-non-renewal-of-passport.html> (accessed September 26, 2010).

<sup>539</sup> SaharaReporters, “About Face: Yar’Adua Repudiates NIA Memo on El Rufai and Ribadu, Fires DG Imohe for Memo,” October 13, 2009, <http://saharareporters.com/news-page/about-face-yaradua-repudiates-nia-memo-el-rufai-and-ribadu-fires-dg-imohe-memo> (accessed September 26, 2010). Also see Emmanuel Iffer, “Ribadu/El-Rufai Saga: Yar’Adua Fires NIA Boss,” *Leadership*, October 14, 2009; Francis Ugwoke, “FG Fires Security Chief over el-Rufai, Ribadu,” *ThisDay*, October 15, 2009; Ihuoma Chiedozie, “Presidency Lifts Ban on Passports of el-Rufai, Ribadu,” *Punch*, October 15, 2009. Interestingly, all these papers depended almost entirely on the report on Sahara Reporters for their stories, even though they have a closer geographic distance to the source of the story.

<sup>540</sup> Daniel Idonor, “Yar’Adua Orders Probe of Sacked NIA Boss,” *Vanguard*, October 15, 2009.

requests for such assistance in any Nigerian mission abroad....”<sup>541</sup> But Nigeria’s most influential newspaper, the *Guardian*, reported that the director general of the Nigerian National Intelligence Agency was merely “sacrificed” to save the president from an “international embarrassment.”<sup>542</sup> Not surprisingly, after the resolution of the passport renewal controversy in his favor, Mr. el-Rufai singled out diasporan Nigerian citizen journalists for commendation. In an interview with the *Daily Trust*, he said,

I am particularly grateful to the patriotic Nigerians that got those documents out and published them. Without those documents, the government would never have back-tracked on its decision. Clearly you can see from the contents of the documents that this decision came from Yar’Adua himself, in spite of his lame attempts to deny it.<sup>543</sup>

Although he gave the credit to diasporan Nigerian citizen reporters for exposing the government memos that caused a reversal of a government policy against him, it is obvious that he was the source of the authentic copies of the memos published on SaharaReporters. He revealed as much in his own ruminations after the incident. In a blog post in the Nigerian Village Square, he wrote:

After I was branded a liar by the authorities when I told the world of my ordeal (a lie which a lot of Nigerians unwittingly bought into) I determined to expose my tormentors. With the help of well wishers and men of conscience right at the heart of the government in Abuja, I was able to get documentary evidence to prove that what I had said was true and that what the administration said was a blatant lie. Thus exposed, the administration chose to sacrifice the Director General of the National Intelligence Agency, a man that I know and respect for his sterling gentlemanly qualities.<sup>544</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> SaharaReporters, “It is Official: El-Rufai and Ribadu Can Enjoy Passport Services, Yar’Adua Now Says,” October 14, 2009, <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/it-official-el-rufai-and-ribadu-can-enjoy-passport-services-yaradua-now-says> (accessed September 26, 2010).

<sup>542</sup> Martins Oloja, “El-Rufai-Ribadu Passport Saga: How Nigeria Escaped International Embarrassment,” *Guardian* October 18, 2009.

<sup>543</sup> Ibrahim Chonoko, “How Yar’adua Betrayed Us, By el-Rufai,” *Daily Trust*, October 22, 2009, [http://www.news.dailytrust.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=8204:how-yaradua-betrayed-us-by-el-rufai-&catid=48:inside-politics&Itemid=123](http://www.news.dailytrust.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8204:how-yaradua-betrayed-us-by-el-rufai-&catid=48:inside-politics&Itemid=123) (accessed October 4, 2010).

<sup>544</sup> Nasir el-Rufai, “The Moral of the Story,” Nigerian Village Square, October 21, 2009, <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/nasir-el-rufai/the-moral-of-the-story.html> (accessed October 4, 2010).



By admitting that he was “able to get documentary evidence to prove that what I said was true,” he clearly implied that he was the source of the documents that SaharaReporters published. However, it is interesting that he chose a diasporan online citizen media to give these exclusive documents to and not homeland newspapers, not even *NEXT*, his newspaper, which has the same multi-media and hypertextual capabilities as SaharaReporters. This fact underscores the increasingly preeminent position of diasporan online citizen media outfits in charting national discourses. Had he given the documents to homeland newspapers, the story would not have had the same effect as it had. The papers would probably not have touched the documents with a barge pole for fear of running afoul of the laws of sedition, which forbid and criminalize the unauthorized publication of classified government documents.<sup>545</sup>

Here, the lesson is that alternative online newspapers do not necessarily have to adopt “native reporting” or such other subversive reportorial practices to upset the power structure. They can exploit the internal dissensions of the ruling elite to subvert the system. This is a system of reporting that SaharaReporters has perfected; it accepts confidential documents exposing the dirt of various ruling class factions, assures sources confidentiality but does not spare these sources if dirt about them is exposed by competing elites. The geographical distance of the diasporan citizen media especially makes this possible.

But, more importantly, what redounds to the formidability and effectiveness of the diasporan online media is the greater capacity they have to shame governments and politicians at home than do the domestic media, especially because the diasporan media have now become such an important fixture of the Nigerian media landscape that they have attracted the attention of the US government and of Western international news organizations. In a report about

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<sup>545</sup> See Chude R. Okonkwo, “Nigeria's Sedition Laws-- Their Effects on Free Speech,” *Journalism Quarterly* 60 no. 1 (1983): 54-60.

SaharaReporters titled “Africa’s WikiLeaks,” *Daily Beast*’s Philip Shenon reported that Sahara Reporter’s “impressive muckraking has drawn the support of that most august of American philanthropies—the Ford Foundation, which has given SaharaReporters \$175,000 over the last two years.” He quoted Calvin Sims, a former *New York Times* foreign correspondent who now works for the foundation and is overseeing the grant, as saying, “I hadn’t seen anything like this. The impact it’s having—holding political leaders to account—is very impressive,” pointing out that Sahara Reporters could be a model for similar sites throughout the developing world.<sup>546</sup>

It is precisely because of the increased international exposure of the Nigerian citizen media outfits that governments back home are so afraid of them. It is interesting that part of the reason the government quickly rescinded its decision to deny consular services to opposition politicians after the memo was exposed was the fear of being exposed to “international embarrassment.” In other words, the diasporan media have an enormous capacity to bring a boomerang effect to bear on the governments in ways the homeland can only dream of.

## **5.2 Watching the Watchdogs: Exposing Corruption in Homeland News Media**

The diasporan citizen media have not only been a thorn in the flesh of governments and corrupt politicians, they have also been exposing corruption in homeland newspapers and, in the process, eroding their legitimacy. In the run-up to the 2011 president elections, for example, the diasporan online media, especially SaharaReporters, have particularly been hard on the media. Sahara Reporters, for instance, reported that the editorial board chairman of the *Punch*, an influential, widely circulated national newspaper, had attended a “nocturnal meeting” with former corrupt

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<sup>546</sup> Philip Shenon, “Africa’s WikiLeaks,” *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-08-12/sahara-reporters-uncovering-nigerias-corruption/2/m> (accessed October 10, 2010).

military dictator Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) who, at the time of this study, was campaigning to be elected president again. The muckraking citizen medium alleged that the *Punch* journalist, along with other top media executives, collected huge sums of money from the former dictator to launder his image in the media. The Web site obtained the photograph that top media executives took with the former dictator and published it.<sup>547</sup> The management of the paper was embarrassed and fired the man.<sup>548</sup> The unmasking of this secret meeting by Sahara Reporters, which had been kept away from public knowledge, led to a huge media firestorm and debate.<sup>549</sup>

The site also published a secret text message that the editor of the same paper sent to its reporters and section editors instructing them to never write any negative stories about the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, who is also a contestant in the presidential race.<sup>550</sup> The publication of this text on SaharaReporters caused a hurried policy reversal and the deliberate publication of a rash of negative stories against the president to prove the story wrong. But in this chapter I will focus on only two dramatic, far-reaching stories that shook the roots of traditional media practice in Nigeria: exposure of land allocations to top Nigerian editors to stop them from

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<sup>547</sup> SaharaReporters, "IBB's N10 Million Photo-Op with Media Executives," August 19, 2010, <http://www.saharareporters.com/photo/ibbs-n10-million-photo-op-media-executives?page=1> (accessed October 4, 2010).

<sup>548</sup> Lanre Idowu, "IBB, Sahara Reporters, and the Press," *NEXT*, September 1, 2010, <http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5613382-146/story.csp> (accessed October 4, 2010). Also see Pointblanknews.com, "IBB's Minna Parley: How Punch's Editorial Board Chairman Was Fired," September 1, 2010, <http://www.pointblanknews.com/News/os3828.html> (accessed October 4, 2010).

<sup>549</sup> See, for instance, Eze Anaba, "IBB, Visit to Minna and Journalism," *Vanguard*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/08/ibb-visit-to-minna-and-journalism/> (accessed October 4, 2010).

<sup>550</sup> SaharaReporters, "Punch Newspaper Prohibits News Critical Of Jonathan," September 19, 2010, <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/punch-newspaper-prohibits-news-critical-jonathan?page=2> (accessed October 4, 2010).

writing about a corrupt government minister and the practice of editors and reporters serving as “consultants” to corrupt politicians and shady businesses.

In early 2009, SaharaReporters exposed the ugly underbelly of Nigerian journalism when they revealed that a former minister of Nigeria’s Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Aliyu Moddibo, had bribed top Nigerian editors and chairmen of editorial boards with juicy land allocations in 2008. The site scanned and published the original documents of the land allocations. The minister at the time was being investigated by the Nigerian Presidency over an “extensive corruption dossier” that had been established against him, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission’s (EFCC) new chairperson, Mrs. Farida Waziri, was instructed to lead the investigation. In order to appease his investigators to write a favorable report on him, he allocated choice pieces of land to the anti-corruption chief and to twenty three Nigerian editors, including prominent columnists who had made a career of railing against corruption on the pages of newspapers. “[A]n official at the EFCC familiar with details of Modibbo’s corrupt deals told SaharaReporters that the former minister’s decision to allocate lands to Mrs. Waziri alongside top newspaper editors was... to ensure that the transaction was not reported – and that Modibbo’s extensive scams at the FCT were covered up.”<sup>551</sup>

The report was the most damning evidence of the rot in the Nigerian media industry. Among the editors mentioned in the reporter were previous “guerilla” journalists who had cultivated the public personae of anti-corruption crusaders. One of the editors, Bayo Onanuga, interestingly, was a mentor to the publisher of SaharaReporters, Omoyele Sowore. His newsmagazine, *The News*, and its sister publication, *P.M. News*, also had an operational

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<sup>551</sup> Sahara Reporters, “How Farida Waziri and Top Nigerian Editors Got Abuja Land Allocations,” January 4, 2009, <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/how-farida-waziri-and-top-nigerian-editors-got-abuja-land-allocations> (accessed October 4, 2010).

relationship with SaharaReporters; they regularly republished stories that appeared on Sahara Reporters, and SaharaReporters sometimes republished their stories. That Sowore would publish stories that destroyed the legitimacy of his mentor underlines the fierce independence of the brain behind SaharaReporters.

Although Nigerian newspapers refused to publish the story and censured all opinion articles about it, it damaged their credibility greatly. As we will see later in this chapter, this land deal has become the reference point in discussions about corruption in the Nigerian media. Meanwhile, several opinion articles sprang up in the Nigerian blogosphere that ridiculed the Nigerian journalists mentioned in the Sahara Reporters story.<sup>552</sup> Some demanded explanation from the editors. Yet others initiated an online petition drive to request the Nigerian National Assembly to investigate the land allocations scam. This was a decisive moment in the corrosion of the legitimacy of Nigerian journalists. The fact that all the newspapers kept a conspiracy of silence over the land allocation scandal, which has been viewed by millions of Nigerians at home and abroad, did not help their reputation. Predictably, more than half of the reader comments that accompany the punditry of the Nigerian editors identified in the SaharaReporters stories have been taunts and raw anger. But a worse crisis of credibility was to be exposed by the diasporan citizen media.

On March 4, 2010, a little-known Indiana-based diasporan citizen media outlet called iReports-ng (“ng” is the domain name associated with Nigeria), whose motto is “Truly Independent. Truly Yours,” published the story of high-profile corruption in the top editorial

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<sup>552</sup> A commentator picked on an old article written by one Reuben Abati, editorial board chairman of the *Guardian* who was mentioned in the report. In the article titled, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” Abati pontificated about the virtues of modesty and railed against corruption and greed. The commentator titled his critique of Abati, “How Much Land Does Reuben Abati Need?” (See, Osita Mba, “How Much Land Does Reuben Abati Need?” Nigerian Village Square, January 18, 2009, <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/osita-mba/how-much-land-does-reuben-abati-need.html> (accessed October 4, 2010)).

echelon of the *Punch*, Nigeria's most widely circulated newspaper which, as the previous discussion shows, has been dogged by ethical scandals. The trigger for the story was a petition against Azubuike Ishiewene, the former editor of the paper who was also its executive director of publications at the time of the petition. Mr. Ishiewene also wrote a wildly popular, punchy, well-regarded anti-corruption column on the back page of the *Punch*. The petition against him was written by the editor of the paper, Steve Ayorinde, who had recently been fired at the instance of the executive director of publications, to whom he was directly answerable. In the petition he addressed to the chairman of the newspaper group, the former editor alleged that his boss caused him to be fired because he allowed stories to be published that diminished the governor of Lagos State, to whom the executive director was a "media consultant" and from whom he received the equivalent of thousands of dollars in monthly upkeep for protecting his interests in the paper. "It was an open secret that the ED Publications regularly attended meetings of the media consultants to the Lagos State Government, made up of a few Senior Editors and Chairmen of Editorial Boards," Ayorinde wrote. He also pointed out that, "The need to watch the government's back and either woo over or change unfriendly editors and journalists, where possible, was the charge to those senior editors."<sup>553</sup> He backed up his claims with strong, unassailable evidence. Other allegations against the executive director of publications were that he owned a public relations and advertising firm and, in contravention of existing rules in the newspaper company he worked for, used his position to plant favorable stories and to "kill" negative ones for his clients, while using his popular column to nurture a public persona of an anti-corruption crusader. The Web site captured the substance of the petition this way:

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<sup>553</sup> iReports-ng.com, "Dirty War Over Money Tears Punch Apart, as Editor Opens Can of Worms on Multi-Million Naira Corruption Scandal," March 14, 2010, <http://ireports-ng.com/2010/03/04/dirty-war-over-money-tears-punch-apart-as-editor-opens-can-of-worms-on-multi-million-corruption-scandals/> (accessed October 10, 2010).

The petition details how Ishiekwene, known for his open and persistent criticism of corruption in Nigeria through his back page column in *The Punch*, intimidated, displaced and forced about five editors and several other editorial staff out of their job in a bid to protect and promote several individuals including corrupt politicians he collects millions of naira from as well as organisations where he serves as a consultant or director designate. The latest of such that brought out the exposé against him is the allegation that he collected N15 million among other benefits from the Lagos state government to entrap and sack the most senior editor of *The Punch*, Mr Steve Ayorinde, over the latter's failure to stop publishing negative stories against Lagos State government believed to have engaged Azu, as he is often called in Nigerian media circles, as a consultant.<sup>554</sup>

The explosive petition, which runs into several pages of ethically damning indictments against not just Mr. Ishiekwene but a slew of senior Nigerian journalists, was initially ignored by the management of *Punch*. Nigerian newspapers also refused to publish it. This was predictable. The petitioner did not only indict his boss of editorial compromise and dalliance with corrupt politicians, he also accused “senior editors and chairmen of editorial boards” of prominent newspapers of being complicit in these ethical infractions. Realizing that local newspapers would not touch the petition, iReport-ng.com wrote, a director in the newspaper company decided to reach out to the Nigerian diasporan online citizen media. The Web site quoted the director as saying,

What I have read about the young man at the centre of the allegations is incredible and I know that his friends in the Nigerian media won't want to expose one of their own and I think *that is why you online publishers out there have to help us expose these too many scandals* to save a reputable organisation like *The Punch* from going down to ignominy [emphasis mine].<sup>555</sup>

It really does speak to the increasing centrality of the diasporan citizen media in the politics of the Nigerian domestic public sphere that even directors of established national newspapers look up to them for the coverage of news stories that the traditional media, for any number of reasons, will not touch. The Web site quoted the director as disclosing that attempts were being made by

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

vested interests to “cover up the allegations” against Mr. Ishiekwene and that if recourse to the diasporan online media did not yield the result he expected, then he would be compelled to forward the petition to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC).

A day after the IReport-ng.com published the petition, it was picked up by almost all the other diasporan media outlets. It also circulated widely on Nigerian online discussion boards and was shared copiously on Facebook and Twitter. Although the story had not yet made it to the pages of Nigerian newspapers, the management of *Punch* was compelled to react. In a reaction published on its front page, the newspaper’s management chose to pick holes in the reporting of the scandal by IReports-ng.com. It said, “In reporting the petition, the website made some introductory remarks which were clearly intended to cause disaffection among the directors of *Punch*,” adding that “Mr. Ayorinde’s account of the circumstances of his forced resignation are incomplete and inaccurate.”<sup>556</sup> The management was concerned more by the disclosure that the petition was submitted by an unnamed director than by the substance of the allegations. It did not want the reading public to get the impression that the newspaper company was a divided house. Days later, however, it suspended the accused director of publications pending the outcome of its independent investigation of the allegations. Meanwhile, the chairman of the newspaper threatened legal action against iReports-ng.com and enlisted the support of Nigerian security agencies to track down the owners of the Web site.<sup>557</sup> The strategy was to intimidate the Web site into not publishing more unflattering disclosures about the company. But it backfired, as many anti-corruption and media NGOs, such as the Coalition Against Corrupt Leaders (CACOL)

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<sup>556</sup> Punch, “A Statement from PUNCH,” *Punch*, March 20, 2010, <http://www.punchng.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art20100320462910> (accessed October 10, 2010).

<sup>557</sup> iReports-ng.com, “Punch Chairman in Desperate Moves To Cover Up Corruption Scandals,” March 30, 2010, <http://ireports-ng.com/2010/03/30/punch-chairman-in-desperate-moves-to-cover-up-corruption-scandals/> (accessed October 10, 2010).



and Media4Democracy, joined calls for an independent investigation into the allegations against Mr. Ishiekwene.<sup>558</sup>

Emboldened by the wild sensation that the report generated on Nigerian cyberspace and the impact it had had at home, another crack investigative reporter who was eased out of *Punch* by the same corrupt director of publications made available to IReports-ng.com a petition he had written against the man two years ago, but which was ignored by the management of the paper. In the petition, the reporter alleged that well-investigated stories against three corrupt governors were “killed” by Mr. Ishiewene. He also wrote:

I recall that early this year, I filed a story on EFCC’s investigation of the wife of Vice President Goodluck Jonathan for money laundering but it was killed for yet unclear reasons. And over a month ago, I was advised against doing a story on the curious withdrawal of N3.6 billion from Rivers Government account with Zenith Bank. What could have been a great and exclusive story for our newspaper was spiked for reasons still unclear to me. The matter has, through smaller newspapers, however come to the public domain, with PUNCH having no option than [sic] to participate in its reportage.<sup>559</sup> The petition was ignored and, in protest, the reporter left the newspaper for *NEXT*, an up-and-coming multimedia newspaper funded by former opposition politician Nasir el-Rufai. Upon the publication of this petition on iReports-ng.com, several reporters and editors at the paper revealed more sordid details of the allegations. For instance, it was revealed that the chairman of the company actually acted in cahoots with Mr. Ishiekwne to protect politicians who paid huge sums of money to ward off negative stories about them. A particularly dramatic case involved the wife of then Vice President Goodluck Jonathan (who is now president of Nigeria at the time of this study) who was caught by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission while trying to launder millions of dollars. The story had already been written and was being printed for the

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<sup>558</sup> iReports-ng.com, “PUNCH/Azugate Scandal: Media Group Calls for Probe as EFCC Steps in,” March 8, 2010, <http://ireports-ng.com/2010/03/08/punchazugate-scandalmedia-group-calls-for-probe-as-efcc-steps-in/> (accessed October 10, 2010).

<sup>559</sup> iReports-ng.com, “Another Staff Opens Can of Worms On Azu, Punch’s Deep-Rooted Corruption,” March 12, 2010, <http://ireports-ng.com/2010/03/12/another-staff-opens-can-of-worms-on-azu-punchs-deep-rooted-corruption/> (accessed October 10, 2010).

next day's edition when the director of publication, Mr. Ishiekwne, called the Vice President's press secretary and informed him about it. The press secretary requested that the story be killed in exchange for favors. As the source put it,

No sooner had printing started than the editor ran down to the press to order that printing should stop and that all that had been produced be condemned. He had received a call from the Chairman, Chief Ajibola Ogunshola, that anything relating to the VP and his wife in the paper for the next day and subsequently be suspended.... We later learnt the VP paid the bill for the next day's total print and the adverts to get the chairman to order the destruction of the copies already printed. That was the end of the report. So, in trying to nail the ED, we should not forget the involvement of the Chairman in this whole thing.<sup>560</sup>

This revelation further inflamed and outraged the Nigerian cyber community. To pay for the entire print-run of Nigeria's largest circulating newspaper, including paying for all the adverts that were contained in the edition, would certainly add up to millions of dollars. This is what makes the corruption in the media a double-edged tragedy: it not only involves journalists who corruptly enrich themselves by protecting corrupt government officials, it also entails government officials embezzling massive public resources to bribe the news media on a sustained basis. In time, the story percolated into the pages of the domestic media; it could no longer be ignored. A well-known New York-based columnist for the influential *Guardian* newspaper, Sonala Olumhense, was the first to bring the discussion to the mainstream. In his popular column in the *Guardian* he wrote an article titled "The Nigerian Mass Media on Trial." He argued that what the news of the scandal at *Punch* had done was to give a face to the well-known journalistic perversions that have become endemic in mass media practice in Nigeria in general. In a witty yet blistering critique, he wrote:

In retrospect, the Ayorinde story is not about *The Punch* at all, but about journalism in Nigeria. One cannot read Mr. Ayorinde's protest without coming away with the

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<sup>560</sup> Nigerian Village Square, "Corruption in the Nigerian Media- Case of Azubuike Ishiekwene," <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/guest-articles/punch-editors-bombshell-on-corruption-in-the-nigerian-media-2.html> (accessed October 10, 2010).

frightening impression that many senior journalists have now adopted a loose lifestyle of selling their influence to government officials and businessmen in exchange for cash and gifts without the slightest concern for any conflict of interest. This is a terrible burden because the power of the press lies in its credibility. If stories are being paid for, or editors bought in order to ensure specific kinds of coverage, a newspaper is, in effect, a doctored and worthless document.<sup>561</sup>

This incisive commentary activated a flurry of condemnations of the Nigerian press in cyberspace and in the traditional domestic media. One commentator, for instance, characterized the Nigeria press as the “fourth estate of graft,”<sup>562</sup> an apparent witty inversion of the popular characterization of the press as the “the fourth estate of the realm,” a phrase first coined by Thomas Babington to describe the coffeehouses of Restoration England,<sup>563</sup> but which the rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberalism ascribed to the modern mass media.<sup>564</sup>

A Nigerian media NGO reported that the scandal at *Punch* had “become the talk of the town in most newsrooms with many journalists of the view that the allegations would damage a profession that is already suffering from a credibility crisis.”<sup>565</sup> But the consequences of the damning revelations against Mr. Ishiewene reverberated beyond Nigeria and its digital diaspora. The CNN MultiChoice African Journalist Award, the prestigious body that rewards excellence in African journalism and on whose panel of judges Mr. Ishiekwene served, dismissed and replaced

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<sup>561</sup> Sonala Olumhense, “The Nigerian Media on Trial,” *Guardian*, March 21, 2010, p. 29.

<sup>562</sup> Olusegun Fakoya, “Nigeria Mass Media - The Fourth Estate of Graft,” PointblankNews.com, March 26, 2010, <http://www.pointblanknews.com/artopn2542.html> (accessed October 10, 2010).

<sup>563</sup> See Brian Cowan, “The Rise of the Coffeehouse Reconsidered,” *The Historical Journal* 47 no. 1 (2004): 21-46.

<sup>564</sup> See James Curran, “Rethinking the Media as a Public Sphere,” in *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere*, ed. Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, 1-57 (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>565</sup> Media Matters, “Five-Man Panel Probes Ayorinde’s Petition Against Azu,” [http://mediamatters-ng.com/spotlight\\_pg9.php](http://mediamatters-ng.com/spotlight_pg9.php) (accessed October 10, 2010).

him with another Nigerian editor.<sup>566</sup> This effectively dimmed his rising international profile. On April 16, Mr. Ishiekwene could not stand the heat and voluntarily retired from the *Punch* newspaper. But, in a widely circulated statement, he said, contrary to stories in the papers and on the Web, he was not forced to resign his job, and that he voluntarily recused himself from serving on the Award panel in light of the weighty allegations against him, pointing out that the committee set up to investigate him found him innocent.<sup>567</sup>

This story has far-reaching significance. It brought into bold relief the complicity of the Nigerian traditional media in the institutional corruption that plagues the country, which the media is supposed to expose and fight. The editor who called attention to this media corruption is clearly not innocent either. Several comments, including Mr. Ishiekwene's rebuttal, pointed to his own entanglements in corrupt deals and in the "killing" of unfavorable stories for his clients. The second petition against Mr. Ishiekwene actually mentioned the ousted editor as having acted in conjunction with the director of publications to cause stories that were unfavorable to certain government officials not to be published. In fact, he was forced to resign his position as editor because he was caught planting a story for the political rival of Mr. Ishiekwene's "client."

The heat that this exposé on corruption in the media generated brought to renewed limelight the report that SaharaReporters has done earlier, but which did not pick up much steam outside the Nigerian cyber sphere. Many commenters on the series of stories about the scandals at *Punch* did make the connection between the SaharaReporters story on the land bribery of top

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<sup>566</sup> Nicholas Ibekwe, "Ishiekwene Leaves CNN Judges Panel," *NEXT*, April 7, 2010, [http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5551143-146/ishiekwene\\_leaves\\_cnn\\_judges\\_panel\\_.csp](http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5551143-146/ishiekwene_leaves_cnn_judges_panel_.csp) (accessed October 10, 2010).

<sup>567</sup> See Azubuike Ishiewene, "An Era Ends, a Story Begins..." SaharaReporters, April 17, 2010, <http://www.saharareporters.com/article/era-ends-story-begins%E2%80%A6> (accessed October 10, 2010).

editors and editorial board chairmen and what now became public knowledge about the coziness of certain top journalists with government officials. One commenter remarked thus:

I'm surprised that this is the first time a corruption allegation against media executives is receiving serious attention. I could remember that sometimes [sic] last year, SaharaReporters wrote about some senior editors of different newspapers involved in a land allocation scam in Abuja. Nothing came out of this revelation. Nobody followed it up. I think all sections of Nigerian Media should be investigated, especially the print media, not just *The Punch*, in order to restore people's confidence in their info.<sup>568</sup>

The cumulative, although as yet unconfirmed, effect of the series of exposés on the corruption in the traditional media in Nigeria is that the general public is beginning to lose faith in them and are now turning to the plethora of diasporan online citizen media for their informational needs. This could very well be the single most important factor that will cause the death of traditional newspapers in Nigeria. This is especially so because Internet penetration is deepening every day in Nigeria and people there are increasingly using the Internet to find information. In fact, according to the International Telecommunications Union's 2010 report, forty percent of all Internet traffic from the whole of Africa comes from Nigeria. It also says the country has at least forty-three million active Internet users.<sup>569</sup> Advertisers whose patronage sustains newspapers are taking notice. The crisis of the Nigerian domestic newspaper market will deepen once advertisers migrate in large numbers to citizen reporters. But the malaise that plagues the media in Nigeria may migrate online, too. In fact, as the example of Elendu Reports shows in chapter four, this is a real possibility.

It is at yet unclear where this will all lead. What is clear, however, is that the legion of diasporan online citizen media that have sprouted in the Nigerian diaspora have reversed the

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<sup>568</sup> Nicholas Ibekwe, "Allegations Against Punch Director Sad, Says Journalism Teacher," *NEXT*, March 11, 2010, [http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5538392-146/allegations\\_against\\_punch\\_director\\_sad\\_says.csp](http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5538392-146/allegations_against_punch_director_sad_says.csp) (accessed October 10, 2010).

<sup>569</sup> Michael Malakata, "Nigeria Claims Top Internet Spot in Africa," *ComputerWorld*, August 10, 2010, <http://news.idg.no/cw/art.cfm?id=5DBFEB28-1A64-67EA-E470DF5BE0AA9E10> (accessed October 10, 2010).

unidirectionality that hitherto characterized news flows between the homeland and the diaspora. They have increased and enriched access to Nigerian news for Nigerians everywhere. Most importantly, by taking over the watchdog role that the homeland media had traditionally performed, they could potentially supplant the homeland news media. What implications do these realities have for the way we theorize news flows, citizen and alternative journalism and emerging forms of journalism? The next chapter answers these questions.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **6 EVALUATION AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA**

This chapter critically discusses and evaluates the data that has been presented in the preceding chapters in a bid to provide answers to the research questions in Chapter One. In what follows, the research questions posed in Chapter One are reproduced, followed by a ruminative and perspectival synthesis of the data presented in chapters three, four, and five in response to the research questions. Subsequent sections of this chapter consist of the summary of the findings of

the study, conclusions, implications that can be adduced from the study's data, and recommendations for future research.

### **6.1 Response to Research Question One**

1. *How and why did online citizen news media emerge in the Nigerian digital diaspora with their current characteristics?*

The emergence, popularity, and progressively soaring impact of the Nigerian diasporan citizen media examined in previous chapters were actuated and propelled by six underlying factors. The first is the death or dearth of a critical press tradition in Nigeria—especially the adversarial guerilla press tradition that reigned in the 1990s—in the face of the profound moral putrescence that the restoration of democratic rule has paradoxically inaugurated since 1999. At a time when billions of dollars are brazenly stolen and salted away in foreign bank accounts by political office holders and when bald-faced cronyism and avarice have overtaken the public sphere, the national media, for the most part, have either looked the other way or have been actively complicit. This state of affairs is inconsistent with the progressive, agitational, and inquiring disposition that had defined the character, disposition, and performance of much of the Nigerian press since its founding in the mid 1800s.

As was shown in Chapter Three, the Nigerian press has historically been vigorously critical of the powers that be. It almost single-handedly dislodged colonialism and helped fight against military dictatorship. The guerrilla press of the 1990s especially had a powerful impact on the media practice and politics of Nigeria. One of its enduring legacies is that it has predisposed Nigerians to expect their press to be robustly fearless, critical, and uncompromisingly adversarial. But after winning the fight against military dictatorship, much of

the national press lost its critical bite; the press appeared to have been anesthetized into a false sense of triumphalism at a time when corruption by the emergent political elite it helped to bring to the forefront took newer and more insidious forms. In many cases, the traditional Nigerian press was co-opted into the mindless looting of the national treasury that has attended the restoration of democracy, as the case studies in chapters four and five illustrate. Top editors and reporters of influential newspapers and magazines are now political consultants to corrupt politicians and dodgy businesses. They censor unfavorable stories about their clients and punish idealistic reporters and editors who still innocently cherish the virtues of good old investigative journalism. This widespread assault on basic journalistic norms has given birth to a drab, pliant, colorless, and boringly predictable national media.

The absence of a watchdog media, therefore, created a yawning void, which many of the diasporan citizen media are filling. Although not all the online diasporan citizen media are critical of the hydra-headed corruption in the homeland, many of them expose it in more vigorous and effective ways than the homeland media. The most popular of them, indicatively, are those that fearlessly and evenhandedly call attention to acts of corruption and abuse of power in the domestic public sphere. Thus, it is only in the online media of the Nigerian digital diaspora that critical journalism is now practiced. And this critical journalism, more often than not, also involves the uncloaking of corruption in the traditional homeland media themselves, as the case studies in chapters four and five demonstrate. It is the diasporan media, for instance, that divulged the sordid dalliance between top editors and editorial board chairmen of major Nigerian newspapers and corrupt governors of states and thereby brought to the forefront of public consciousness the depth of the compromised nature of news reports and analyses in the national press.



This state of affairs, which had been known to the discerning reading public for a long time, had eroded the credibility of the domestic media. An indication of the loss of confidence in the local media by the Nigerian reading public even before the emergence of the diasporan online media is the fact that such global news media outlets as CNN, BBC, and Voice of America, had outcompeted the domestic media as sources of credible news. As Ayo Olokoyun notes, Western international news media have for long dictated and influenced the editorial direction of the Nigerian news media.<sup>570</sup> With the rise in the credibility and reputational capital of the Nigerian diasporan online media, however, the influence of the global news media in Nigeria is receding. Similarly, with the rise, acceptance, and popularity of diasporan media outlets, government-owned media that had wrestled with credibility problems right from their very founding may be forced out of existence in the foreseeable future. A Nigerian researcher who investigated the impact of the diasporan citizen media on government-owned media concluded that “more people are increasingly relying on citizen media for news, information and entertainment than [on] government-owned media. This gives a negative signal about the survival of government owned media.”<sup>571</sup>

The second reason for the ascendance in the popularity and acceptance of Nigerian diasporan citizen online journalism is the backward state of the Web presence of the homeland news media. As was demonstrated in Chapter Four, most of Nigeria’s traditional newspapers—with the notable exception of *NEXT*, a new multimedia newspaper run by a Pulitzer Prize winning Nigerian journalist—lack even basic multimedia and hypertextual capabilities and are

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<sup>570</sup> Ayo Olokoyun, “Media Accountability and Democracy in Nigeria, 1999-2003,” *African Studies Review* 47 no. 3 (2004): 69-90.

<sup>571</sup> N. Usua, “Citizen Media and the Future of Government-Owned Broadcast Organizations: A Study of Radio Nigeria,” *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research* 7 no. 2 (2010), 1.

therefore incapable of telling twenty-first century stories, which are increasingly not only video- and audio-based but also “networked” and interactive.<sup>572</sup> For instance, the story about a northern Nigerian “Sharia” governor who furtively danced with prostitutes at a night club outside Nigeria while harshly punishing similar activities in the state he governs can only be told with a video post. SaharaReporters told that story videographically to maximum effect. Few, if any, traditional Nigerian newspapers are technically equipped at the moment to do that. Similarly, a secret audio recording of a Nigerian state governor conspiring to rig elections for his friend using fake military personnel to intimidate voters that was published in SaharaReporters and other diasporan citizen media sites would have lost its punch, vitality, and even credibility if it were merely transcribed and published in a newspaper. Since the Nigerian traditional media at the time of this study neither have the technical ability nor the inclination to report on such multimedia stories, several such stories passed them by and caused diasporan online news outlets to become popular for being the sole purveyors of such stories.

But it is not only the capacity to report on stories with multimedia and interactive corroborations that give the diasporan media an edge, it is also their ability to report them in real-time. The majority of Nigeria’s homeland newspapers’ Web sites are mere “shovelware” of their print editions. They are, in the main, aesthetically unappealing, unintuitive, non-interactive, and lacking in such basic technical capabilities as archiving, as was shown in Chapter Four. They are, in a way, stuck in the infancy of the evolution of online journalism that Pavlik perceptively periodized.<sup>573</sup> For web-savvy, young Nigerians, including Nigerians in the diaspora whose privileged geographic location exposes them to cutting-edge industry trends in the media, the

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<sup>572</sup> Network journalism is multi-media, hyperlinked journalism targeted at specific audiences. For an analysis what “network journalism” entails in practice, see Jo Bardoel and Mark Deuze, “Network Journalism: Converging Competences of Media Professionals and Professionalism,” *Australian Journalism Review* 23 no. 2 (2001): 91-103.

<sup>573</sup> John V. Pavlik, “The Future of Online Journalism,”

Nigerian traditional media became woefully inadequate. It was only natural that when an alternative or a complement was found for them, people would enthusiastically embrace them.

The third reason for the emergence of the diasporan online media is related to the second: the technical incompetence and lack of initiative of Nigeria's traditional print newspapers, which ensures that their Web sites are often stagnant, lifeless, and slow to respond to breaking news. In fact, until relatively recently, Nigerian newspapers never updated their Web sites even if a politically consequential newsbreak occurred. Before the profusion of Web-based diasporan media, news-hungry Nigerians always had to wait until the following day to get updates on evolving news events. Evidence that the citizen media chosen for this study are partly popular because of their capacity to update news stories in real-time can be seen in the number of times the wildly popular SaharaReporters has crashed due to the massive traffic it received in moments of breaking news and national uncertainties. For instance, in early 2010 when Nigeria was enveloped in a cloud of political uncertainty as a result of the sickness of the late President Umaru Yar'adua, Nigerians in their millions turned to SaharaReporters for updates. On the day the late president was flown back to Nigeria in the dead of the night from Saudi Arabia where he had been receiving treatment to avoid having to hand over power to his deputy, no traditional Nigerian newspaper had the story on their site. It was SaharaReporters that broke the story and, because millions of people logged on to it simultaneously for updates, the site crashed several times within the week.

In this age of dizzyingly fast-paced informational flows across the bounds of time and space, it is hardly surprising that Nigerians increasingly turn to news media that can give them the news as it occurs, even if these news media are located thousands of miles away from the physical scene of events that they cover. For the traditional media in Nigeria to reclaim their

authority and readership, they need to not only catch up with the diasporan online media in reporting news in real time and with rich, multimedia complements but also outrival them in these emergent multiplatform news delivery mechanisms. But there is little evidence to inspire confidence that this will happen soon. For one, most traditional journalists in Nigeria are technophobic, disaffiliated from contemporary technological advances in the media world,<sup>574</sup> and the newspaper organizations they work for are themselves hampered by excessive red tape of the kind that stifles creativity and imagination. But going forward, the very survival of the traditional media in Nigeria will be almost entirely dependent on how they navigate and come to terms with the reality of the new demands of real-time, multiplatform, networked news delivery, especially with the deepening Internet penetration in Nigeria and other parts of the developing world through mobile phones,<sup>575</sup> aided even more by the fact that news-thirsty diasporan Nigerians who number in their millions have easy access to the Internet.

Another factor that has contributed to the vigor and attractiveness of the Nigerian diasporan citizen media is the comparative richness and reliability of their sources of information, which has been made possible by the willingness of privileged but disgruntled or conscientious Nigeria-based sources to confide in the citizen reporters of the diasporan media. The diasporan citizen media built their credibility by publishing apparently off-the-wall stories

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<sup>574</sup> Levi Obijiofor, "Singaporean and Nigerian Journalists' Perceptions of New Technologies," *Australian Journalism Review* 23 no. 1 (2001): 131-151.

<sup>575</sup> For a thoughtful analysis of the phenomenon of Internet access through cell phones in the developing world, see Menzie D. Chinn and Robert W. Fairlie, "ICT Use in the Developing World: An Analysis of Differences in Computer and Internet Penetration," *Review of International Economics* 18 no. 1 (2010): 153-167. Also see Chaiho Kim, "A Study of Internet Penetration Percents of Africa Using Digital Divide Models," Technology Management for Global Economic Growth (PICMET), 2010 Proceedings of PICMET, October 14, 2010. The London Guardian notes that "in mobile phone journalism, Africa is ahead of the west." See Mercedes Bunz, "In Mobile Phone Journalism, Africa is Ahead of the West," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2009; accessed December 20, 2010 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2009/dec/17/digital-media-mobilephone-usage-africa-leapfrogging-ushahidi-swift-river>. For a recent fascinating scholarly reflection on how mobile phones are aiding web-based journalism in the Third World, see Maja Andjelkovic, "The Future is Mobile: Why Developing Country Entrepreneurs Can Drive Internet Innovation," *SAIS Review* 30 no. 2 (2010): 121-133.

about corruption and influence-peddling in high places in Nigeria that readers either initially doubted or scoffed at but which turned out to be mostly true, as the case studies in chapters 4 and 5 show. In many cases, otherwise improbable stories are accompanied by vividly telling pictorial and documentary corroborations. Perhaps the biggest gain in the credibility of the online diasporan news media happened in December 2010 when cables released by the whistle-blowing, secret-spewing WikiLeaks confirmed most of the stories that the diasporan online media had published. SaharaReporters, for instance, ran a series of articles comparing its previous stories about corruption in the Nigerian presidency with new revelations that came out in WikiLeaks cables.

The geographical distance of the practitioners of diaspora citizen online journalism confers many advantages on them. First, it assures would-be whistle-blowers in Nigeria that their identities would be concealed and protected since U.S.-based citizen reporters are unlikely to be under pressure to reveal their sources to Nigerian authorities. Nigerian traditional journalists, on the other hand, cannot give such guarantees even if they wanted to practice adversarial journalism because they have to contend with the ever-present reality of libel and sedition laws. They can also be subpoenaed by the courts to reveal their sources.<sup>576</sup> Although two diasporan citizen journalists were arrested and detained when they traveled to Nigeria in 2009, there was no indication that they were forced to reveal their sources, even though they were both charged with “sedition.” They were ultimately released after international pressure was brought to bear on the Nigerian government.

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<sup>576</sup> To be sure, this is also the case in most advanced democracies in the world. Journalists can be subpoenaed by the courts to reveal their sources before a grand jury. See Anthony Fargo, “Evidence Mixed on Erosion of Journalists’ Privilege,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 22 no. 2 (2003): 50-63. However, it is highly improbable that a subpoena from a Nigerian court against an online diasporan citizen journalist, say in the US, can be enforced.

The geographic distance of the diasporan citizen journalists also gives them the advantage of access to a lot of information about Nigerian political elites who have huge investments in the West, especially in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Citizen journalists take advantage of the Freedom of Information Act in the West to ferret out embarrassing information about the shady foreign investments and indulgences of corrupt Nigerian politicians and public figures. One-time American Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell recently disclosed that as a result of the intense scrutiny they have been subjected to by Western governments, aided in part by the work of certain Nigerian diasporan citizen media, corrupt Nigerian politicians are now increasingly moving their ill-gotten wealth to China and the Middle East.<sup>577</sup> This is certainly a momentous setback on the efforts by critical sections of the Nigerian diasporan citizen media to fight corruption, but it nonetheless underscores the power and influence of a hitherto marginal media formation.

But, best of all, all attempts by Nigerian government officials to sue the critical sections of the Nigerian diasporan citizen media have been unsuccessful, first, because it is almost impossible for governments to win libel cases against the media in the United States and, second, because the Nigerian government officials who have sued these media often have their cases dismissed for jurisdictional incompetence. Additionally, many international media rights NGOs often provide free legal defense to the diasporan citizen media practitioners who are sued by Nigerian government officials in U.S. courts. So, ultimately, the citizen media have nothing to lose for their adversarial journalistic practices. When you take into account the fact that entry into citizen journalism is cheap and easy, it is not difficult to figure out why diasporan citizen media have been growing by leaps and bounds over the last few years. As Davis Merritt

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<sup>577</sup> SaharaReporters, "Nigerian Treasury Looters Have Moved Over To China, India, And Persian Gulf Countries," December 7, 2010, <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/nigerian-treasury-looters-have-moved-over-china-india-and-persian-gulf-countries> (accessed December 9, 2010).

observes, a primary reason for the unstoppable growth of citizen journalism worldwide is that “it has the ability to operate from multiple platforms at minimal fiscal cost to either the creator or the consumer, unlike the revenue-driven models of traditional journalism institutions.”<sup>578</sup> It is precisely this fact, more than any other factor, that would make it difficult for the traditional media in Nigeria to stop the rising profile of Nigeria-focused citizen journalism and, with it, the inevitable weakening of the homeland legacy media.

## 6.2 Response to Research Question Two

### 2. *How have the online citizen and alternative media of the Nigerian diaspora influenced traditional journalistic practices in Nigeria?*

It is evident that the popularity of diasporan online citizen media took the Nigerian professional journalistic fraternity by surprise. As Chapter Four illustrated, the participation of diasporan Nigerians in online discussions about news in the homeland initially took place in the few online forums provided by traditional newspaper organizations with a Web presence. By the mid 2000s, however, that reality changed. The people formerly known as the diasporan Nigerian audience of domestic Nigerian newspaper content, to paraphrase Jay Rosen, decided to practice what J.D. Lasica famously called random acts of journalism.<sup>579</sup> They were initially ignored, their emergence dismissed as a flash in the pan, and their journalism thought to be too amateurish to have a staying power. However, when the diasporan citizen media sites began to break stories and write about issues that were beyond the reach of the domestic media and that began to attract the attention of people that matter in the Nigerian society and beyond, the traditional media

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<sup>578</sup> Davis Merritt, “What Citizen Journalism Can Learn from Public Journalism,” in *Public Journalism 2.0: The Promise and Reality of a Citizen-Engaged Press*, ed. Jack Rosenberry and Burton St. John III (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 28.

<sup>579</sup> Lasica, “Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other.”

redefined their attitude to the emerging diasporan media formation. Their attitude changed from insouciance or indifference to cautious embrace. They initially found the newfangled diasporan citizen media to be useful sources of information, especially for stories about Nigeria that originate in the United States. But the cautious embrace changed to cold hostility when the online citizen media began to compete with the local newspapers for local Nigerian stories. Because Nigeria's traditional journalists had assumed that many Nigerians at home had no access to the Internet, they had imagined that most of their readers would not have access to the diasporan citizen media. So they often lifted and republished, in many cases without the time-honored journalistic courtesy of attribution, agreeable stories, such as stories that further the political aspirations of their sponsors and political allies. In time, Nigeria's professional journalists realized that many ordinary Nigerians increasingly had access to the Internet and could often tell—and did, in fact, point out in online comments— stories that had been lifted directly from diasporan citizen media sites. This created a crisis of credibility for the homeland industrial news media, a crisis that got exacerbated when the diasporan citizen media reported the squalid sleaze that now characterizes traditional, legacy media practice. Then the relationship turned to ambivalence.

As of late 2010, the traditional media in Nigeria seemed to have come to terms with the reality that the diasporan citizen media are not the flash in the pan they had envisaged or hoped they would be. These geographically displaced, amateur citizen media now drive national conversations. Their exclusive stories, which have on many occasions forced governments and politicians to react through the national media, are now the grist in the editorial mills of many Nigerian newspapers. To cite just one addition to the case studies in chapters 4 and 5, SaharaReporters in late November, 2010 broke the story of an embarrassing presidential



corruption scandal that became the subject of intense front-page newspaper coverage, editorial commentaries, denials, and affirmations in the Nigerian domestic public sphere for more than two weeks. The Nigerian president, who is seeking to extend his tenure for another four years, invited members of a prominent civil society organization by the name of Save Nigeria Group to a clandestine meeting. After the meeting, he bribed them with \$50,000 in cash—and in U.S. denomination. The president of the NGO, Tunde Bakare, who is a church minister, declined the bribe and returned it to the president through one of his close aides. SaharaReporters broke the story of the details of the meetings and the exchange of the bribe a few minutes after the event happened, which was past midnight Nigerian time.

The following day, the presidential aide to whom the money was returned for onward delivery back to the president issued a tepid, tongue-in-cheek denial of the story, but the church minister confirmed it to SaharaReporters the same day, saying only that what the president had offered them was not a bribe but “transport money.” Other members of the NGO who attended the meeting with the president confirmed SaharaReporters’ story in its entirety as well. The back-and-forth exchanges between members of the NGO—who swore that they did not leak the story to SaharaReporters—and government spin doctors dominated the news cycle for days on end. Curiously, however, almost all the Nigerian newspapers never referred to SaharaReporters by name; it was often identified as “an online news site,” an “online news agency” or sometimes an “offshore news agency.” And this was not an exception. Increasingly, when the traditional news media lift stories from or make reference to the diasporan citizen media, they never identify them by their names lest, it would appear, they help make these competitors more popular and more formidable than they already are. This illustrates the increasing agenda-setting powers of the diasporan online media and the professional anxieties of the traditional media about this

reality. This professional anxiety is reflected in the labels homeland journalists deploy to identify the diasporan citizen media. By refusing to identify them by their names, the homeland journalists seek to denude them of professional legitimacy and visibility before the Nigerian domestic reading public. This was the subject of a recent comment by well-regarded Nigerian columnist Sonala Olumhense who railed against Nigeria's *Guardian* for choosing WikiLeaks founder Julia Assange as its 2010 Man of the Year while ignoring SaharaReporter's Omoyele Sowore who had leaked stories about graft in Nigeria that WikiLeaks confirmed months after and whose Web site predated Assange's by one year. He concludes thus:

If whistleblowing and unearthing official secrets that are of great importance to a nation is the subject, nobody has done that with greater dedication in the Information Age than Saharareporters. Somehow, however, in the past five or six years *The Guardian*—unlike several other Nigerian newspapers— does not seem to have noticed Saharareporters, despite the impact it has made on the nation.<sup>580</sup>

Although the writer thinks only Nigeria's most influential paper ignores SaharaReporters, the fact is that those that acknowledge it—and other diasporan citizen media—do so with a hypocritical contempt. They monitor the media fervently, get stories and story ideas from them but often fail to give them credit. Wherever they grudgingly give them credit, they seek to undermine through referencing them with unflattering descriptive markers.

In spite of the thinly veiled hostility toward the diasporan citizen media, however, an evaluation of the Facebook fans and Twitter followers of the major diasporan online media outlets showed that almost all Nigerian journalists are fans and followers of especially SaharaReporters.<sup>581</sup> Interestingly, the diasporan citizen media seem unfazed by the professional

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<sup>580</sup> Sonala Olumhense, "Nigeria's Citizen Reporters," *Nigerian Tribune*, January 9, 2011, <http://tribunengrworld.com/mobile.php?docID=2634377>; accessed January 9, 2011.

<sup>581</sup> I know this because, being a former newspaper journalist in Nigeria and a regular reader of Nigerian newspapers, I am familiar with the names of Nigerian journalists. Being a Facebook fan and Twitter follower allows users to keep up with latest updates of news organizations or personalities. It does not necessarily indicate friendship or approval.

snub of the homeland newspapers. They appear to take solace in the fact that, in the past five years, the traditional homeland media have declined as the dominant force in the public sphere. The diasporan news media have now somewhat assumed the role of agenda setters for the Nigerian national media. There is an interesting parallel between this development and what Ben Sayre and his colleagues found in the relationship between the traditional American media and their new social media competitors over the coverage of California's Proposition 8.<sup>582</sup> They found that the "traditional media system may be losing some of its agenda-setting ability to emerging social media."<sup>583</sup> Thus, the emergence of Web-based citizen journalistic forms is adding new dimensions to what has been called the agenda-setting function of the media in mass communication research.<sup>584</sup> This increasingly seems to be the case in Nigeria as the diasporan media is mainstreamed in the domestic public sphere. This fact contradicts research cited in Chapter Two, which concluded that rather than challenging the dominance of mainstream news media, the plethora of citizen media that the Internet has spawned do no more than strengthen the mainstream media's dominance by further circulating, if not amplifying, their discourses. The researchers who arrived at these conclusions, therefore, characterize citizen media as having "derivative"<sup>585</sup> and "parasitic"<sup>586</sup> relationships with the mainstream news media and that

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<sup>582</sup> Proposition 8, formally called the California Marriage Protection Act, was a 2008 ballot proposition on the constitutional legality of same-sex marriage.

<sup>583</sup> Ben Sayre, "Agenda Setting in a Digital Age: Tracking Attention to California Proposition 8 in Social Media, Online News, and Conventional News." *Policy & Internet* 2 no. 2 (2010), 26.

<sup>584</sup> The canonical article on agenda-setting is Maxwell McCombs' and Donald Shaw's "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 6 no. 2 (1972): 176-187. For a notable revision of the agenda-setting paradigm, see Lutz Erbring, Edie N Goldenberg, Arthur H. Miller, "Front-Page News and Real-World Cues: A New Look at Agenda-Setting by the Media," *American Journal of Political Science* 24 no.1 (1980): 16, 34.

<sup>585</sup> See Paul Andrews, "Is Blogging Journalism?" *Nieman Reports* 57 (2003): 63-64; Andrew Baoill, "Weblogs and the Public Sphere," in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* ed. Minnesota Blog Collective, accessed September 12, 2009 from [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/weblogs\\_and\\_the\\_public\\_sphere.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/weblogs_and_the_public_sphere.html); Brian Carroll, "Culture Clash:

online citizen media, by this fact, are more the “online echo chamber of mass-mediated political views”<sup>587</sup> than “alternative spheres of news and views.”<sup>588</sup> But the Nigerian diaspora citizen media are not only alternative spheres for the dissemination of news and views in their own right, they also influence what the domestic mainstream media write about and report on, although they can also, on occasion, serve as online echo chambers of the discourses of the domestic, traditional media. The available evidence at the moment suggests that citizen media will continue to co-exist with the traditional media and be engaged in an as yet indeterminate push and pull of influence in the foreseeable future.

Significantly, the old model of doing journalism in Nigeria—and elsewhere—is being more and more challenged, and the overwhelming power and cultural capital that the traditional media enjoyed for many years are being diminished. Hierarchical, centralized, traditional structures for news production and distribution are now being confronted by a networked, heterarchical structure typified by the robust proliferation of many-to-many information flows and amateur but technically efficient and occasionally radical citizen news sites. The traditional media in Nigeria are responding to these changes in different ways, but a majority of them have now been compelled to appreciate the importance of interactivity and reader involvement in newsgathering. When this study began in 2008, only two major Nigerian newspapers,

*Leadership* and *Daily Trust*, allowed reader comments on their stories. But by late 2010, many

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Journalism and the Communal Ethos of the Blogosphere,” in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*, ed. Minnesota Blog Collective, accessed September 12, 2009 from [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/culture\\_clash.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/culture_clash.html).

<sup>586</sup> Alexander Halavais, “The Web as News: September 11 and New Sources of Web News,” Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association of Internet Researchers, Maastricht, The Netherlands, October, 2002.

<sup>587</sup> Jane Singer, “The Political J-Blogger,” Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Canada, August, 2004, 23.

<sup>588</sup> Guy Redden, “Read the Whole Thing: Journalism, Weblogs and the Remediation of the War in Iraq,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 109 (2003), 162.

traditional newspapers not only allow reader comments, they have also inaugurated participatory, “crowdsourcing”<sup>589</sup> platforms on their sites. For instance, the *Vanguard* newspaper came up with the Vanguard Online Community in late 2010. The platform allows users to upload pictures and videos, share news stories, blog, and play online games. The *Daily Trust* also has an “iReport” page that allows readers to post unreported or under-reported stories in their communities. It is conceivable that more Nigerian newspaper Web sites will incorporate participatory elements to their sites—if they can overcome their technophobia, that is. What appears to be slowing down this process is the fact that advertisers, the live wires of institutional media organizations, still patronize the traditional media and are yet to migrate online in the same way that advertisers in the West have done.<sup>590</sup>

### 6.3 Response to Research Question Three

3. *How and why have online citizen and alternative media of the Nigerian diaspora caused the Nigerian government to change state policies?*

The online diasporan media became politically consequential precisely because they have ruffled the composure of governments in the homeland. As we saw in chapters four and five, the Nigerian diasporan online media have caused an incumbent Vice President to publically declare his assets after initially declining to do so. They also caused the country’s president to rescind a

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<sup>589</sup> The term “crowdsourcing” was neologized by Jeff Howe who defined it as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call” (See Jeff Howe, “The Rise of Crowdsourcing,” *Wired*, June, 2006 2007; accessed December 12, 2010 from <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>). In a journalistic context, crowdsourcing news entails the solicitation of news, video, photos and audio clips from non-professional journalists.

<sup>590</sup> In the United States, for instance, Web advertising officially overtook print newspaper advertising in 2010. See Kristen Schweizer, “U.S. Web Advertising Exceeds Newspaper Print Ads in 2010, eMarketer Says,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 20, 2010; accessed December 25, 2010 from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-20/u-s-web-ads-exceed-newspaper-print-ads-in-2010-emarketer-says.html>.

government directive to deny consular services to some self-exiled opposition figures after a directive authorizing that they be denied the privilege of passport renewal was leaked and published by the diasporan online media. And the publication of the pictures of the president's son bathing in loads of cash, including the leak of several troves of top-secret information compelled the president to demand that all workers in the Nigerian presidency swear an unprecedented oath of secrecy. But more than these, the majority of the diasporan media attracted and retained the attention of the reading public through their continued unmasking of the corruption of the ruling elite in Nigeria. From the very beginning, diasporan online news outlets, such as ElenduReports and SaharaReporters, took advantage of their location in the United States to not only dig up information on corruption of the Nigerian political elite but also published pictures, addresses and other details of their investments. The enormous popularity of these kinds of stories forced indicted government officials to react to the stories through the local press.

This development had two effects. First, it helped popularize the diasporan media in the domestic public sphere. People who did not have a chance to read the original stories—or who were not aware that the diasporan news sites existed—looked out for them. Through recommendation and word of mouth, their popularity grew exponentially. Second, although suspicion that the new political elite spawned by the restoration of constitutional rule were thoroughly corrupt had always been part of the national psyche, there had not been any evidentiary proofs confirming these suspicions. Much of the local media, to make matters worse, had either been unwilling or unable to investigate allegations of corruption against politicians. Therefore, the rash of evidence-based citizen news reports in the diasporan media about transnational elite corruption in Nigeria became an instant hit. In a country where cynicism

against public officials has justifiably become a national culture, the forceful denials by politicians and government officials of reports of corruption against them only served to confirm the truth of the reports. Here, Claude Cockburn's perceptive, if ironic, quip that we should "never believe anything until it is officially denied" is particularly applicable.<sup>591</sup> The fact that government officials were sufficiently concerned about stories of corruption against them to the point of issuing forceful, impassioned rebuttals in the local press conferred credibility on the purveyors of the stories. However, ignoring the stories, which were increasingly being read and shared by many people, would not have been wise either; silence could be interpreted as admission of guilt. In a way, the Nigerian political elite, because of the perception that they are sunk in deep corruption, are mired in a catch 22, which makes the diasporan online news media all the more popular.

Another reason that the diasporan online media have had the capacity to cause governments at home to change state policies in response to their sustained reportage on issues is the fact that they have often inspired the formation of episodic, informal but nonetheless cohesive activist online diasporan communities that organize to effect change back home based on stories published in the diasporan media. Online petition drives based on stories published on diasporan citizen media sites, the sending of physical delegations of diasporan Nigerians to appeal to governments in Nigeria to change certain decisions, and generating publicity for all these are common occurrences, as detailed in Chapter four. This fact conforms to the broad outlines of alternative media, which scholars characterize as consisting of "mobilizing information,"<sup>592</sup> "information for action,"<sup>593</sup> "action on action,"<sup>594</sup> or simply "useful

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<sup>591</sup> Tony Harcup, *Journalism: Principles & Practice* (London: Sage, 2009), 98.

<sup>592</sup> Haas, "Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization," 116.

<sup>593</sup> Atton, *Alternative Media*: 154.

information.”<sup>595</sup> In other words, unlike the mainstream news media, alternative media go beyond publishing ostensibly disinterested information; they go beyond reporting the news and invite readers to take action based on the information they provide in their reportage. They encourage readers to initiate online petition drives or to be part of an offline, on-ground protest in order to cause governments to change unpopular policies or practices. The Nigerian Village Square and SaharaReporters (which indicatively has a section called “Take Action”) are the best examples of Nigerian diasporan citizen media sites that effectively put this principle to practice.

Concerns about being exposed to international ridicule, especially in the eyes of Western governments, is another reason the diasporan media have been able to influence governments in Nigeria. Many of the diasporan media, as stated in previous chapters, have acquired international clout. SaharaReporters, for instance, has been profiled and referenced by such powerful Western news organizations as the Associated Press, CNN, BBC, MSNBC, and so on. This publicity led the site to be noticed by the U.S. government and donor agencies like the Ford Foundation, which now partly funds it. But more importantly, the relationship between the U.S. government and SaharaReporters appears to go beyond financial assistance. The site has broken many stories and leaked state secrets that embarrassed the Nigerian government, which all seemed to have emanated from U.S. government sources. It has also quoted anonymous State Department sources for many sensitive stories. Clearly certain people in the State Department in possession of sensitive information against the Nigerian government leak it to SaharaReporters. The WikiLeaks cables about Nigeria have confirmed this. It is supremely ironic that the U.S.

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<sup>594</sup> Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 379.

<sup>595</sup> Brian Whitaker, *News Limited: Why You Can't Read All about It* (London: Minority Press Group, 1981), 105.



government is miffed when WikiLeaks does to it what its employees do to another government in a developing country.

Since Nigerian governments have historically worked to win the approval of the U.S. government, they are often sensitive to stories that put them in a bad light. It also seems likely that Nigerian government officials interpret leaks to SaharaReporters from the State Department as coded diplomatic messages to them from the U.S. government. More specifically, the diasporan citizen media have often taken advantage of the reality of the “boomerang effect” discussed in Chapter Five to effect changes in the homeland. The “boomerang effect” accounts for how advocacy networks, in this case diasporan citizen media, deploy the power of information to shame recalcitrant and dictatorial regimes. In their influential book *Activists Beyond Borders*, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink point out that “voices that are suppressed in their own societies may find that networks can project and amplify their concerns into an international arena, which in turn can echo back into their own countries.”<sup>596</sup> In the Nigerian case, as a result of a domestic media formation that has become compromised and therefore unable to expose corruption as it should, online citizen media sprouted in the Nigerian diaspora and helped bring to light homeland corruption to both domestic and international audiences. It is entirely conceivable that had the diasporan citizen media been viewed only in Nigeria, their effect would not be as great as it has been; what appears to make them forces to reckon with is the fact that they are inserted in the discourse and politics of an activist international arena, which gives their stories significance and visibility beyond the bounds of Nigeria. Fear of “international embarrassment,” as we saw in Chapter Five in the case of two self-exiled opposition politicians who were initially denied consular services on the orders of the president, is a powerful incentive for change of policies in Nigeria. And there is no better structure to bring

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<sup>596</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*: 23.

this about in the Nigerian situation than citizen media outfits managed by Nigerians who are located outside the borders of Nigeria.

#### 6.4 Response to Research Question Four

4. *How have the online media of the Nigerian digital diaspora disrupted traditional notions of news flows between the media of the homeland and the people in the diaspora?*

Traditionally, the scholarship on diaspora media studies has focused on three areas: how diasporans set up niche news media to construct and negotiate their identities and to come to terms with their new culture and environment; how the mainline media in the host countries construct exilic ethnoscaapes in dominant media narratives; and how diasporans keep up with the politics, culture, and other singularities of their homelands through the consumption of their homeland news media.<sup>597</sup> Indeed, until 2005, the Nigerian diaspora in the West, as Misty Bastian's insightful work shows, had media that exclusively catered to their informational needs, and they looked elsewhere for news to quench their nostalgia about the homeland.<sup>598</sup> When Nigerian newspapers began to migrate their content to the Web in the early 2000s, diasporan Nigerians flocked to their sites to read up on news about the homeland and to discuss common topics of concern. This was a radical improvement on the previous state of affairs when Nigerians who were displaced from the homeland waited for the occasional newspapers from the

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<sup>597</sup> For representative examples of recent studies that fall in these categories see, Henry Mainsah, "Cameroonians in Oslo, Diaspora, and Uses of the Media," *NORDICOM Review* 30 no. 1 (2009): 83-94; Halleh Ghorashi and Kees Boersma, "The 'Iranian Diaspora' and the New Media: From Political Action to Humanitarian Help," *Development & Change* 40 no. 4 (2009): 667-691; Yu Shi, "Identity Construction of the Chinese Diaspora, Ethnic Media Use, Community Formation, and the Possibility of Social Activism," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 19 no. 1 (2005): 55-72; Nicola Mai, "The Albanian Diaspora-in-the-Making: Media, Migration and Social Exclusion," *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 31 no. 3 (2005): 543-561.

<sup>598</sup> Bastian, "Nationalism in a Virtual Space: Immigrant Nigerians on the Internet."

homeland from people who traveled home or from the few Nigerian newspapers that sold hard copies of their papers in such Western cities as New York and London.<sup>599</sup>

But from the mid 2000s all that changed. Diasporan Nigerians ceased to be mere consumers of news from the homeland; they also became producers of news and have now graduated to being editorial agenda setters for the mainline news media in the homeland. So the hitherto unidirectional flow of news from the homeland to the diaspora has now given way to a new flow which is not just bidirectional but, in fact, circuitous. News flows from homeland news media seep out to the diaspora through the Web in a faster way than was ever the case, but news about the homeland that has never been reported in the homeland also gets back to the domestic news media—and, ultimately, to the domestic public sphere—through the citizen media of the diaspora. In an interesting way, both media formations have become echo chambers of each other. The relational dynamics between diasporan citizen media and the established vehicles of informational flows in the homeland moved from cooperation to competition and finally to thinly veiled confrontation. The diasporan citizen media were first regarded as additional sources of news for the homeland traditional media. For as long as they were not perceived as threatening the authority and credibility of the homeland news media, Nigeria-based journalists accepted them, if halfheartedly. However, when it became obvious that they were assuming a position of centrality in the news dissemination enterprise, the homeland news media saw them as rivals, and the online citizen media themselves began to act in ways that suggest that they saw themselves as competitors of the homeland news media for the eyeballs of Nigerian readers. This fact inspired the traditional journalists in Nigeria to begin an artful patrol of the boundaries of

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<sup>599</sup> *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* experimented with selling hard copies of their papers in London and New York in the late 1990s. They discontinued the experiment when AllAfrica.com emerged as a news aggregator that paid major African newspapers to have their content available on its site. Thus, newspapers from Africa, especially from Nigeria, that did not have a functional Web site were viewable online on AllAfrica.com. This obviated the need to sell physical copies of the papers in the West.

journalistic authority. One of the ways they attempted to do this, as was hinted at earlier, was to denude citizen media practitioners of the social capital that comes from being identified with the tag of “journalists” or from being regarded as legitimate news sources. Stories culled from or inspired by the citizen media, as pointed out before, were either never acknowledged outright or were attributed with pejorative identification labels like “offshore guerrilla news agency” or simply “an Internet site”; they ceased to be mentioned by their names. This got worse when some of the diasporan citizen media started to expose corruption in the domestic media, which is having the effect of making homeland newsmen lose grip of their much cherished journalistic authority and credibility.

The Nigeria-based journalists were being beaten at their own game by people who have neither formal journalistic training nor elaborate institutional support, and who lack the locational advantage that living in the homeland should confer on newshounds. However, the relational tension between Nigeria’s traditional journalists and the U.S.-based Nigerian citizen journalists fits a pattern that has been observed in many other contexts. Many journalism scholars have pointed out that professional journalists in the mainstream media perpetually seek to consolidate their professional legitimacy and power by appealing to their authority and by denigrating alternative sources that question their news judgment or undermine their professional confidence.<sup>600</sup> More specifically, Barbie Zelizer argues that journalists often tend to deploy three kinds of narrative strategies to assert their authority. She identifies them as synecdoche, omission, and personalization.<sup>601</sup> In the Nigerian case, they not only subtly invoke their

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<sup>600</sup> See, for instance, Peter Dahlgren, “Introduction,” in *Journalism and Popular Culture* ed. Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, (London: Sage, 1992), 1-23 and David L. Eason, “On Journalistic Authority: The Janet Cooke Scandal,” in *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press*, ed. James Carey (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988).

<sup>601</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “Achieving Journalistic Authority through Narrative,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 7 no. 4 (1990): 366-376.

professionalism as a strategy to assert their authority and undermine the diasporan citizen media, they also call attention to their locational advantage by labeling the diasporan media as “offshore” news sources and eliding them as mere “online sources.” Zelizer, in a different article, observed a similar phenomenon in American journalism where “reporters use the authority culled from their local placement within the event to expound on its more general significance.”<sup>602</sup> Here, she is talking about the privilege and capital that “eyewitnessing,” “being there,” “being on the spot,” and such other signifiers of positional vantage confer on journalists in contradistinction to non-journalists who might have legitimate grounds to question the narrative fidelity of journalistic accounts but who would potentially be undermined by an absence of this privilege. Nigeria’s traditional journalists, it would seem, discursively constitute their actual physical presence in Nigeria, as against the virtual “presence” of the diasporan citizen media, as a form of cultural capital to preserve their authority and competence. But the growing importance and centrality of the diaspora media in the Nigerian public sphere suggests that these rhetorical strategies have not been effective.

Now, although diasporan media that exclusively report on the conditions, concerns, and anxieties of Nigerian diasporans in the West still exist,<sup>603</sup> they are progressively either dying out or changing focus to report on issues that pertain to the politics of the homeland. At the last count, there are at least fifteen diasporan citizen media sites—all of which are curiously based in the United States—with correspondents and informants in Nigeria. As noted earlier, these online

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<sup>602</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “Journalists as Interpretive Communities,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 no. 3 (1993), 226.

<sup>603</sup> A good example is the New York-based *African Sun Times*, which won the Historical Black Press Foundation’s “Black Newspaper of the Year” in 2009, the first time an Africa-focused newspaper won the award. The paper describes itself as “America’s # 1 African Newsweekly” although the preponderance of its editorial coverage is about Nigerian immigrants in America.

diasporan citizen media break stories faster than the domestic media, leading a commentator to note that “In Nigeria, the greatest threat to traditional media seems to come from online bloggers who are more often than not based outside the country. It is interesting to note that a greater percentage of news about Nigeria is being broken by online citizen media.”<sup>604</sup> In sum, the cartography of news flows between Nigeria and its Western diaspora has been complicated by the emergence and rising significance of diasporan online citizen media and this fact is threatening the very life of the traditional media in Nigeria. The one-dimensionality that had hitherto characterized news flows between the homeland and its diaspora has now given way to a labyrinthine multi-dimensionality, which in turn has profound implications for the traditional scholarly conversation about news flows between the Western core and the Third World periphery.

As was noted earlier, the rise of diasporan online media in Nigeria has significantly dimmed the influence of Western news organizations. Here we have a fascinating situation where indigenous ethnoscaapes are now assuming the roles previously occupied by Western “media imperialists.” Although Western news organizations still exert a tremendous influence in Nigeria’s media landscape, their influence is being progressively diminished by the Nigerian diasporan online media. The diasporan citizen journalists have the “native credibility” that Western news sources lack, but they share in the cultural capital that being located in the West confers. This unique positional vantage has earned the diasporan citizen journalists credibility both with Western news sources seeking to find “local color” to stories they report on from their Western locations and from Nigerians at home who value them for their privileged location and

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<sup>604</sup> Kayode Ogundamisi, “Starving Nigerian Journalists and Blood-Stained Proprietors,” *P.M. News*, May 21, 2010, <http://pmnewsnigeria.com/2010/05/21/starving-nigerian-journalists-and-blood-stained-proprietors/> (accessed December 15, 2010).

uncommon access to news sources that are often unavailable to traditional journalists back home. What this means is that stories in Western news media about Nigeria that were usually uninformed or slanted because of inadequate information owing to the difficulty in getting local sources will now benefit from the input of the legion of Nigerian citizen journalists in the West. We saw that with many Nigerian stories, such as the December 25, 2009 attempted bombing of Delta Airline by a Nigerian, all the major Western news organizations turned to the diasporan citizen media for pictures, background and even perspectives on the story. This may very well provide a template to reverse time-honored concerns about the disproportionate flow of news from the West to the developing world. But more importantly, this development has provided novel dimensions to the notion of “contra-flows” that has been theorized to point out the inadequacy of classical notions of media and cultural imperialism. The reality of the weakening of the influence of Western news organizations as a consequence of the emergence of diasporan citizen online journalism by Nigerians living in the West, and the increasing dependence by Western news organizations on these citizen media outlets for Nigeria-related stories emanating from the West, provides grounds to speculate that this may constitute the basis for an African “contra-flow.”<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Several scholars have chronicled instances of contra-flows from other parts of the world, chiefly through the export of cultural goods to the West and the emergence of powerful news organizations that attract the attention of the West and the rest of the world, such as Al-Jazeera. (See, for instance, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, “The International Telenovela Debate and the Contra-Flow Argument: A Reappraisal,” *Media, Culture & Society* 22 no. 4 (2000): 393-414; Hartmut Wessler and Manuel Adolphsen, “Contra-Flow from the Arab World? How Arab Television Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War was Used and Framed on Western International News Channels,” *Media, Culture & Society* 30 no. 4 (2008): 439-461; William M. Kunz, “Prime-Time Island: Television Program and Format Importation into the United States,” *Television & New Media* 11 no. 4 (2010): 308-324; Jade L. Miller, “Ugly Betty Goes Global: Global Networks of Localized Content in the Telenovela Industry,” *Global Media & Communication* 6 no. 2 (2010): 198-217; Azran Tal, “Resisting Peripheral Exports: Al Jazeera’s War Images on US Television,” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 113 (2004): 75-86). African countries do not have the financial muscles to export their cultural and media products to the West through the traditional media. Diasporan citizen media could very well be a useful model to reverse the media flow from the West to African and other Third World societies.

## 6.5 Response to Research Question Five

5. *What dominant influences—such as advertising, political affiliations, emancipatory politics, etc—actuate the citizen journalism of the Nigerian diaspora?*

Although the diasporan citizen media sites selected for this study, for the most part, enrich and expand Nigeria's informational space, different motivations and impulses can be isolated for their existence. Elendu Reports, for instance, started out as an uncompromising, anticorruption alternative news media site. It published pictorial proofs of the corruption by the Nigerian political elite, wrote many piercingly hard-hitting stories that embarrassed government officials, brought down public officials, and caused many more to be investigated and pilloried. It was the “go-to” site for alternative news in Nigeria. The fact that the site had no advertising of any kind strengthened its progressive credentials.<sup>606</sup> So it seemed for a while that it was the ultimate insurgent, emancipatory citizen media site that had capitulated neither to capital nor to politics. But it soon emerged that the proprietor of the site, Jonathan Elendu, was in bed with the same corrupt politicians about whom his site raked muck. This discovery dented his credibility and led to the decline in the popularity and significance of his site. In retrospect, the Web site actually characterizes itself as a “for-profit company,” which nonetheless solicits donations from the public but which insists that donations to it do not entitle donors to preferential editorial treatment. What is apparent from all this is that the site was set up primarily as a commercial venture. Its initial radical and populist reportorial comportment was a mere marketing strategy to call attention to it. After the attention was secured, the proprietor turned himself into a “political consultant” to the same corrupt politicians his site railed against. It is a crass Internet-enabled

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<sup>606</sup> Traditionally, alternative media scholars have posited that “courting advertising revenue leads to depoliticization” and that the hallmark of progressive media is the extent of their freedom from commercial pressures. (See Eun-Gyoo Kim and James W. Hamilton, “Capitulation to Capital? OhmyNews as Alternative Media,” *Media, Culture & Society* 28 no. 4 (2006), 542. This argument is, of course, problematic, as I have shown in this study.



journalistic mercantilism of the kind that has become prevalent in the domestic Nigerian media, which certain other diasporan sites have taken pains to unmask, as we saw in Chapter Five. This reality should impose some restraint on the urge to conceive of all the diasporan citizen media as necessarily wholly distinct from their homeland counterparts. It is particularly noteworthy that Mr. Elendu was a traditional journalist in Nigeria before migrating to the United States. But it is equally remarkable that citizen media sites that betray their readers' trust and confidence often lose credibility and patronage faster than do the homeland traditional media. This is, of course, the consequence of the amplified power and centrality of what one might call "Netizen reader-participants" in the news business.<sup>607</sup> The progressive irrelevance of ElenduReports in the Nigerian blogosphere and in the domestic public sphere is a telling proof of this reality.

The Times of Nigeria, Pointblanknews.com, and Huhuonline.com are also obviously motivated by the same commercial imperatives as traditional, corporatized news media in Nigeria. Although they have published many anti-corruption stories, they also aggressively solicit advertising and have taken partisan stances in defense of certain sections of Nigeria's political and financial elites. They accept advertising from governments, corrupt politicians, and private companies in Nigeria. There is evidence from the archives of these sites that there is some reciprocal editorial acknowledgment of advertising patronage in the form of favorable coverage. For instance, the governors of the corrupt oil-rich states of Nigeria's deep south who lavishly advertise on these site are, for the most part, spared from critical scrutiny. In some cases, in fact, they are whitewashed and fended from attacks from more radical citizen media sites like SaharaReporters. Nevertheless, this fact has not hurt their credibility, first, because they did not define themselves from the beginning as muck-raking, anti-government outlets and, second, because they derive the social basis of their legitimacy and credibility from niche appeals. The

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<sup>607</sup> "Netizen" is the popular short form for "Internet citizen."

TimeofNigeria.com, for instance, is the most reliable source of news about Nigeria's volatile, oil-rich Niger Delta region. Militants fighting for a fairer, more equitable distribution of the oil wealth in the region often reach out to the site first before any other news organization.

Pointblanknews.com, for its part, appeals to readers who are attracted to bizarre scandals involving people in high places. But some of their reports are not always faithful to the facts, as we saw in Chapter Four where a newspaper publisher's wife was wrongly reported to have decapitated a boy for a ritual sacrifice. HuhuOnline is a "go-to" site for the unmasking of what might be called clerical corruption, that is, the scandalous financial fraud of Nigeria's mushrooming church business, which the domestic mainstream news media have ignored.

The sites that can reasonably be said to be animated by democratic, progressive ideals are SaharaReporters and the Nigerian Village Square. While SaharaReporters is an unabashedly and uncompromisingly anti-government news site, the Nigerian Village Square is a fiercely independent arena for untrammelled political discourse on Nigeria and for initiating and coordinating transformative, transaction-oriented changes in Nigeria. Both sites go beyond calling attention to what is wrong with Nigeria to actually physically doing something about the problems they identify and inveigh against. An online petition drive and physical protests in Nigeria, which were initiated in the online forums of the Nigerian Village Square, led Nigeria's then Vice President to publically declare his assets against his wish. Although participants of the Nigerian Village Square are scattered all over the world and have never physically met, they often contribute money through PayPal to send delegations to Nigeria to protest government policies and to demand for change. Although SaharaReporters always encourages its readers to "take action" on the basis of the stories it writes, the "actions" often take place in the Nigerian Village Square, which has become a close-knit community of concerned and politically active

Nigerian diasporan netizens who have cultivated mutual trust, in large part due to the leadership and organizational effectiveness of the site's founder, Philip Adekunle, an Illinois-based IT professional.

Both SaharaReporters and the Nigerian Village Square accept online advertising from Google ads and from Nigerian businesses and politicians. Interestingly, politicians who advertise on the sites have never been able to influence the editorial and discursive directions of the sites, lending credence to the observations of some alternative media scholars that commercialism does not necessarily translate to depoliticization and compromise. But after getting \$175,000 in funding from the Ford Foundation, SaharaReporters discontinued accepting advertising from governments and politicians. It bears pointing out, though, that before the grant from the Ford Foundation, SaharaReporters got the bulk of its funding from voluntary contributions by its readers. This is the case for the Nigerian Village Square as well. Both sites have a permanent "donate" button and often embark on periodic solicitations of financial help from their loyal visitors when they run into financial difficulties. By contrast, TheTimesofNigeria.com, Huhuonline, and Pointblanknews.com do not raise funds from their readers. Lately, these three sites have started a disturbing trend of lending uncritical support for corrupt politicians seeking elective offices. But given that the people associated with these sites are, like Jonathan Elendu, former newspaper journalists in Nigeria, it would not be surprising if it comes to light that they have become paid "political consultants" to politicians.

What is evident from the foregoing is that freedom from commercial pressures and location outside corporatized, institutional media structures in and of themselves are not sufficient safeguards against editorial compromise. Association with, or lack thereof, of a higher, overarching, progressive ideal is a more reliable predictor of the performance of non-corporate,

citizen media. Although Huhuonline.com, ElenduReports.com, TheTimesofNigeria.com and Pointblanknews.com are located outside the orbit of mainstream media formation, they are subject to the same limitations that are denuding the traditional domestic media of their credibility. This is because their performance is not actuated by any identifiable liberatory ideal; they are mere additional, and not necessarily alternative, sources of Nigerian news, a distinction that strikes at the core of the conceptual difference between alternative journalism and citizen journalism, which will be discussed in more detail in the response to the next research question. Similarly, although SaharaReporters and the Nigerian Village Square are subject to commercial advertising pressures in order to survive, they have remained remarkably independent and have been on record as offering witheringly devastating critiques of their advertisers. They have reached such positions of prominence that advertisers desire them more for the eyeballs they attract than for the politics of their news and editorial commentaries. So while advertisers need them for their own commercial gains, they need the advertisers for survival. It is a relationship that is sustained by self-preservationist rather than ideological considerations.

From the foregoing, it would seem that previous association with homeland Nigerian journalism is key here. The diasporan citizen media found to have difficulty rising superior to some of the grave limitations of Nigeria's traditional journalistic practices are those whose owners and writers were once inserted into—and who have internalized the conventions, mores, and weaknesses of—Nigeria's traditional journalistic practices. Diasporan media sites that are refreshingly different and, for that reason enormously popular and influential, are run by people who were never associated with corporatized traditional journalism in Nigeria. This may be fortuitous. What is not fortuitous, however, is that the key to continued relevance in the Nigerian blogosphere and in the domestic public sphere, it would seem, is the capacity to be transparently

different from the Nigerian traditional media formation, which is broadly held hostage by corruption, clannishness, and narrow political loyalties.

So far, only SaharaReporters and the Nigerian Village Square have risen to this challenge. As a result, their power and influence is disproportionately higher than that of other diasporan media sites. Although it can be argued that the Nigerian Village Square is not strictly a journalistic enterprise in the way that SaharaReporters is, it is a site both for citizen reporting and for news-inflected community and discursive participation. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have observed, since its materialization in seventeenth-century Europe, the “concept of journalism” has always been wedded to the “concept of community and later democracy.”<sup>608</sup> The Nigerian Village Square shares this preoccupation with SaharaReporters, and the success of both sites shows that they provide a model for the future of journalism in transitional societies that resemble Nigeria’s media and political systems, although their form and substance has yet to reach stasis.

## 6.6 Response to Research Question Six

### 6. *How might the journalistic practices of the Nigerian diaspora complicate notions of citizen and alternative journalism?*

Before providing a response to this question it is important to reflect upon and categorize the six citizen online media outlets analyzed for this study based on their profiles and preoccupations as outlined in chapters four and five. Which of the diasporan online sites qualify as “alternative” media sites and which are merely “citizen” media sites? This is important not only because the preponderance of scholarship on online journalism tends to erroneously conflate these categories

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<sup>608</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and The Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 18.

but also because classifying them helps to explain their content, character, performance, and editorial temperaments. As we have seen in Chapter Two, the abiding characteristics of citizen media outlets are that they are run by people who are not necessarily professional journalists, but people who would ordinarily be classified as “audience” members in the traditional model of mass communication, people whose journalistic output is random, episodic, and unburdened by the demands of institutional journalism.

This definition concatenates the conceptions of citizen journalism separately postulated by Kristen A. Johnson and Susan Wiedenback,<sup>609</sup> Joseph D. Lasica,<sup>610</sup> Jay Rosen,<sup>611</sup> and Joyce Nip.<sup>612</sup> Johnson and Wiedenback’s notion of citizen journalism as the kind of journalism that is practiced by people with no professional training, while reasonably admissible, fails to take into account the fact that many professional journalists now practice citizen journalism both within and outside the structures of traditional media formations. For instance, four of the six citizen media sites examined for this study are run by former newspaper journalists. That is why Lasica’s apt description of citizen journalism as “random act of journalism,” Rosen’s witty characterization of citizen journalists as “people formerly known as the audience,” and Nip’s insistence that the elimination of the “gatekeeper” in news flow is the central element in the definition of citizen journalism all come together to define the essential singularities of citizen media. This definitional clarification helps us to properly situate and characterize the sites that have been analyzed for this study, which are a mix of people who have no professional training

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<sup>609</sup> Kristen A. Johnson and Susan Wiedenback, “Enhancing Perceived Credibility of Citizen Journalism Web Sites,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86 no. 2 (2009), 333.

<sup>610</sup> J.D. Lasica, “Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other,” *Nieman Reports*, 2003, pp. 70-4. <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2009).

<sup>611</sup> Jay Rosen, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience.” *PressThink: Ghost of Democracy in the Media Machine*. [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html) (accessed May 5, 2009).

<sup>612</sup> Joyce Nip, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 7 no. 2 (2006): 212-236.

in journalism and those who have previously been journalists in Nigeria. Jonathan Elendu, the owner of ElenduReports.com, was a journalist with the *Daily Times*, Nigeria's oldest surviving English-language newspaper. Similarly, Emmanuel Asiwe, publisher of HuhuOnline.com, was a journalist with *ThisDay*, an influential, if notoriously compromised, daily newspaper in Nigeria. Sunny Ofili, owner of the TheTimesofNigeria.com, was a journalist with the defunct *African Guardian* newsmagazine before he relocated to the United States. And the two main people associated with PointBlankNews.com, Jackson Ude and Churchill Umoren, were practicing journalists in Nigeria before they migrated to the United States as well.

However, SaharaReporters.com's Omoyele Sowore has no previous journalistic experience. Neither has Nigerian Village Square's Philip Adekunle and the army of ordinary citizens who independently investigate news stories and publish on SaharaReporters.com and NigeriaVillageSquare.com. But all these people are regarded as citizen journalists because their journalism is not routinized, and is unencumbered by the dictatorship of the multi-layered editorial gate-keeping typical of institutional journalism. Axel Bruns instructively characterizes this as the transformation of journalism "from gatekeeping to gatewatching."<sup>613</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that these Web sites are becoming more or less regular sources of news from which their owners increasingly earn a living challenges us to think of more appropriate terminologies to capture their activities beyond the increasingly generic "citizen journalism" label. It seems appropriate to characterize the journalism that takes place in all the media outlets studied for this project—except the Nigerian Village Square which is actually more of a platform for random news reports, analyses and opinionating than a strictly news site—as "standalone citizen

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<sup>613</sup> Axel Bruns, "The Active Audience: Transforming Journalism from Gatekeeping to Gatewatching," In Paterson, *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production*, ed. Chris Patterson and David Domingo (Peter Lang, New York, 2008).

journalism.” The term “standalone journalism” was first coined by journalist Chris Nolan to describe citizen journalism that is fairly regular, that has a substantial reader catchment area, and that is unaffiliated with a corporate news organization. She defines a “standalone journalist” this way:

They are people who are using blogging technology—software that allows them to quickly publish their work and broadcast it on the Internet—to find and attract users. They understand that the barrier to entry in this new business isn’t getting published; anyone can do that. The barrier to entry is finding an audience. That’s why their editorial product is consistent, reliable and known. Readers have expectations and stand alone journalists understand this and put that understanding into practice.<sup>614</sup>

According to this definition, standalone journalists are not random reporters for just anybody. They have a specific audience in mind and work to meet the expectations of this narrow audience. Since the diasporan online media examined for this study can no longer be described as engaging in “random acts of journalism” (their journalism is now far too regular for that description to be apt) and are not exactly “the people formerly known as the audience” (since most of them were professional journalists back in Nigeria) but are still not employed by corporate news organization nor do they have an obligation to update their sites at regular, inviolably specific time slots like the traditional media do, they still practice citizen journalism, but it is a form of citizen journalism that defies the conventional notions of citizen media practice. It seems appropriate, therefore, to borrow Nolan’s phrase and characterize this type of journalism as “standalone citizen journalism.”

Alternative citizen media, on the other hand, are online citizen media that do not merely produce episodic, non-professionalized, non-routinized journalism but that are, in addition, committed to a higher, progressive ideal of extirpating the dominant, oppressive ideology in a social formation. In the West, alternative journalism often takes an anti-capitalist or at least a

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<sup>614</sup> Jay Rosen, “Chris Nolan: The Stand Alone Journalist is Here...,” PressThink, April 21, 2005, [http://archive.pressthink.org/2005/04/21/nol\\_std.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2005/04/21/nol_std.html) (accessed November 29, 2010).



counter-cultural form. In Nigeria, however, the dominant concern of the progressive segment of the population is markedly different. There, opposition to corrupt governments—and, increasingly, a close, corrupt, and compromised mainstream media formation—constitutes the core of an “alternative” praxis. In this study, therefore, I conceptualize Nigerian alternative online journalism as that type of episodic, non-routinized citizen reportage that is implacably opposed to corrupt governments at all levels, that scrutinizes and holds accountable the domestic national media, and that is sufficiently and uncompromisingly consistent in its advocacy journalism on behalf of a transparent, democratic, and free Nigeria to cause governments to be disconcerted and seek ways to undermine it.

Using this schema, the only Nigerian diasporan online citizen media site that qualifies to be classified as an “alternative media” outlet is Sahara Reporters. The owners of the site not only indicatively describe themselves as “unapologetic practitioners of advocacy journalism,” they have also lived up to that declaration in their reportorial temperaments and practices. This fact is now being acknowledged even by people outside Nigeria. For instance, as we saw in Chapter 5, *The Daily Beast’s* Philip Shenon has perceptively characterized SaharaReporters as “Africa’s WikiLeaks.”<sup>615</sup> This comparison is instructive because, like WikiLeaks, SaharaReporters depends on whistleblowers located in the inner recesses of the Nigerian power structure to leak embarrassing information about the inner, dirty workings of government and about government officials. But while WikiLeaks is merely a treasure trove for sensitive, hacked documents that Western governments would rather have shrouded in secrecy, SaharaReporters is a journalistic project that simultaneously acts as a site for hacked documents and for analyses and reportage of the documents. WikiLeaks depends entirely on citizen and traditional news media sites for the

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<sup>615</sup> Philip Shenon, “Africa’s WikiLeaks,”

editorial analyses of the classified documents it episodically “dumps” on its site. So while SaharaReporters is a citizen journalism project, WikiLeaks is not. As Joyce Nip notes in her influential conception of citizen journalism, “to qualify as journalism, the content needs to include some original interviewing, reporting, or analysis of events or issues to which people other than the authors have access.”<sup>616</sup>

But SaharaReporters certainly shares the subversive information gathering technique of WikiLeaks. This is evident in SaharaReporters’ updated “philosophy and editorial policy,” which states in part:

We depend on the efforts of concerned citizens who act [as] whistleblowers as well as the main sources for our exposés. In a continent where much of the “professional” media is compromised, we make a point of investigating and reporting stories that the mainstream media dare not or will not report.<sup>617</sup>

The above quotation also points to the key distinction between the reportorial practices of Western alternative media formations and SaharaReporters. Whereas the core of the reportorial quiddities of Western alternative media formation consists in such unconventional journalistic practices as “native reporting” and “active witnessing,” SaharaReporters combines these practices with the practice of proactively tapping into the internal discontent within the Nigerian ruling class to get exclusive, often anonymously sourced, stories to expose high-profile corruption and, in the process, discomfit the ruling class and force major policy changes. The site is especially well-suited for this kind of reporting, as has been pointed out earlier, because whistle-blowers who expose government dirt to the site can often be assured that their identities will be concealed and, not being located in Nigeria, owners of the site cannot be subpoenaed by

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<sup>616</sup> Nip, “Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism:” 218.

<sup>617</sup> SaharaReporters, “Our Philosophy and Editorial Policy,” October 25, 2010, <http://www.saharareporters.com/press-release/saharareporters-our-philosophy-and-editorial-policy> (accessed November 25, 2010).

Nigerian courts to disclose the sources of their information. This is a privilege that no Nigerian-based media organization can have. SaharaReporters fiercely protects the anonymity, confidentiality and safety of its sources.

Another factor that redounds to the site's "alternativeness" is that it is reasonably financially independent. When the site started, as pointed out, it was sustained primarily by voluntary donations from its readers and from online advertising. It also initially accepted advertising from governments but did not spare such governments from its adversarial, anti-government advocacy journalism. However, after it won a \$175,000 renewable grant from the Ford Foundation, the site took a policy to reject all advertising from any government in Nigeria. What is important in all this, though, is that Sahara Reporters has demonstrated that commercial success does not necessarily preclude radical critique. The news journal *Comedia* came to this realization long ago.<sup>618</sup> So did Abe Peck in his insightful social history of the "underground press" in 1960s America.<sup>619</sup> They have shown examples of commercially viable alternative media outfits that have not abandoned progressive ideals.

However, the warning from such alternative media scholars as Gholam Khiabany<sup>620</sup> and Herbert Pimlott<sup>621</sup> that exposure to more advertising patronage than is sufficient to sustain the life of alternative media can compromise their editorial independence and vitality is not entirely without merit. This was certainly the case with ElenduReporters which, as we saw in Chapter 4,

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<sup>618</sup> Comedia, "The Alternative Press: The Development of Underdevelopment," *Media, Culture & Society* 6 (1984): 95-102.

<sup>619</sup> Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991).

<sup>620</sup> Gholam Khiabany, "Red Pepper: A New Model for the Alternative Press," *Media, Culture & Society* 22 (2000): 447-463.

<sup>621</sup> Herbert F. Pimlott, "Mainstreaming the Margins: The Transformation of Marxism Today," in *Media Organizations in Society* ed. James Curran (London, Arnold, 2000).

started out as a virile, uncompromisingly muckraking alternative online media platform but degenerated into a mouthpiece for state governors whose sordid corruption it had unmasked. The editorial focus of the site began to change after it accepted advertising from the people whose shenanigans it covered and uncovered. Jonathan Elendu, the site's owner, later took up jobs as a political and media consultant to a slew of politicians his site had exposed as corrupt. Of course, the consequence of that misadventure was the site degenerated from being the leading Nigerian citizen media outlet between 2005 and 2006 to a peripheral, inconsequential one as of late 2010.

Interestingly, when security agents of the Nigerian government arrested and detained him when he traveled home from his base in the United States on suspicion that he was associated with SaharaReporters, his plight elicited minimal concern from Nigerians at home and in the diaspora. He was condemned by many as the victim of his duplicity and lack of principles. PointblankNews.com shows occasional flashes of radicalism in ways that tempt one to characterize it as belonging to the alternative online media sub-formation but there is strong evidence that, since accepting advertising from Nigerian federal government agencies, it has tempered the causticity of its critiques of government.

What is apparent from the foregoing is that like Tanni Hass,<sup>622</sup> John Downing<sup>623</sup> and others have theorized, the notion of alternative media is not a neat, self-sufficient, and unblemished category, nor can it always be conceived in binary opposition to “mainstream” media formations. Although SaharaReporters is decidedly an alternative media platform in the context of the politics and performance of the Nigerian media system, its reportorial practices are not always radically different from those of its mainstream, homeland counterparts. And although it is unique in allowing citizen investigations and testimonies to be published unedited,

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<sup>622</sup> Hass. “Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization.”

<sup>623</sup> Downing, “Audiences and Readers of Alternative Media: The Absent Lure of the Virtually Unknown.”

it robustly deploys anonymous sourcing, a time-honored mainstream reporting style. Although it now rejects advertising from government, it did accept it in the past and still accepts ads on its sites from many businesses and traditional Nigerian news media organizations seeking to promote their stories. Besides, its wild popularity and increasing acceptance in mainstream society both in Nigeria and outside of it calls to question the appropriateness of its designation as an “alternative media” outlet. It is becoming, at best, a mainstreamed alternative citizen media outlet.

Another point that complicates the characterization of media outlets as “alternative” is the reality of intentional ideological deceit evident in many Nigerian diasporan online media outlets. Many of them started out as impassioned, hardnosed, anti-corruption media only so that they could be noticed. They then exploited the reputational capital that their momentary popularity conferred on them to seek opportunities for self-enrichment. This is especially becoming a trend, with SaharaReporters being the notable exception. For being different from the crowd, SaharaReporters is rewarded with wide reckoning in Nigerian politics. But this reality complicates the mapping of diasporan media into ordinary citizen media and alternative media.

Some of the features of alternative online media isolated in Chapter 2 include the following: they are usually run by activists who are motivated by emancipatory progressive impulses; they intentionally function as counterweights to the corporate media; they are often unfettered by the pressures of the market and free from state control; they deploy activist, unorthodox reportorial practices (such as native reporting and active witnessing) in newsgathering; they serve as counter-information systems and agents of development power; they act as facilitators of social communication rather than as sources of information; and they are more concerned with nurturing a “mobilized” citizenry than an “informed” citizenry.

SaharaReporters, the only truly alternative online news medium, does not neatly fit these categories. Although the site's politics and journalistic preoccupations are clearly motivated by liberatory impulses and are not subject to commercial and governmental pressures, it is not a social movement platform, nor are its reportorial practices always in opposition to the conventions of corporate news media practices. However, within the context of the politics of Nigeria—and indeed of all countries that share Nigeria's socio-historical characteristics—its journalism cannot be described as anything other than “alternative.” Thus, the epistemological and ontological boundaries of the time-honored conception of alternative journalism among media scholars need to be expanded to take account of the fact that alternative media can exist without being obsessed with extirpating capitalism or running against the cultural mainstream, or being led and sustained by organized social movements or, for that matter, being both sources of information and facilitators of social communication. Such a reconsideration of the conception of alternative journalism would escape the charge of occluding the socio-historical singularities of non-Western societies. What should matter in the conceptualization of alternative journalism is the degree to which journalism is consistently oppositional both to the mainstream media (which are by definition pro status quo and core instruments for the legitimation and naturalization of the power structure) and oppressive cultural and political practices within societies and social formations. The form and substance of this journalism will necessarily differ from society to society. Transitional, emerging democracies will have alternative media formations that are different from those of freer, more transparent societies, which will in turn be different from deeply oppressive and closed societies. In other words, the form and character of alternative media formations in the world will be inflected by their socio-historical and cultural singularities.

However, they also share a passion for extirpating inequality, instituting justice and economic liberty for all, and disrupting the comfort of oppressive power structures.

## **6.7 Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

This study has illustrated that diasporic online citizen journalism of the kind that has been examined here has the capacity to construct loose but nonetheless virile media-created virtual public spheres that can influence, challenge, and alter the politics and traditional media formations of homelands in peripheral, transitional societies as well as serve as alternatives or complements to state-run and corporate media. This extends the conversation about how the Internet has transformed the dynamics of content creation and consumption. While the transformation of audiences into content creators has been amply documented within the bounds of nations and states, this study has chronicled one of only a few instances of previous diasporic consumers of homeland news transforming to creators of news content for and about the home from which they are geographically separated for good and, in the process, contributing to raising the bar of domestic national discourse, media practice, and governmental policy formulations. The study is therefore important in pointing out ways that countries saddled with a compromised or strangled domestic media system can turn to their diasporas in the West—or any other technologically and politically advanced society—to challenge or improve homeland media formations and influence government policies.

While instances of exilic individuals challenging homeland state policies and even changing whole governments through the instrumentality of “small media” have been well-documented,<sup>624</sup> the kind of diasporic journalism examined in this study is unique in many

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<sup>624</sup> See, for instance, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, “Small Media for a Big Revolution: Iran,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 3 no. 3 (1990): 341-371 and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali

respects. First, it is practiced by people who are not temporary political exiles but permanent legal residents in their host countries. Many of them were professional journalists back home who changed careers upon arrival in their new host countries. Others were pro-democracy and human-rights activists before they relocated to the United States. Still others are U.S.-based IT professionals who are merely interested in expanding the discursive space in Nigeria. But all of them practice citizen journalism as a part-time endeavor. And, unlike the exilic elites of 1980s Iran, for example, who brought about changes back home while away from it using small media and going back home thereafter, the Nigerian diaspora at the vanguard of the online citizen journalism in this study have a sense of rootedness and membership in their host communities and have no desire to return to the homeland.<sup>625</sup>

Similarly, over the years, their diasporic online media have been mainstreamed and are now seen as part of Nigeria's media landscape. This fact has conferred on them institutional authenticity in ways that the small media of exilic elites highlighted in previous studies did not have. So the citizen media system that the Nigerian diaspora has helped birth is not episodic, contingent, and inspired by fleeting political concerns. It emerged first as a complement and later as a competitor to the domestic media. A diasporic media formation, located solely on virtual space but with preoccupations entirely centered on the homeland is unique. It is even more unusual that such a media system can influence government policies and threaten the professional and institutional authority of the domestic legacy media. Thus, this media system, as the Ford Foundation aptly notes, provides a model for deepening participatory democracy and serving as a counterfoil to compromised media systems in developing societies. Of course, not

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Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture and the Iranian Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994).

<sup>625</sup> Becoming a citizen of another country or getting another country's permanent residence permit is a good indication of the absence of a desire to return "home." It is evidence of rootedness.



all the online media highlighted for this study have democratizing potential, but it is significant that the discursive democracy the Internet enables also makes it easy for readers to desert news outlets that betray the trust of their readers.

It is obvious that that the diasporan online media in Nigeria have been effective partly because of their capacity to attract the attention of government back home. And they have succeeded in attracting the attention of the government because the diasporan media sites are located in the United States, a country whose approval the Nigerian governments traditionally seek, with a few exceptions.<sup>626</sup> As one of the case studies showed, fear of being exposed to “international embarrassment” (which is often shorthand for American disapproval) is often a potent motive force for changing unpopular state policies in Nigeria. It is conceivable that were the diasporan citizen news media to be located anywhere outside America, they would not have been as effective as they have been. This is the core of the claims of the theory of boomerang effect: its power derives from the willingness of governments of resource-rich countries in the West to compel governments in the Third World to change policies considered unpopular. This means that the relative success of the diasporan online media can only be replicated in countries where governments are sensitive to international public opinion, where governments are eager to be in the good graces of Western governments, and where the press systems are at least “partly free,” to use the Freedom House’s terminology for the classification of the world’s freedom index.<sup>627</sup> Nigeria has been consisted classified as “partly free” except for once when it was

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<sup>626</sup> The only times when Nigerian governments openly disagreed with the U.S. government and strained diplomatic relations were in 1975 and the late 1990s. In 1975, a radical military dictator by the name of Murtala Muhammed took over government by coup d’état and decided to confront the U.S. government. He was toppled and assassinated after only 6 months in power in what many believed was a CIA plot. In the 1990s, General Sani Abacha rebuffed the U.S. when he was severely excoriated for his gross human rights violations, including his hanging of environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. He too died in office.

<sup>627</sup> Freedom House. “Freedom House’s Annual Survey of Global Media Independence: An Historical Review, 1984-2007.”

classified as “free.” It was also once classified as “not free” during General Sani Abacha’s brutal military dictatorship. The point then is that the online citizen media of Third World diasporas can only be effective and active agents of change in their original homelands if those homelands at least make pretensions to democracy and freedom, like Nigeria does. It would be pointless in countries like North Korea, Cuba, Iran, China, Pakistan, the Gulf States, and so on where Web sites can be arbitrarily blocked by governments without reputational consequences, where governments are contemptuous of international public opinion, and where anti-Western sentiments are mainstream. In other words, countries where the press systems are “not free” are exempt from the consequences of the random acts of journalism of geographically displaced ethnoscapas in the Western core. This consideration is the major limitation in the applicability of this study. However, even in these totalitarian or authoritarian countries, the proliferation of mobile Internet access is rendering government control of the Web rather slippery. In China, for instance, many demonstrations have been successfully organized by otherwise widely dispersed people through cell phones.

It is important to note, too, that although the Internet is not as widely accessible in the developing world as it is in the West, potentially limiting the power and reach of online citizen media, Internet access and literacy have been growing by leaps and bounds lately, especially with the wild popularity of mobile Internet service. In Nigeria, as in most developing countries, most people get access to the Internet through their cell phones. But, more importantly, as the two-step flow theory of communication (sometimes called the multiple-step-flow theory of communication) suggests, the effects of mass communication are not often measured primarily through the number of people who have had first contact with the content of the mass media. News often percolates to the general populace through a network of interpersonal relationships

led by “opinion leaders.”<sup>628</sup> The theory states that news from the mass media usually first get to opinion leaders, who are usually well-educated, media-savvy and have access to modern communication facilities, who then relay it to the lower strata of the society through informal channels. Most of the stories covered in the online diasporan media that had momentous consequences in Nigeria became topics of national conversation precisely because they were first exposed to a few influential people who had access to the Internet and who later diffused the information to the larger populace through a multiple-flow process. With the profusion of Internet access through cell phones, which empowers many more people to directly encounter news on the Internet, this theory and its implications may become less significant.

As a result of the success of the first set of diasporan online citizen media outlets, there has been a mushrooming of diasporan online citizen media that are actively involved in traditional news reporting. It is conceivable that they will become a permanent fixture of the Nigerian media landscape, but it is also possible that their emergence is actuated by the general election in Nigeria billed for April 2011. Most of these sites are obviously politically motivated, are designed to feather the political aspirations of certain politicians and to undermine those of others, and generally fall short of the expectations that made some of their forerunners popular and successful. Similarly, such older diasporan media sites as *TheTimesofNigeria.com* and *Huhuonline* have become partisan in ways that suggest that they have been compromised and that they are selling their influence, especially to Nigeria’s current president and his minions. The good thing, though, is that these sites seem to be losing their readers while those of

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<sup>628</sup> The two-step flow theory was first conceptualized by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues. See Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (Columbia University Press, 1944). It was later fleshed out by Elihu Katz in many experiments such as his famous “The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on a Hypothesis,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 no. 1 (1957): 61-78. Although the theory has been criticized it offers a useful framework to conceptualize how information flows especially in societies where the mass media have not fully permeated.

SaharaReporters.com seem to be increasing by the day.<sup>629</sup> The deliberative democracy that the Internet makes possible will ultimately allow readers to express their feelings through online comments and patronage. In the final analysis, the Web sites that will survive will be those that are not only transparent and unaffiliated with politicians and political parties but that are seen to be so by readers.

Although there is no parallel as of the time of this study of diasporan online journalistic activism of the kind examined here, it would be interesting to look out for such instances when they emerge and compare them with the Nigerian example. It would also be useful to undertake comparative online media journalistic activist studies with countries that share Nigeria's demographic and socio-historical attributes such as Malaysia where bloggers recently caused a major political earthquake by helping to unseat a government that had clung on to power since the country's independence through an iron-clad strangulation of the discursive space. In Malaysia, like in Nigeria, "people trust the Internet more than official sources." That is why Malaysian researchers found that "more than 70 percent of voters in March 8 [2008] elections were influenced by blogs."<sup>630</sup> Such an effect has not been systematically measured in Nigeria, but given the mass disillusionment with the mainstream media in Nigeria and the immense popularity of online media, it is entirely possible that a similar finding will be made.

One of the limitations of this study is that I did not directly interview Nigerian journalists. Future research that interviews Nigerian journalism to find out their views, anxieties, and concerns about the diasporan media would be an invaluable contribution. So would an ethnographic study of the U.S.-based diasporan journalists themselves. But, significantly, this is

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<sup>629</sup> SaharaReporters increased four million unique pages views in three months while stories on Huhuonline.com and TimesofNigeria.com have stopped to attract comments from readers, indicating that readers are deserting the sites.

<sup>630</sup> Stephen Kaufman, "Malaysia's Alternative Media Become Decisive Political Factor," America.gov, April 3, 2008; accessed December 20, 2010 from <http://www.america.gov/st/democracy-english/2008/April/20080403175441esnamfuak0.1705591.html>.

an exploratory study of an unfolding phenomenon. The insights presented in this study can become the basis for a more descriptive study.

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