African Citizen Journalists' Ethics and the Emerging Networked Public Sphere

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Abstract: *Citizen journalism is emerging as a powerful phenomenon across Africa. The rise of digitally-networked technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones is reshaping reporting across the continent. This change is technological – with social media platforms enabling new forms of publishing, receiving, and discussing stories – as well as cultural – with idiosyncratic conventions emerging on these platforms. This study surveys the ethical beliefs of citizen journalists in several sub-Saharan African countries. We find that they are driven by a sense of social responsibility and a wish to inform their readers and the general public. Citizen journalists show a clear anti-authoritarian strain and an antipathy towards government regulation, yet most see themselves as subject to the same ethics that guide traditional journalism. We then investigate the implications of these ethics for the emerging networked public sphere. The emergence of a digitally-networked public sphere has been hailed as a revival of bottom-up democracy in the West, but its consequences for African countries are rather ambiguous. We therefore set out to disentangle the possible relationship between citizen journalism and the emerging networked public sphere.*

Keywords: *Africa, citizen journalism, journalism ethics, networked public sphere*.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Internet access is scarcer in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world: African Internet users account for barely more than five percent of the world's online population, and in many countries the Internet penetration rate still lies below five percent. However, the picture is changing rapidly as more and more people gain access. Mobile phone adoption has exploded all over the continent, so much so that today most Africans have access to a mobile device. In a number of countries, the introduction of 3G networks has also revolutionized the way by which many people access the Internet - while for most of the previous decade cybercafés prevailed, more and more people now access the Internet via their mobile phones. In these countries - including Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, among others - a significant share of the population is now online (Columbus & Heacock, forthcoming).

The rise of the Internet across Africa, just as anywhere else in the world, has not left journalism untouched. Newspapers and broadcasters across the country have started to publish content online. In many cases, however, African online journalism is merely repurposing content produced for the publishers' primary publications (Bosch, 2010; Mudhai, 2011). Nevertheless, practices pioneered by alternative media actors - such as the use of multimedia and increasingly immediate reporting - are adopted by mainstream journalists, so that there is a trend towards "networked-convergent journalism" (Mudhai, 2011; Banda, 2010).

The spread of Internet and mobile telephony has also led to the emergence of a new form of citizen journalism in many sub-Saharan African countries. While this movement and its impact is less obvious in Africa than in Europe and the U.S., vibrant online communities exist in many countries, and citizen journalists are increasingly using digital technologies such as blogs, SMS, social networks, microblogs, video-sharing platforms, and mapping to report and comment on a wide range of topics (Mutsvairo & Columbus, 2012). The role of citizen journalists has particularly been highlighted in times of crisis: in Kenya, during the violent election aftermath 2007, while social media were also used to incite riots, bloggers documented human rights abuses and created Ushahidi, a crisis mapping software (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). In such situations, when

reports from conventional media are absent, citizen journalists are not merely relaying critical information - blogs, microblogs and fora also serve as means to express emotions and as spaces for discussion (Zuckerman, 2009).

The rise of the Internet, and in particular of citizen journalism, has been hailed as the emergence of a “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006). Digitally networked technologies enable ordinary citizens, the idea goes, to become their “own broadcasters and reach large numbers of people in unprecedented ways at trivial cost" (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). However, the application of this theory in the African context has been controversial. While Goldstein and Rotich argue that the fast adoption of mobile phones in Kenya has led to the emergence of a networked public sphere, this has been challenged by Walton (2011), who points out that many are still without access to communication technologies. Goldstein and Rotich (2008), however, also note that the emergence of a networked public sphere in Africa is, other than in Western democracies, not necessarily linked to civic impulses; much rather, digitally networked technologies can be utilized to promote violence as well as to provide counter-narratives to the stories of oft-censored conventional media and to more easily collect reports from witnesses of human rights violations. Bosch (2010), who entertains the notion of multiple public spheres in different online communities, in a similar vein points out that online discussions often fall short of the reasoned debate required for the formation of a public sphere, more resembling a “barroom brawl”.

II. CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN AFRICA

The term 'citizen journalism' has risen to broad attention since the mid-2000's (Allan, 2009, p. 18), albeit mostly in Western countries. In Africa, it is even more of a novel phenomenon. Along with its novelty comes an abundance of definitions, such that the boundaries of citizen journalism are hardly drawn yet. Often, the term is used to denote non-professional, amateur news publication (ibid.); the reporters are "incidental journalists" who happen to witness and capture, then publicize events (p. 21). Allan therefore argues that citizen journalism plays a particularly salient role in crisis reporting (ibid.). Indeed, much of the research on African citizen journalism consists of case

studies on political crises (in Kenya: Mäkinen & Kuira, 2008; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Zuckerman, 2009; in Zimbabwe: Moyo, 2009). The total body of research remains small, although useful Africa-specific normative frameworks for the analysis of citizen journalism are supplied by Goldstein & Rotich (2008) and Banda (2010). A comprehensive literature review is provided by Mutsvairo & Columbus (2012).

In Africa more than elsewhere, participation in citizen journalism hinges on scarce access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Walton, 2011); consequently, citizen journalists can be expected to be mostly better-off, higher educated, and living in urban areas (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). Over the last decade, the growing adoption of mobile phones has vastly increased access to ICTs for many Africans, and they have been noted as a key technology for citizen journalists in Africa (Banda, 2010; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Oteku et al., 2010); most recently, Internet-enabled mobile phones also enable increasing access to the latter medium. Despite these advances, citizen journalists in Africa today are often experienced ICT users with extensive experience in using social media (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). Blogs and Twitter are commonly used outlets for citizen journalists, as well as the social network Facebook; but uses of mass SMS and emails for citizen journalism have also been reported (Moyo, 2009).

Reporting news is quite naturally a major part of citizen journalism. Especially in the crisis situations predominantly studied, which come with an absence of reports from traditional media sources, citizen journalists take a role in relaying critical information (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Moyo, 2009). In some cases, this involves dedicated research on issues that are ignored or suppressed by mainstream media (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008), but Moyo (2009) has also pointed out that this "parallel market of information" can be fraught with falsehoods and uncertainty. However, citizen journalists do not only report news, but also comment on them. Punditry has been noted as a common feature on citizen media outlets (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Zuckerman, 2009), as has the expression of emotions, for example by means of political jokes (Moyo, 2009; Oteku et al., 2010). Social media, in particular blogs and fora, also have strong discursive component and have been turned into "spaces for discussion" (Zuckerman, 2009), which

in crisis situations serve to connect those in the country with the diaspora (Moyo, 2009).

Mutsvairo and Columbus (2012) have argued that in Africa, citizen journalism takes place counter, parallel to, and interlinked with mainstream journalism, noting a growing convergence between conventional and citizen journalism. Bloggers and microbloggers take up and link to stories published in the online editions of newspapers (Oteku et al., 2010), but in return traditional media also take leads from citizens, going as far as reprinting blog articles without permission (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). Tools and practices pioneered by citizen journalists have also found their way into the portfolios of some media publishers, as when journalists write blogs in an explicitly less formal tone, or when online editions of newspapers provide platforms for readers to report stories - what Banda (2010) calls "institutional citizen journalism".

There is also a much debated relationship between citizen journalism and democratization and empowerment (Banda, 2010). Goldstein and Rotich (2008), in particular, have proven wary of technological determinism. They employ a terminology of "civic" and "predatory" impulses (borrowed from Diamond) which are amplified by digitally networked technologies. Indeed, during the aftermath of Kenya's 2007 election, the tools and practices of citizen journalists were utilized both to incite violence and to document it. Similarly, Moyo (2009) warns that citizen journalism, while at times providing critical information, by spreading untruths may be fueling "panic and disorder".

III. THE DIGITALLY-NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

With the emergence of digitally networked information and communication technologies, such as the Internet and the mobile phone, has come “the rhetoric of the technological sublime”, or, in other words, a Utopian belief in their democratizing potential (Carey cited in Poor (2005)). Associated with a reshaping of the public sphere, ICTs are hailed as a revival of bottom-up, participatory democracy in the West. However, their consequences for African countries are less clear. This section therefore considers conceptualizations of the digital or “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006) and the necessary preconditions for its well-functioning, while particularly focusing on what this

implies for African countries.

Originally conceptualized by Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive arena where private people come together as a public to freely discuss matters of mutual interest (Habermas, 2006). Presumably led by the strength of the argument, the rational-critical debate ideally results in consensus or public opinion, which then serves as a mediator between private citizens and the State, and constitutes democratic control of state activity (ibid).

Although widely recognized as an indispensable resource, this conceptualization of the public sphere has been criticized as it does not seem to fully take into account how systems of exclusion may be embodied in a public sphere (Fraser, 1990). As Fraser points out, what should and what should not be regarded as a matter of public interest does not naturally or logically follow from the subject itself, but rather becomes a common concern through the process of debate (ibid). However, to participate in the debate marginalized groups "must assume the discourse of the dominant group (…) and this may include disregarding what to them are crucial issues" (Thornton, 2001, p. 135). In this manner, the public sphere may leave concerns of the subordinate classes unaddressed, and thereby perpetuate existing systems of domination.

A related yet distinct strand of criticism questions the possibility of a common interest for all citizens. They posit that like-minded individuals will organize themselves in separate public spheres, which all vie for the attention of the political arena. Poor (2005) comes to the same conclusion on more practical grounds. He simply questions a singular public sphere's ability to function on the basis of deliberation, given the size of population.

Regardless of whether there is one overarching public sphere or separate distinct ones, in practice, the nature of a public sphere is highly dependent on information and communication tools. After a period of a weak public sphere during the era of the traditional mass media, the emergence of new ICTs, such as the mobile phone and the Internet, has supposedly reshaped and strengthened the public sphere, aptly termed "networked public sphere" by Benkler (2006). These technologies have made possible "multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information

environment" at trivial costs (p. 211). As a result, more information and voices are able to reach a larger audience, and like-minded individuals are better able to organize. Or, in Benkler's words, ICTs have drastically improved the generative and reactive capacities of individuals, thereby enabling them to "be active participants in the public sphere as opposed to its passive readers, listeners, or viewers" (p. 212). Particularly the Internet, with its anarchic nature, feedback loops, and comment sections (Thornton, 2001, p. 139) has been associated with the potential for a more varied and inclusive public discourse, more transparency, and the capacity of collective action, such as civic journalism and civil society campaigns (Benkler, 2006).

However, in order for a public sphere to function properly it must satisfy several conditions, which include environmental factors as well as behavioral norms. Although there is interdependency between the various factors, they will be discussed separately for the purpose of clarity. With respect to the environmental factors, two seem particularly relevant for our current purposes. First of all, individuals must be able to speak freely about any topic. This implies that the public sphere must be autonomous from state and economic power (Dahlberg in Poor (2005)), and that individuals' rights to free speech must be protected (Habermas, 2006). In the African context this is not something that can be taken for granted. Governments frequently curb basic political and civil rights, including freedom of expression, and do so increasingly on the Internet as well (Columbus & Heacock, forthcoming). The second environmental condition concerns equal access to the public sphere among different members of society. To have access to the networked public sphere naturally calls for the need to have access to digitally networked technologies. This is not only dependent on penetration rates, but also on the availability of leisure time, literacy, and with respect to the Internet often also on English language speaking skills (Thornton, 2001, p. 133). Despite rapidly growing usage of ICTs, access is still skewed towards males and urban residents in Africa (Hilbert, 2011, p. 485).

The required behavioral norms include those linked to the promotion of a rational-critical debate, the inclusiveness of the public sphere, and the minimization of harm in a politically sensitive context. In line with Habermas, one of the most important

characteristics for a strong public sphere is that it should foster rational-critical debate that leads to a common judgment and action (Barton, 2005, p. 180). First, this implies (inter)activity on behalf of the participants of the public sphere. Thornton (2001) particularly warns for the possibility that the Internet may become dominated by advertisements and public relations interests, where politicians are "sold as commodities, citizens are viewed as consumers, and issues are decided with staged events and quotes pre-worded by publicity specialists" (Hilbert, 2011). Rather, a strong public sphere should consist of active participants that continuously react to one another. Second, the discussion should be led by the strength of the argument, which implies that the quality of the argument should be checked and the status of the speaker should be disregarded. Third, this discussion should lead to some sort of consensus. However, although this seems theoretically admirable, Bosch (2010) notes that in practice one must find a balance between "informal kinds of consensus" and deliberation free of status (p. 273). In her case studies she finds that participants were more likely to reach consensus if the website or blog owner posited him or herself as a discussion leader. Similarly, where deliberation was left to its natural course no consensus seemed to be reached (ibid). Finally, the consensus that is presumably arrived on from the rational-critical-debate represents public opinion, and should lead to action.

Moreover, in light of the previously mentioned criticism that public spheres may embody systems of exclusions, participants should be able to introduce topics that were previously unquestioned (Barton, 2005, p. 185). However, Bosch (2010) notes that in Africa citizen journalism and online journalism are often "dependent on traditional outlets for content delivery" (p. 270). In this sense, they tend to be reactionary, and have to enter the discourse of the dominant powers (ibid).

Lastly, although not originally included in previously discussed conceptualizations of the public sphere, in the African context of ethnic conflicts, it may be particularly important to be wary of sensitive or harmful content. As the Kenyan post-election crisis of 2007/2008 illustrates, ICTs can be used both to promote civil rights campaigns as well as to incite violence, and Goldstein and Rotich (2008) have posited that the digitally networked public sphere may serve civic and predatory impulses, thus not necessarily

aligning with democratic values.

IV. TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF THE PRESS

The authoritarian doctrine is a normative theory of press originally conceived by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963). Under this theory, the press is tightly controlled by the government and operates to encourage solidarity and union in the nation. Interference through challenging, questioning or criticizing the workings of the government is not permissible. The role of the press, instead, is to strengthen the power and authority of the head of state or government. It is a theory under which "the press as an institution is controlled in its functions and operations by organized society through another institution, government" (p. 10). Baran and Davis (2009) define it simply as a "normative theory advocating the complete domination of media by a government for the purpose of forcing those media to serve the government" (p. 118).

The authoritarian theory of press is best understood in a comparative analysis with other theories, which as suggested by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm are the libertarian theory, the social responsibility theory and Soviet Communist concept. Severin and Tankard (2010) say the libertarian theory of the press holds that the press is fundamentally there to inform the public and protect their rights and liberties. A clear distinction between the authoritative and libertarian concepts is offered by John Stuart Mill, who asserts that for the latter, which has also been called the "free press theory" to function well, there needs to be no authoritative state intervention (p. 44-45). Unlike the authoritarian concept, this theory thus clearly does not allow for government ownership of the press. Associated with several Western democracies, it unequivocally states that the right to publish is a right that is essential for the success of any democracy. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963) conclude that the theory takes a "philosophical view that man is rational and able to discern between truth and falsehood and, therefore, can choose between a better and worse alternative." Again, unlike the authoritarian doctrine, ownership under the libertarian theory of the press is exclusively private.

The social responsibility theory is considered an offshoot of the libertarian concept, sharing plenty of similarities, although one clear distinction is that it places

moral and ethical restrictions on the press. While the former aims for absolute freedom, the latter believes in freedom with responsibility. Considering under this theory journalists are accountable to the publics and the government, state intervention just as is the case with the authoritarian doctrine can thus be necessary and justified. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963) also note that "freedom of expression under the social responsibility theory is not an absolute right, as under pure libertarian theory....One's right to free expression must be balanced against the private rights of others and against vital social interests." As noted by the Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947, the press has an important role to play in the development and stability of modern society and, as such, it is imperative that a commitment of social responsibility be imposed on mass media. Hence Ostini & Fung's (2002) analysis that social responsibility model is based on "the idea that media have a moral obligation to society to provide adequate information for citizens to make informed decisions."

The Soviet Communist theory of press, which was developed during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, shares plenty of similarities with the authoritarian press theory. Oyedele (2005) argues that according to the theory, "which evolved from Marxist – Leninist – Stalinist thought, with mixture of Hegel and 19th Century Russian thinking, the chief purpose of the press is to contribute to the success and continuance of the socialist system, and especially to the dictatorship of the party." (p. 105) Journalists are thus there to transmit government policy and not to aid in searching for the truth. The Soviet Communist model is seen as an extreme application of authoritarian ideas—in that media are "totally subordinated to the interests and functions of the state" (Ostini & Fung, 2002, p. 42). In assessing the relationship between the authoritarian model with other theories, it is relevant to take note of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's (1963) view that "in fact practically all Western Europe... utilized the basic principles of authoritarianism as the theoretical foundation for their systems of press control" (p.9).

While Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's largely normative four theories of the press paradigm has remained the dominant source for the scientific study of the press worldwide, the advent of the Internet and new technologies make it equally timely to disentangle its original hypothesis. Its framework is considered "obsolete and

inapplicable for contemporary analysis," argue Ostini and Fung (2002, p. 42). Conceptualizing the work by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, Benson (2005) dichotomizes their work with the endorsement of ethnocentrism thereby justifying the central need for objectivity in news. This inherent need for objectivity is one area considered outdated and incomprehensible by the disciples of the web. For others, objectivity is indeed slowly becoming a thing of the past largely due to the rise of online journalism (Taflinger, 1996). Few will be opposed to the idealistic need for objectivity be it for professional or citizen journalists. But others have chosen to focus on the overall ethical dilemmas posed by online-based journalism (Friend & Singer, 2007; Deuze & Yeshua, 2001). Among several issues raised by these scholars are the commercial-based pressures caused by the immediacy factor, issues surrounding accuracy and authenticity of news.

Accuracy and impartiality are universally accepted as standard norms for any practicing journalist (Ibrahim, 2010). Journalism ethics is defined as a species of applied ethics that examines what journalists and news organizations should do, given their responsible role in any given society (Ward, 2005). Kaplan contends that good journalism involves the abolishment and potential influence of own ideas and values when researching and publishing a story (Kaplan, 2002). Furthermore, objectivity boosts reliability (Fischer & Verrecchia, 2000). It is also Ward's conviction that truth and objectivity are the main pillars of good journalism since the need to present two sides of the story remains apparently universal (Ward, 2009). Objective reporting involves the presentation of provable news free of personal evaluation or assumptions (Severin & Tankard, 2010). In the traditional sense, these definitions would mostly work. However, it is almost impossible to maintain this assumption especially when one looks at the presentation of African news online. Web-based journalism is a fast-paced environment, which means journalists are constantly under pressure to complete their new stories in order to remain competitive. The quest for objectivity is the main loser of this development.

Ethical guidelines are the capstone for most media associations and groups of journalists, as they have adopted these guidelines and attempt to achieve them in

practice (Cline, 2009). Several journalistic organizations have adopted codes of conduct, which ensure that their professional conduct remains intact. (Pritchard & Morgan, 1989; Pleijter & Frye, 2007). Ghana was one of the premier African countries to establish a code of ethics, with the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) introducing a colonial era one in 1949. The codes are developed and approved by media organizations as evidence for self-regulation, thereby accepting the calls for autonomy (Limor & Himelboim, 2006). “Ethics substantially defines the duties of an individual towards his own self and towards other people and is a personal responsibility,” argues Demir (2011, p. 538). In the African context, the audiences are perceived to be largely poor, illiterate, uneducated, of diverse language and cultural background and difficult to reach (Mupfurutsa, 1999). Faced with dilemma of working without proper and permanent gatekeepers, African journalists often compromise the important journalistic requirement of responsibility. It is acceptable common practice to not acknowledge the source of a borrowed news article. Findings of a study conducted in Nigeria concluded that the advent of the Internet was making it possible for journalists to freely cull and publish articles from other the website without paying any royalties or acknowledging the source of the article (Nworah, 2005).

Traditional ethics of journalism include a commitment to truthfulness, accuracy, wisdom, courage, justice, temperance, objectivity, impartiality and public accountability (Haque, 2008). A peaceful vote in Kenya was followed by a demoralizing political, economic, and humanitarian crisis ignited by President Mwai Kibaki’s declaration that he had won the presidential election held on December 2007. More than a 1000 people were allegedly murdered during the ethnic clashes, further presenting media analysts with another chance to examine the role of journalism ethics in the wake of the digital revolution. Notably, the Kenyan government’s move to inexplicably delay announcing the election winner evoked tensions across the country even though it was its decision to impose a ban on live broadcasts that left many perplexed. While some foreign media continued to broadcast live, local media did not dare to resist the ban (Mäkinen & Kuira, 2010). The ban presented bloggers with an opportunity to flex their muscles as the political crisis intensified. Zuckerman (2009) credits the growing middle-class population for the rising number of digital activists in the country. The Ushahidi crisis mapping

project gathered momentum as several people including Kenyans abroad flocked to it site hoping to get first-hand reports on the crisis. The reports generated by the blog were passed on to journalists and aid organizations to enable them get the right picture of the crisis (Macharia, 2010). If Macharia's claims are to be believed then there is a bigger chance journalists working for the foreign media may also have been tempted to use information from this "trusted" source. Whether facts were verified is another thing, potentially bringing ethical and credible journalism into disrepute as a blog was used as a primary source for such a crucial news item.

Limitation of harm, which largely involves the preservation of certain details from reports with the aim of avoiding harm to someone or an organization's reputation, is one principle often highlighted as a journalism norm. The otherwise popular newzimbabwe.com news site's editorial independence and responsibility came under heavy scrutiny after it published in November 2010 an AIDS victim's death certificate on its website without the permission of his family. The document supplied to the website's editor by the Zimbabwean government was meant to offset rumors that the country's dreaded spy agency was behind the victim's death. It can be argued that the website acted irresponsibly by publishing the death certificate as this may have caused pain and grief to the victim's family, something that the online newspaper could have easily avoided to remain a tenet of good journalism,

V. CITIZEN JOURNALISM ETHICS

Whereas journalism ethics have a long tradition and are manifested in the codes of unions, agencies and publishers, the ethical foundations of citizen journalism have been much less explored. Perlmutter and Schoen (2007) found that even among top-ranked American political blogs, some of which are professional outlets, few have formal or informal codes of ethics. In the United States, there have been two notable early attempts at creating a 'bloggers' code of ethics'. Blood (2002) focuses on journalistic bloggers and attempts to provide guidelines to raise their credibility. Dube (2003) similarly sees bloggers as comparable to journalists and provides a code of ethics that is adapted from the guidelines of the Society of Professional Journalists, listing advice for

honesty and fairness, minimizing harm, and accountability. However, these two early formulations depart little from traditional journalism ethics and are only within limits specific to the medium.

A more audacious attempt was formulated by Kuhn (2007), who set out to "identify through a dialogic process those values held most deeply by those who chose to blog regardless of the specific functions they perform as bloggers and build a normative code accordingly" (p. 21). He particularly stresses the use of blogs for many-to-many communication, as opposed to the one-to-many communicative fashion of journalistic bloggers in Blood's and Dube's conception. Consequently, Kuhn used a dedicated blog to elicit responses from readers, however, unfortunately his sample size is rather small. Kuhn finds that in his sample, bloggers identified themselves and their readers, rather than society at large, as 'stakeholders' in their blogs; while at the same time they considered blogs as "vehicles for social change, a challenge to our mainstream media, and tools that can be leveraged for political and social gain".

In Kuhn's study, bloggers named 'free expression' as the value most important to them with regard to blogging, followed by 'factual truth', followed by transparency, accountability, and minimizing harm to others. Etiquette was mentioned regularly, but ranked as rather unimportant. When asked for imperative "dos", they named providing credits or links to other blogs, being honest and grounding opinion in fact, and disclosing biases as most important for bloggers, whereas knowingly spreading misinformation, posting information unsupported by facts, and violating copyright laws were highlighted as "don'ts" (p. 31). Kuhn particularly notes that the dos and don'ts also include prescriptions to "sustain the discourse on blogs" and "avoid actions that might discourage participation in blog discourse", consistent with his emphasis on dialogue and many-to-many communication (p. 31-32).

Kuhn's findings tie in with a larger study by Cenite et al. (2009), which asked personal and non-personal bloggers about their ethical beliefs and corresponding practices. They found that personal bloggers valued attribution most, followed by minimizing harm, truth-telling, and accountability. Non-personal blogger valued attribution and truth-telling highest, followed by minimizing harm, and accountability

(p. 586). Differences between groups were significant for truth-telling, valued more highly by non-personal bloggers, and minimizing harm, valued more highly by personal bloggers (p. 587). Cenite et al. also found that non-personal bloggers practice ethical practices related to truth-telling, accountability, and attribution more than personal bloggers (p. 588). However, the findings of this study are limited by the fact that answers were limited to these four categories, excluding the interactive factor Kuhn (2007) has emphasized.

There has been no research specifically on the attitudes and ethical practices of African citizen journalists so far. If mentioned in the literature on ethics at all, citizen journalists are portrayed as negative examples of unethical behavior. As Kasoma (cited in Tomaselli, 2009) writes, “if untrained citizens become journalists, they are oblivious about principles of ethics. This [...] puts the entire media institution at risk with governments.” Some authors have noted practices in which citizen journalists differ markedly from professional codes of ethics. For example, Moyo (2009), writing about Zimbabwe, notes that "when the bloggers refer to 'the news in now' or 'unconfirmed reports', they are not necessarily trying to convince the reader that they have done some investigation in the manner professional journalists verify facts, but merely to indicate that the information has been derived from the grapevine and hence suggest that the readers should do their own cross-checking and verification of stories published." Concluding from this observation, Moyo warns that in the absence of any particular ethics, citizen journalists could, by spreading untruths, lead to "panic and disorder".

VI. METHODS

To study the set of ethics citizen journalists in Africa subscribe to, we used an online survey. Citizen journalists were found through the alternative news platform Global Voices, which summarizes the discourse in non-Western blogospheres, and contacted through mail addresses on their respective blogs. We explicitly excluded non-African expatriates and the African Diaspora from this study. The survey was filled in by 20 participants, of whom all but three self-identified as citizen journalists. Only one participant explicitly denied this. However, half of the participants also identified as

journalists in the more general sense, and eight claimed to work as media professionals. All but one of the participants claimed to have both a blog and a Twitter account.

Due to the small number of active citizen journalists in most African countries, we decided to include all of sub-Saharan Africa in this study, acknowledging the complications that come with generalizing across the continent. Since the survey was conducted in English, responses were focused on English-speaking countries. Most responses came from Kenya (5), Uganda and Zimbabwe (4 each); further responses came from six different countries, all in Africa.

In the first part of our survey, we assessed attitudes towards several ethical questions. In total, this part consisted of 19 prompts with Likert scales. The questions encompass three major themes: traditional theories of press, journalism ethics, and press freedom. First, we asked who journalists and citizen journalists should serve, testing public, communitarian, and authoritarian perspectives. Second, we investigated the issues of attribution and objectivity. Third, we asked about Internet regulation and press freedom. The second part of the survey consisted of three prompts for qualitative statements, asking about citizen journalists' motivation, values of objectivity, and differences and traditional and citizen journalists' ethics.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

The first cluster of three items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .775$; combined mean = 2.39; standard deviation = .95; significant difference from 3 (one-sample t-test) at $p = .011$) tested the attitude towards socially responsible journalism, in which the "media have a moral obligation to society to provide adequate information for citizens to make informed decisions" (Ostini & Fung, 2002). The second cluster of three items ($\alpha = .555$; $\bar{x} = 3.41$; $s = .78$; $p = .041$) asked about the need for self-censorship in case that national security is threatened. This set of questions relates to communitarian ethics, which constrain freedom of the press to accord to the values of a community (Tomaselli, 2009). The third cluster of two items ($\alpha = .722$; $\bar{x} = 4.29$; $s = .81$; $p < .001$) concerns the authoritarian theory of the press, which stipulates that the press should be controlled by the government (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1963). In the first part of our questionnaire,

we find that citizen journalists have a tendency towards public journalism. Journalism is seen as service to the public rather than to the authorities, and self-censorship is opposed even if it is in the name of national security.

The second part of the questionnaire includes two clusters of three items on attribution ($\alpha = .383$; $\bar{x} = 3.21$; $s = .76$; $p = .245$) and two items on objectivity ($\alpha = .592$; $\bar{x} = 2.79$; $s = 1.05$; $p = .391$). For both clusters, the results of the t-test is not significant. Due to the low Cronbach's α in both clusters, individual t-tests were run for each individual question in both clusters, which yielded no significant results. To further examine the differences between the items, a paired-sample t-test was run for two items in the “attribution” cluster, which asked for journalists' and bloggers' need to disclose sources, respectively. The result is slightly significant ($p = .057$), indicating that bloggers more than journalists are expected to disclose their sources. A paired-sample t-test for both items in the “objectivity” cluster yielded no significant result.

The third part of the questionnaire consists of two clusters of three items on government control of online media ($\alpha = .524$; $\bar{x} = 3.96$; $s = .59$; $p < .001$) and two items on press freedom ($\alpha = .348$; $\bar{x} = 2.86$; $s = .89$; $p = .516$). This shows a clear opposition towards government control and censorship of online and in particular social media. However, freedom of the press is not seen as a right above all, the libertarian theory of the press (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1963).

The second part of the survey serves to further elaborate on the findings from the questionnaire. The first question asked what motivates citizen journalists to report on a story. By far the most common answer given was to “inform” their audience or the public at large ($n = 11$); other factors that were named more than once included “truth” ($n = 4$) and “raising awareness” ($n = 3$), as well as “justice”, which included holding authorities accountable. These answers serve to affirm that citizen journalists are motivated by social responsibility. At the same time, they perceive their role as limited to reporting a situation, leaving commenting (named once) and taking action to others.

The second question asked whether traditional and citizen journalists ought to be objective in their reporting. The answers can be categorized as either yes ($n = 8$), no ($n = 4$), or yes, but while disclosing their opinion ($n =4$). Several of the responses frame

objectivity as a responsibility to the audience. As one citizen journalist remarked about traditional and citizen journalists alike, “the information they share goes to influence the opinion of readers online, therefore there is a duty of care expected from them.” It is also notable that none of the respondents made an explicit distinction between the need for traditional and citizen journalists to be objective, instead, many pointed out that both enjoy “public trust” and should act accordingly.

Differences between traditional and citizen journalists were investigated in the third question, which asked whether both ought to adhere to the same set of ethics. The vast majority of answer affirmed that there was no difference between them (n = 11), whereas some respondents saw some differences (n = 3). A few respondents also claimed that ethics either did not exist or were not needed (n = 3). As one respondent wrote, there is “no need for ethics on the Internet. It's free.” The majority however contended that citizen journalists ought to work according to the same ethics that count for traditional journalists. Those who differed felt that the ethics for citizen journalists were “undefined” or less strict, leaving more freedom to them. As one respondent phrased it, “ethics of balance and fairness should apply, but in some cases there's no need for that balance and that's what citizen journalism benefits from.”

Apart from the question what ethics journalists ought to live up to, respondents voiced perceptions on actual ethical or unethical behavior. They report shortcomings on both sides; as one respondent wrote, “citizen journalists do not realize they have that responsibility, because they do not even know it exists. Some journalists are just in a hurry to be published and get paid, worry about ethics is the last thing on their mind.” While it was generally acknowledged that citizen journalists might not be trained in journalistic ethics, traditional journalists were seen as being at least equally at fault; one respondent even claimed that “traditional journalists, although professional trained, are generally more unethical and biased than bloggers who usually disclose their position up front.”

VIII. DISCUSSION

Analyzed through the perspective of the 'four theories of press', it is clear that African

citizen journalists align themselves with the ethics of social responsibility. For most of the citizen journalists in our sample, informing their readers and the public are the main motivation for their work. They object to authoritarian tendencies and government regulation of social media. Nevertheless, our findings on practical journalism ethics are less clear. While most respondents claim that citizen journalists ought to be objective in their reporting and align with traditional journalism ethics, our quantitative findings on questions of attribution and objectivity are less clear.

When interpreted in light of the behavioral requirements for a strong public sphere, it seems that the unwritten ethical codes of conduct of online journalists and bloggers (at least partially) contribute to a stronger public sphere. In the African context, arguably the most important challenge to a public sphere is that of the free press. While infractions against freedom of expression are rampant in many African countries, the Internet has remained mostly free of censorship (Columbus & Heacock, 2012). Indeed, our data show that African online journalists and bloggers are critical of government regulation and authoritarian tendencies. Moreover, some of our respondents seemed particularly motivated to bring out truth, highlight different perspectives to a story, and bring about justice, which shows they are not afraid to bring up issues outside the boundaries of the dominant discourse.

A particular question is whether the ethical norms of citizen journalists align with the values of a rational-critical debate, which is supposed to prevail in a strong public sphere. Bosch (2010) has seriously questioned whether online debates live up to this value, comparing them to a “barroom brawl”. Many of our participant responded that citizen journalists, just as traditional ones, ought to be objective in their reporting, although some pointed out that in practice, this value is often not adhered to. Since our quantitative data also does not yield a significant preference for objectivity in reporting, further research will be needed to identify how citizen journalists in Africa conceptualize and value objectivity.

Linked to the rational-critical debate in the networked public sphere is also the notion of many-to-many communication, or interactivity. Kuhn (2007) has argued that conceptualizations of citizen journalism ethics along the lines of traditional journalism

ethics, which are based on one-to-many publishing, miss an important factor that sets apart digitally networked media. Indeed, citizen journalism outlets are often also used as "spaces for discussion" (Zuckerman, 2009). However, most of our respondents emphasize informing citizens as their main goal, whereas engagement and discussion with their readers are hardly mentioned. There was no significant finding on the need to link to other sources, which would contribute to the discourse in social media. Implicit in the aim of informing others is a notion of a passive "reader" rather than a "prosumer", for whom reading and writing are one process (Stalder cited in Currie, 2010). This passivity is hard to align with the notion of a public sphere that is open to involvement from all.

If anything, the networked public sphere is still emerging in Africa. Although advancements have been made, Internet usage is still low, and citizen journalists are few. We find that those who perceive themselves as citizen journalists are motivated by a sense of social responsibility and the wish to inform others. Despite criticisms, both in the literature and from citizen journalists themselves, most value journalistic ethics. The sense of social responsibility displayed by citizen journalists fosters the emerging networked public sphere, which builds upon rational-critical debate. Although barriers of access remain, the values held by the subjects of this study support such a debate. Further research will have to investigate to what degrees these believes translate into ethical practices.

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