Interactivity and the Online Media Sphere in Nigeria

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Shovelware to Multimediality

By

Joseph Wilson

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Juliet, Jason and Jemma

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PREFACE

The changes in the structure of opportunities in communications that the Internet has produced have inspired a momentous transformation in journalism practice worldwide. Journalism practice online is evolving so fast that it is almost impossible to keep track of all the new developments. With the ever-changing trends in global journalism, the mass media require the development of convincing concepts to keep up with the demand of their online presence. Interactivity is a distinguishing feature of the online environment that addresses one of the lingering communication concerns or dissatisfactions in respect of the limited one-way communication of traditional mass media. The online media platform has provided new avenues particularly for the newspaper industry and its audience to enhance communication. This book gives an insight into the nature of online interactivity in the Nigerian media. The book looks at the interactive status of some selected leading online Nigerian newspapers (*Daily Trust*, *Punch*, *The Sun*, *Leadership* and *The Guardian*). The book highlights the categories and functionality of interactive features on the websites of the selected newspapers, features which facilitate interpersonal communication processes, the availability of links/icons content, the user-friendliness of the interactive features, the nature of customization of information features for monitoring information use and the responsiveness to interactivity by the selected newspapers. The book goes further by projecting some theories that explain the concept of interactivity. The book explains the transition of Nigeria's online media, from the 'Shovelware' stage of online journalism to multimediality. It also looks at the adoption of social media by newspaper outlets in order to enhance interactivity. It is important to note that the list of interactive features may never be exhaustive because of the constant development in information and communication technology. It is expected that this book would greatly enhance the understanding of interactivity in the online media in Nigeria and beyond.

CHAPTER ONE

INTERACTIVITY AND THE MASS MEDIA

A series of developments in information and communication technology are having a significant impact on the mass media industry and journalism practice. For instance, the phenomenon of online journalism is an obvious result of the expansion and significant development and adoption of the Internet in the mass media. Reading online newspapers and watching live streams from broadcast stations have become a part of many individuals' daily lives around the world, as they seek to stay informed about local and international issues. The emergence of new media technologies and the development of the likes of Web 2.0, which is characterized by interactive capabilities that encourage user-generated content, have spurred a transformation in how the mass media operate, how journalism is practised and who is doing it (Lasica, 2003; Deuze, 2003). Folayan (2004) notes that the interesting feature of Internet technology is its ability to do and offer things that no single conventional medium can offer in totality. The convergence of several media functions into the Internet makes it a unique technology, thus making an online presence an integral part of contemporary mass media with interactivity featuring prominently.

Online media are changing so fast that it is almost impossible to keep track of all the developments. With the ever-changing trends in the global information sphere (Info-sphere), the mass media need to develop convincing concepts to keep up with the demands of their online presence (In-Went Capacity Building International, 2009). The medium of the Internet with its myriad of content patterns has now placed in perspective the incredible desires of the media organizations to reproduce television, radio and print media on the Internet, which from Marshall McLuhan's point of view, produces interactivity and exchange that is positive in the transformation of the rigidities of the mass media and particularly the snowballed print culture (Burnett and Marshall, 2003).

The growing popularity of online media, especially newspapers, provides new avenues for the mass media industry and its audience to enhance

communication and address lingering communication concerns such as the long tradition of dissatisfaction in respect of the limited one-way communication of mass media – the hierarchical structure of conventional mass communication imposes a "don't talk back" format on audiences. This concern has, to an extent, been addressed by the emergence of the Internet and the changes it has introduced to traditional media activities (Schultz, 1998; Habermas, 1989). A distinguishing feature of the Internet that has addressed arguments and counter arguments in respect of media audiences, being passive consumers of content, is the quality and nature of interactivity on the Internet.

The Internet now makes available components that, until now, were lacking in the print and the broadcast media. While broadcast media may be immediate and the print medium may offer as much depth, they are, however, limited in terms of providing an interactivity option like the online media (McQuail, 2000 and Perlman, 2002). Otto and Rosser (2000) point out that the greatest strength and distinguishing feature of the online medium is its ability to support simultaneous and interactive communications among many people. Thus providing a shift from the "one to many" media culture to "many to many".

The incorporation of the interactivity feature of the Internet into mass media activities has also served to distinguish what has come to be termed online journalism from the traditional print and broadcast media. Although interactivity is not exclusively a new media concept, it is highly facilitated and readily available in the new media. It is in the new media context that the concept of interactivity has become widely recognized and explored (McMillan, 2002).

Interactivity implies an elaborate or wide system of feedback that can respond to the requests and decisions of any web user (Burnett and Marshall, 2003). Interactivity is both the ability to communicate with people (person interactivity) and access the information (machine interactivity) (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). According to Schultz (1999), interactivity can be understood as a formal element of unmediated or mediated conversations. It is a variable of responsiveness in interpersonal and societal communication.

 Schultz (1998) points out that, in recent years, the clamour for public participation in the journalism process has been based on, among other things, the argument that mass media offer limited interactivity. This has compelled scholars like Lawrence (1993) to call for an interactive

journalism or mass media practice that emphasizes the centrality of audience participation. He argued that there is a need for journalists and mass media organizations to encourage and solicit feedback. This can be realized by creating focus groups, initiating online community meetings that would facilitate the conduct of opinion polls and the establishment of platforms for interaction among community members. This approach assumes that there is a connection between society and the media, which has been made possible through interactive communication facilitated by media establishments. Consequently, it is important for the broadcast and newspaper industries to carefully consider and adopt tools and techniques that may foster interactive communications.

The Newspaper Industry

The newspaper industry globally has witnessed some transformation in the past two decades. According to Haneefa and Nellikka (2010), the exponential growth of the Internet and the increased reliance on digital information have transformed newspaper journalism by ushering in new ways and means of disseminating news and other products. It has given online newspapers the challenge of updating and providing fresh news frequently and providing channels for them to interact with their audience. Day (2008) notes that news organizations now explore innovative approaches to their online presentations, giving the readers information and format that, until recently, were not available in print production.

The online versions of newspapers have the potential to increase interactivity options for the audience. This option of interactivity distinguishes them from the traditional mass media practices. Such an obvious shift brings with it an assortment of challenges and opportunities, as newspapers look to enhance their online presence and incorporate more interactivity in order to attract more readers, while still maintaining the traditional function so central to a journalist's identity (Schultz, 1999; Kenney et al, 2000).

The introduction of online versions of newspapers by the newspaper industry in Nigeria has caused a shift in the way news and other services are disseminated. Media services are now more dynamic and attractive; products and news are delivered in real time, there is an increased quantity of information, news reports are provided with photographs and videos, and are updated periodically. Online pages are often scenes that are made more appealing by their varied content (Peters, 2009).

Traditionally, professional journalism has offered the audience few direct opportunities for interactive communication. A well-known, age-old means of feedback, especially in print media, is the 'Letters to the Editor' section, which is a conventional way for readers to react to media messages by writing letters. The communication remains reactive, unless journalists or readers respond to the initial communication.

The potential of interactivity has fuelled extraordinary anticipation over the adoption of a two-way communication model in the mass media industry. Interactivity, an important quality of new media, principally challenges the traditional one-way directional flow of mass media content by providing audiences with enhanced options and even allowing them to participate in the production of mass media content.

The growing impact of new technologies and the resulting pressure on mass media organizations to incorporate more audience involvement through online interactivity and the rather impressionistic findings and arguments by the likes of Katz (1994), Lasica (1996) and Saila (1997) that media organizations offer illusions of interactivity on the net and that a lot of newspapers simply put the content of their print editions online, making little effort to take the interactivity option seriously have prompted a number of European, American, Asian and Afro-centric studies on how media organizations are incorporating interactive features and what kinds of interactive features newspaper websites are offering.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERACTIVITY:
UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT

Websites are created for different purposes and their success is measured or determined by how effective they are at performing their designed functions. Hwang and McMillan (2002) note that interactivity and involvement are two key measures that may help website users better understand the effectiveness of a website. The level of interactivity and the number of users of websites may indicate the attitude that is unique to new media environments.

Traditionally, involvement has had strong links to attitude. Thus, involvement with the subject of the site, using interactivity features, might also influence attitudes or interests towards the site. There are several tools on most online media that in one way or another engage readers by either allowing them to post comments, participate in a poll, send email inquiries or react to an issue. Examples of such features include the comments segment, the email link etc.

Manosevitch and Walker (2009) note that many, if not all website users are familiar with the comments section of online news websites. Readers' comments play an interactive role between the public and the media organization (journalists or editors). The feature is relatively straightforward, allowing readers to submit their views, opinions, perspectives and expertise to content written by professional journalists. In essence, this is a form of interaction made possible by owners of such sites. Generally, interaction is made possible through various formats and meeting some requirements on such sites. In some, it is made available only to readers who register or sign up with the news site (Hermida and Thurman, 2007).

Rosenberry (2005), notes that the online interactivity concept relies on the combined effects of immediate response, unlimited space, and minimal censorship which open up an opportunity for citizens to participate in public deliberation, and establish a direct link between the mass media

voice and the audience voice, thereby combining institutional and public voices.

The concept of interactivity can mean different things depending on the context within which it is used. An effort to define the concept would mean an attempt to highlight the basic idea as it relates to the role of the media in any form of communication. Whether the communication is face to face or societal, the idea of interactivity centres on the exchange of information between two entities; it could be between the audience and the media organization or between a user of technology and the technology. One of the known and earliest definitions of interactivity was from Rafaeli (1988), that interactivity is, "an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third or later transmission or message is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions". According to Schultz (1999), interactivity can be understood as a formal element of unmediated or mediated conversations. It is a variable of responsiveness in interpersonal and societal communication.

Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) identified five defining characteristics of communication on the Internet: multimedia, hypertext, packet switching, synchronicity and interactivity. Hitchcock (2003) identified some common manifestations of interactivity on websites: search, hypertext links, multimedia, Java applets, JavaScript, blogging (Technorati), web forms, software agents, portals, personalization – email, chat, instant messaging, online gaming, file sharing, peer-to-peer (Napster model), music swapping, webcams, 'virtual' meetings, Macromedia Flash!, e-shopping, cookies, counters (user logs), online polls etc.

Pavlou and Stewart (2000) note that interactivity is not really new but what is new comes from the speed, scope and scale of interactivity. These are provided by new information and communication technologies, which make online activities simpler, cheaper and easier. They emphasize that interactivity is an attribute of the consumer, not a characteristic of the medium, as consumers can choose to respond or not.

Schultz (1999) asserts that "interactivity describes and prescribes the manner in which conversational interaction as an iterative process leads to jointly produced meaning". Technological tools can neither produce nor share meaning in a narrow sense. But, undoubtedly, they can mediate and facilitate or impede interactive communication. The obvious characteristics of fully interactive communication can imply more equality of the participants and a greater proportion of communicative power than two-

way and reactive communication, and clearly more so than one-way communication. Therefore, there is much value in a high level of interactivity, as far as the ideal of deliberative democracy is concerned (Rafael, 1988; Schultz, 1999).

Rogers (1986) defines interactivity as "the capacity of a new communication system, usually containing a computer as a component to respond to the user almost like an individual participating in a conversation". While some of the technologies are relatively low in their level of interactivity, some are highly interactive. Likewise, for Hoffman and Novak (1996) interactivity is both the ability to communicate with people (person interactivity) and access information (machine interactivity).

Hashim et al (2007) point out that there are several studies (Ha & James, 1998; McMillan, 1998; Jensen, 1998; Wu, 1999; Massey & Levy, 1999; Dholakia et al, 2000 etc.) linking new technology like the Internet to the concept of interactivity in an attempt to identify the dimensions, benefits and implications of interactivity from various perspectives and disciplines such as communication studies, computer-mediated communication (CMC), Marketing, and Information Systems. However, as the functionality and uses of the Internet continue to expand, the understanding of interactivity will also continue to change to suit the approach of researchers. Hashim et al (2007) refer to interactivity as a concept that involves negotiation, cooperation and coordination. They note that interactivity showcases the platform where computer program and human being may have a dialogue. In the realms of the Internet, this relates to communication activities which may be human-to-human or human-to-computer interactions that involves receiving and disseminating inputs, messages and commands.

Significantly, many scholars (Heeter 1989; Morris & Ogan 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli 1996; Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997; Ha & James 1998, Hashim, Hasan and Sinnapan 2007) posit that interactivity is an obvious feature of the new information technologies that causes a considerable reassessment of communication research which has resulted in several definitions of the interactivity concept. Kopper et al (2000) define interactivity as the characteristics of the Internet that facilitate association, enabling people not only to receive information (a passive audience), but also to disseminate it. Similarly, Kawamoto (2003), views interactivity as a process of engaging active human or machine participation in the process of seeking and sharing information.

Hoffmann and Novak (1996) view the interactivity concept as the ability to interact through a medium as well as to maintain personal interaction between people. Macias (2003) explains that interactivity requires two things: a person can give or get information online through surfing or researching, but they are also able to connect with other people via emails, chatrooms, and online chat features, such as Instant Messenger as well as chat features on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, etc.

According to Hashim et al (2007), most definitions of interactivity, and the associated body of literature, were developed from the computer-mediated communication perspective. Carrie Heeter's 1989 conceptualization of interactivity has gained acceptance and wide usage among researchers because of its simplistic nature. One of which is the categorization of interactivity into six components:

- the complexity of choice available: users are provided with a choice of available information or selectivity;
- the effort users must make: the amount of effort users must make to access information;
- the responsiveness to the user: the degree to which the medium can react responsively to a user;
- the monitoring of information use: potential tools to monitor system use;
- the ease of adding information: the degree to which the user can add information to the system that a mass audience can access; and
- facilitation of interpersonal communication: the degree to which the media system facilitates interpersonal communication between specific users.

Another interesting angle to conceptualization of interactivity is the development of dimensions of interactivity (Kenney et al 2000; Stromer-Gally, 2004).

Dimensions of Interactivity

Interactivity is further understood by its dimensions. The positions of Kenney et al (2000), Stromer-Gally (2004), and Hashim et al (2007) emphasize two occurrences: interactivity between people, and interactivity between people and computers or networks. Hashim et al (2007) note that increasingly readers of online news sites desire the freedom to use and navigate the websites, not only retrieving the reports and news stories, but

also to gain the opportunity to communicate by reacting to debatable issues, share ideas with reporters and other readers, which addresses the online engagement need of users. Similarly, Carey (1989) describes dimensions of interactivity thus: engagement with technologies that provide person-to-person communication and person-to-machine interactions. Hoffman and Novak (1996) identify two dimensions of interactivity: person interactivity and machine interactivity. Lee (2000) explains the two dimensions or two broad types of interactivity as interacting with people and interacting with technology. Stromer-Galley (2000) describes the two dimensions as human-to-human and human-to-media interaction.

Chung (2008) notes further that while interactivity is represented on a continuum, the dimensions of interactivity are manifested through various forms of interactive features that make up the continuum. For example, features representing medium interactivity rely solely on the technology to allow users to exert control and are considered as lower levels of interactivity. The characteristics of medium interactivity include features that enable users or readers to send and article to a friend, perform audio and video downloads and access photo galleries.

According to Chung (2008), there exist features in medium interactivity that allow for a partial human-to-human communication and are considered as middle-ground interactivity features. This category is found between the two extremes of human interactivity and medium interactivity. Features that allow customization options fall within this category. For example, customization of topics, breaking news headlines, polls and weather provide readers with the means to design information to their liking and in some instances share and express their views, but these features do not support the exchange of ideas.

Features that facilitate reader-to-reader or user-to-user (the human-to-human interactivity dimension) mutual communication, or interpersonal communication, are considered as higher levels of interactivity. This dimension promotes human interactivity. Features of this dimension include e-mail links, message boards and chat features. (Chung 2008; Hashim et al 2007).

The use of features in human-to-human interactivity requires more effort because users do more than mere clicking or selecting in order to actively use them. Chung (2008) points out that this dimension of interactivity constitutes one of the dividing lines between the traditional and the online news system. The online news delivery system allows for instant or

immediate audience participation through interpersonal communication, which is not so for traditional media (print versions of newspapers, television and radio). According to Schultz (2000), this human-to-human dimension showcases two types of interactivity that characterize journalistic websites: reader-to-reader and journalist-to-reader.

In furtherance of discourse on dimensions of interactivity, Szuprowicz (1995) emphasizes the three levels of interactivity: user-to-user, user-to-documents, and user-to-computer (or user-to-system). Kayany et al (1996) note that within these three levels of interactivity users exert three types of control: relational (interpersonal), content (document-based), and process/sequence (interface-based). Additional interactivity dimensions have been identified that are setting-specific.

McMillan (2002) notes that the three-dimensional categorization of *user-to-user*, *user-to-documents*, and *user-to-system* interactivity seems to dominate the primary literature on interactivity in new media. *User-to-user* interaction focuses on ways that individuals interact with each other. Among the new media that enable social uses are: email, networked electronic bulletin boards, and chat. *User-to-documents* interactivity describes a scenario where people interact with each other, but they also interact with documents and the creators of those documents. Forms of interaction with documents are obvious in areas such as active navigation on websites and active participation in the creation of interactive actions (customization). *User-to-System* interactivity is a computer-controlled interaction. McMillan (2000) notes that the computer presents information to users who will respond to that information, which Crawford (1990) describes as a kind of 'interactive circuit' through which the user and computer are in continuous communication. For example, the continuous clicking of webpage icons.

Another interpretation or dimension of interactivity with a focus on the design of news websites is the one provided by Deuze (2003) which suggests the following dimensions: *navigational interactivity*, such as human-to-machine interactivity, which allows users to navigate a site with hyperlinks and menu bars; *adaptive interactivity*, such as a blending of medium and human interactivity, which allows users to customize website contents; and *functional interactivity*, which is similar to the human-to-human interactivity in that it gives users the opportunity to communicate with other individuals.

Jensen (1998) and Folayan (2004) note that, among the numerous significant features of the Internet is its capacity to provide a public forum in which Internet users can express themselves freely or minimal restriction. The hype surrounding the concept of interactivity is not unrelated to the expectations regarding its potential to provide some level of individual freedom of choice through online interactivity, which seems to have positive implications on mass media practices.

CHAPTER THREE

ONLINE INTERACTIVITY

Websites are created for different purposes and their success is measured or determined by how effectively such sites perform their designed functions. Hwang and McMillan (2002) note that interactivity and involvement are two integral elements that may help us to better understand the effectiveness of a website. The level at which interactivity takes place on a website may indicate the uniqueness of the site. There are several tools on most online newspapers that in one way or another engage readers by either allowing them to post comments, participate in a poll or send an email to make inquiries or react to an issue. Examples of such features include the comment segment, the active email link, and games etc.

Manosevitch and Walker (2009) note that many online users are familiar with the comments section of websites. The platform that allows readers to posts comments on a website encourages interaction among readers, and between readers and the media organization (journalists and editors). The feature allows readers to submit their views, opinions and perspectives to content written by professional journalists. In essence, this is a form of interaction made possible by owners or operators of such sites (Hermida and Thurman, 2007). Rosenberry (2005), notes that the online interactivity concept rests on the combined effects of immediate response, unlimited space, and minimal censorship, which open up an opportunity for the audience to participate in public deliberation, and establish a direct link between the media organization and the audience, thereby combining institutional and public collaboration.

Kenney et al (2000), note that, while it is often perceived as a feature of dialogue, interactivity is not limited to two people, face-to-face or societal communication.

The development of new technologies has compelled mass media organizations to adopt and harness the kind of interactivity offered by these technologies. Thus, one of the known and earliest definitions of

interactivity was from Rafaeli (1988), that interactivity is "an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third or later transmission or message is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions". In this regard, Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) identified five defining characteristics of communication on the Internet: multimedia, hypertext, packet switching, synchronicity, and interactivity. Hitchcock (2003) identified some common manifestations of interactivity on websites: search, hypertext links, multimedia, Java applets, JavaScript, blogging (Technorati), web forms, software agents, portals, personalization – email, chat, instant messaging, online gaming, file sharing, peer-to-peer (the Napster model), music swapping, webcams, 'virtual' meetings, Macromedia Flash!, e-shopping, cookies, counters (user logs), online polls etc.

As pointed out earlier by Pavlou and Stewart (2000), interactivity is not new but newness stems from the speed, scope, and scale of interactivity provided by new information and communication technologies, which has simplified online activities. Thus, interactivity is an attribute of the consumer, not a characteristic of the medium, as consumers can choose to respond or not.

Schultz (1999) asserts that interactivity describes and prescribes the manner in which conversational interaction as an interactive process leads to jointly produced meaning. Technological tools can neither produce nor share meaning in a narrow sense. But, undoubtedly, they can mediate and facilitate or impede interactive communication. The obvious characteristics of fully interactive communication can imply more equality of the participants and a greater symmetry of communicative power than two-way and reactive communication, and clearly more so than one-way communication.

Rogers (1986) defines interactivity as the capacity of new communication system, usually containing a computer as a component to respond to the user almost like an individual participating in a conversation. While some of the technologies are relatively low in their level of interactivity, some are highly interactive. Likewise, for Hoffman and Novak (1996) interactivity is both the ability to communicate with people (person interactivity) and access information (machine interactivity).

There are widely used components of interactivity identified by scholars such as Heeter (1989 and 1989) and Ha and James (1998) among others. These components are popularly referred to as dimensions of interactivity