Free lunch? Cameroon’s diaspora and online news publishing

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Abstract
Using a case study of The Post newspaper in Cameroon, this article examines an alternative model through which a media organization located within the ‘have not’ side of the digital divide is publishing online. A skills inadequacy in the newsroom and a relatively weak telecommunications infrastructure in the country have prompted the newspaper’s online version to not only target a diasporic audience, but rely on the expertise and resources of this audience in the development and administration of its website. Illustrating this mode of collaboration between the diasporic audience and the newspaper and detailing its implications for news production and editorial decision-making, this article argues that this model of online news publishing, rarely evidenced in the literature, illustrates the nature and significance of transnational relationships in the diffusion and adoption of online publishing. It simultaneously reflects an alternative transnational practice through which African migrants engage with their home of origin.

Key words
Cameroon • computers • diaspora • Internet • news production • news websites
INTRODUCTION

In 2001, John Pavlik (2001) compared internet news to the equivalent of a library that carries more than 4925 daily newspapers from around the world. In the rapidly changing world of online publishing, where newspapers around the world increasingly operate web versions of their hardcopy, and more people with access to networked computers turn to the internet for news, the number of newspapers online has increased substantially. Fortunati (2005) suggests that newspapers in Italy have gone online as a means of attracting young and adult audiences who refuse to spend money on the hardcopy. A survey of US newspapers identified the need to reach more readers, generate extra revenue through advertising, and using online versions to promote the hardcopy of the paper, as the reasons for going online (Peng et al., 1999). In China, the quest to keep up with competitors, seize web space, expand influence, make instant profit, enhance circulation for the hardcopy and explore options of replacing the print product in case of readership decline are some of the reasons advanced by newspapers for going online (He and Zhu, 2002).

Pavlik (2000) suggests that new media technology is transforming news gathering and production, news content, the structure and organization of the newsroom and the relationship between news organizations and their audiences. To illustrate this, scholarship has highlighted the form of news reports online (Barnhurst, 2002; Singer, 2001), the design and use of interactive features and graphics (Li, 1998), the process of adopting multimedia and interactivity in online newsrooms (Boczkowski, 2004) and journalistic practice in digital newsrooms (Aviles and Leon, 2002). In developing strategies to accommodate new media technologies, news organizations have explored different models of publishing online. These include having some stories written specifically for the online edition of the paper, publishing breaking news online and enhancing news coverage by providing additional reporting and multimedia features online, among others.

While existing research has been useful in outlining some trends in online journalism and publishing, a significant number of these results are limited largely to western media contexts, where computer ownership and connectivity to the internet is relatively higher. Owing to the specific research questions addressed, most of these studies do not account for the dynamics of online news publishing in developing countries in general, and Africa in particular, where weak telecommunications infrastructures, inadequate financial resources and comparatively low levels of computer literacy impair access to, and use of, the internet. The considerations that influence news organizations in countries on the ‘have-not’ side of the digital divide to establish an online presence and the models of online publishing that they subsequently adopt, have not been adequately explored. By examining one model of online
publishing in Cameroon, this article contributes towards filling this gap in the literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Everett Roger’s diffusion of innovation theory offers a useful perspective to understand the process of adopting online publishing and the online news model assumed by individual newspapers. Focusing on analyses of how innovations or new ideas spread, diffusion theorists argue that the proliferation of technological innovations and their adaptation by different individuals or societies is assessed by how the ‘innovation is diffused to and adopted by the intended audience’ (Rogers, 1962: 2). Critical to the analysis of the diffusion of innovations are: ‘(1) the innovation, (2) its communication from one individual to another (3) in a social system (4) over time’ (Rogers, 1962: 12; emphasis in original). Equally important to the diffusion process are the characteristics of an innovation, its desirability within a particular sociocultural and economic context and the group relationships of potential adopters. These varyingly mediate and determine the rate of adoption or rejection of an innovation (Rogers, 1962; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). Thus, the perceived benefits of an innovation do not necessarily lead to its acceptance, diffusion and adoption. Consequently, there are bound to be disparities between an innovation and its mass adoption (Rogers, 1962) and differences in application between adopters. Indeed, the term ‘digital divide’ has been used to characterize various disparities in access to and adoption of information and communication technologies by individuals and groups in society. The digital divide is multidimensional and can occur within or between nations (Coul dry, 2004) with technocratic, social, and modernization approaches to understanding its features (Sassi, 2005). Regardless of the modernization undertones for which the diffusion of innovations theory has been criticized (Banda, 2003), in the current analysis, the theory provides a useful approach to understanding how media in a developing world context overcome various barriers in order to adopt online news publishing and reach extended audiences.

Despite a poor telecommunications infrastructure, low newspaper readership and little computer literacy, some newspapers in developing countries remain enthusiastic about and aspire to online publishing owing to the possibilities it offers. Olorunnisola (2000) proposes that African media and content providers could enhance their presence on the internet by targeting African emigrant communities in diaspora. Indeed, considering the growing size of the African diaspora, Olorunnisola’s proposal would seem reasonable.1 Between 1960 and 1989 an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 highly-skilled African professionals left the continent for Europe and the USA respectively (Gordon, 1998). The number of Africans who emigrated from the continent increased dramatically in the 1990s. In 2000, the US Census Bureau’s statistics on the country’s
foreign-born population indicated that there were close to 1 million African immigrants in the USA. More than half of these arrived between 1990 and 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2000). Although Olorunnisola acknowledges the continent’s weak communications infrastructure as inhibiting online publishing in most of Africa, his proposal fails to answer a fundamental question: how will (often underresourced) newspapers with no access to a computer linked to a modern initiate publishing online? In a country where ownership of computers is very low and few people have regular access to the internet, how does a news organization extend its publishing to cyberspace? Why and how do you move into online publishing when the print run of your hard copy ranges between 2000 and 3000, and your target audience is an urban-based literate minority?

Using a case study of The Post newspaper in Cameroon, this article examines an instance of engagement between newspapers and diasporic audiences through online news content. It will augment Olorunnisola’s argument by contending that the lack of a mass local online audience, a skills inadequacy in the newsroom, and weak telecommunications infrastructure in the country can be an impetus for newspapers not only targeting an audience in the diaspora, but relying on the expertise and resources of this audience in the establishment and administration of their online edition. In this case, the expertise of some members of the diasporic audience has proved essential to the diffusion process and the newspaper’s adoption of electronic publishing. Whereas this mode of collaboration between the Cameroonian diasporic network and the newspaper has implications for news production and the integration of online operations into the news organization’s management structure, this article argues that this particular model of online news publishing, rarely evidenced in the literature, demonstrates an alternative (if unconventional) way in which a media organization on the ‘have not’ side of the digital divide is venturing into online publishing. It simultaneously illustrates the nature and significance of transnational relationships in the adoption of online publishing and highlights an alternative transnational practice through which African emigrants engage with their homeland.2

AFRICAN DIASPORA AND HOME NEWS
The emergence of an African diaspora is the result of various movements of Africans from the continent through slavery, colonization, trade and voluntary migration. African diasporas have existed in different parts of the world before the term ‘African diaspora’ gained currency in the 1950s and 1960s (Zeleza, 2005). For Zeleza (2005) these dispersals and the complex communities and identities that they produce, shape and reshape renders the diaspora ‘a process, a condition, a space and a discourse’ and diasporic identity, a form of group consciousness constituted historically through expressive culture, politics, thought and tradition, in which experiential and representational
resources are mobilized from the imaginaries of both the old and new worlds. (Zeleza, 2005: 41)

Personal communication with relatives and friends in the homeland is a key source of information for immigrants. However, in order to meet their different information needs, diasporic communities have sometimes operated small newspapers, magazines and broadcast media (Karim, 1998; Wanning, 2005). Internet radio stations such as Radiopalmwine.com (www.radiopalmwine.com) and the UK-licensed Voice of Africa Radio (www.voiceofafricanradio.com) provide news and entertainment to African diasporic communities in the USA and UK respectively. Besides the consumption of news, ready access to personal computers and connection to the internet among migrant communities have been influential in the establishment of what Bastian (1999) and Boczkowski (1999) describe as ‘virtual national communities’. Indeed, different modes of networked communication in cyberspace have fostered the establishment and growth of virtual or online social networks within the African diaspora. This is evidenced in the growth of African nationals’ electronic discussion groups, which discuss issues relevant to their country of origin and their migration experiences, among others. Listservs and electronic discussion groups, such as Naijanet (Nigerians) Niajapolitics (Nigerians) Camnetwork (Cameroonian), AfricaPolitics (Africans in General) and various interactive websites, provide a means of engaging with fellow compatriots living in the same country or elsewhere. These electronic fora concurrently serve as a source of information, as members circulate news considered to be of interest to subscribers (e.g. news from home, immigration updates). Boczkowski (1999) suggests that such a reconfiguration of existing community life in cyberspace potentially moves beyond ethnic, class and spatial differences. However, Bastian (1999) illustrates how the discussions on fora such as Naijanet that she studied, largely mimicked existing offline inter-ethnic and intergroup tensions between Nigerians. Consequently, the internet can become a ‘place’ where networked users electronically reconstitute relationships that existed before migration (Karim, 1998). The identity that emerges from these cybercommunities is ‘a hybrid of: past alliances, the re-establishment of relations through the newsgroups, as well as the experiences of negotiating real life in the new country of settlement and interaction with other individuals/groups in that society’ (Karim, 1998: 13). In Cameroon, where historical political and social tensions between the majority French-speaking population (Francophone) and the English-speaking minority (Anglophone) have given rise to the ‘Anglophone problem’ in the country, internet listservs and electronic discussion groups have served as a catalyst for the development of an ‘Anglophone identity’ among English-speaking Cameroonian in the diaspora (Eko, 2003). Agreeing with Karim and Bastian that the development
of a community of interest of migrants in cyberspace is based on prior sociocultural relationships that existed before leaving home, this author will add that the cyberspace community is only part of developing and maintaining these relationships. It needs to be emphasized that migrants equally depend on formal structures of associational life developed offline and these are equally important to the migrant experience. Virtual online networks are only one of many ways through which diasporic communities interact with each other as part of associational life.

Olorunnisola suggests that the ‘increased connectivity to the internet and African emigrants’ ongoing use of computer-mediated platforms to sustain social networks, two seemingly unrelated developments, provide content providers in Africa with a unique opportunity to interact with a natural and global audience’ who need little external motivation (Olorunnisola, 2000: 61). Similarly, Boczkowski (1999) asserts that the constitution of national virtual communities through relocation of diasporic communities in cyberspace presents an attractive market for some developing countries, owing to the high financial and social status of these potential diasporic audiences. In suggesting that these virtual networks provide African content providers with an opportunity to tap into and cultivate a virtual target audience, Olorunnisola (2000) sets out some of the advantages of such a linkage. First, given their location, African content providers ‘can enrich emigrants’ on- and off-line discussions with news and sector specific information’ (2000: 61). Second, online debates on national issues among emigrants could provide an ‘external perspective’ which could ‘enhance the dimensions from which local issues are evaluated in and by the media’ (2000: 62). Third, a long-term advantage of the enhanced presence of African content providers in cyberspace will be to counter the existing quantitative and qualitative underreporting of Africa. As Olorunnisola goes on to propose:

In this new role, African content providers become social intermediaries between geographically dispersed communities while enabling the itinerant members a vital opportunity to continually function as citizens. Through this creative avenue also, the media can reduce the digital divide by becoming digital bridges in a macroscopic network of social networks. (Olorunnisola, 2000: 62)

Notwithstanding the plausibility of Olorunnisola’s arguments, the existing telecommunications infrastructure and computer illiteracy in many parts of the continent speak to a different reality. Only 2 percent of the world’s fixed telephone lines are located in Africa, even though the continent is home to about 14 percent of the world’s population (International Telecommunications Union (ITU); Robins and Hilliard, 2002; 2007). Recent statistics from the indicate that of an estimated 1.1 billion internet users in the world in 2006, only 44 million (3.8%) were located in Africa with most users accessing the internet through cybercafes. Less than 0.4% (1 million) of the world’s 281 million
broadband subscribers are located in Africa (ITU, 2007). The bulk of these
subscribers are located in urban centres in North Africa and South Africa.3
These low levels of internet connectivity on the continent significantly
influence the form, content and scope of newspaper websites as well as the
local audience’s use of the internet to access news. Radio remains the most
accessible (and often the most affordable) to many in Africa, who remain
dependent on this medium for news and information.

The Post’s decision to go online is informed by a similar perspective to that
proposed by Olorunnisola. This article will consider the following aspects of
this engagement between a newspaper on the African continent and its
diasporic audience which remain unexplored: the sponsorship of a
newspaper’s website by members of the Cameroonian diaspora as a means of
facilitating its publication online, and the impact of this form of engagement
on the news production process, content and the organization of the
newsroom. These are examined by investigating the paper’s motivation for
going online, the location of its online operation within the overall
newsroom structure, and the generation of revenue through the website.

METHOD
The research entailed face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the editor
and the website coordinator, and two weeks’ observation at the paper’s head
office in Buea in January 2005. Both individuals interviewed are responsible
for the web edition of the paper. However, owing to the organization of The
Post’s online operation, the paper’s website owner was interviewed by email
correspondence. In addition, the paper’s website was monitored from October
2004 on an average of four days a week. This entailed visiting the site and
checking for frequency of updates in content, modifications in design and
additional navigation features. The objective was to be able to relate the
newspaper’s conceptualization, development and integration of its online
news operations (gathered from the ethnography) to the nature and
development of the online product (www.postnewsline.com).

Background to the media in Cameroon
Cameroon is a country composed of more than 250 ethnic groups, with a
 corresponding number of languages and dialects. However, owing to it being
colonized by France and Britain respectively, French and English are the
country’s two official languages. These are the languages used equally in the
educational system and by the country’s media. Eight out of the country’s 10
provinces are French-speaking. English is the dominant language in the
North–West and South–West provinces respectively.

The country’s broadcast media sector, composed of both private and state-
owned media, is dominated by the state-owned Cameroon Radio and Television
Corporation (CRTV) with its national TV and radio station based in the
capital, Yaoundé. In addition to the national station, CRTV’s network includes regional radio stations in each provincial capital and five FM commercial radio stations in Yaoundé, Douala, Buea, Ebolowa and Bafoussam respectively. Provincial stations opt into national radio at various times. A 2006 report noted that about 80 private FM radio stations went operational in the country between 2000 and 2005 (Alobwede, 2006). The majority of these are located in select urban centres (usually provincial capitals). In addition, the broadcasts of the BBC and Radio France International (RFI) are available on FM transmission nationwide. The transmission signals of most Cameroonian private television stations cover limited geographic regions (provincial capitals and other urban centres). Government control of the state broadcasting media has ensured that its radio and television networks – so far the only audiovisual organization whose signals have a national reach – serve as a public relations arm of the regime while denying opposition parties equal access (Nyamnjoh, 2005a).

As part of the democratization process of the early 1990s, new laws pertaining to the freedom of the press were enacted in 1990 and 1996 respectively. The Law on Freedom of Mass Communication 1990 resulted in a newspaper publishing boom in the country (Fombad, 2003), particularly between 1991 and 1992 when numerous private newspapers were launched. By 1998, 400 newspapers were registered as being in circulation (US Department of State, 1999, cited in Fombad, 2003). The majority of these publications appeared sporadically and few survived longer than a couple of months or a particular event. Besides, a selective application of laws ensured that government authorities continued to stifle the private media by intimidating journalists, seizing and suspending publications or shutting down radio stations perceived to be critical of the government (Nyamnjoh, 2005a). By 1997, only an estimated 50 newspapers were in circulation (Commonwealth Observer Group, 1997). A recent report for the BBC World Service Trust’s African Media Development Initiative indicated that an estimated 500 newspapers have been registered in the country between 2000 and 2005 (Alobwede, 2006). Less than one-third of these publish regularly. Among the private newspapers, most are weeklies, bi-weeklies or tri-weeklies with estimated print runs of between 5000 and 10,000. The government-owned bilingual daily, Cameroon Tribune, has an estimated print run of 17,000.

The Cameroonian media are predominantly urban-based, urban-centred and targeted at a minority literate readership. Low literacy levels among the population and the myriad number of indigenous languages in the country pose problems for the print media, given that these publish only in the official languages. The English-language press in the country faces particular challenges owing to it being limited to a linguistic minority. No English-language daily currently exists in the country. However, the French-language press is a relatively vibrant and more competitive market, with three private dailies. Among the
literate population, the inability to buy newspapers regularly has impeded the
development of a reading culture. Newspaper circulation figures reflect this
situation. The relatively cheap cost of radio sets, combined with the ability of
radio transmission to surpass barriers of distance and literacy, means that radio
remains the main source of information for an overwhelming majority of
Cameroonian. In addition, economic factors such as the devaluation of the
Cameroon franc in 1994, high production costs, low advertising revenue and poor
transport infrastructure that impairs the distribution of newspapers, have left many
media organizations in financial crisis, with reporters earning very low wages.

The available statistics estimate that in 1999, out of a population of 14.31
million, only 94,000 Cameroonian had access to fixed-line telephony, with
2500 dial-up internet subscribers (United Nations Economic Commission for
Africa, 2000). By 2004, fixed lines accounted for 0.7 percent of teledensity in
the country, compared with 4 percent for mobile telephones (Nzepa, 2004).
Mobile phone subscription has increased while subscription to landlines has
stalled with waiting lists of over 1 million, which take an average of two years
to clear (Nzepa, 2004). With an overwhelming majority of the population still
without access to landlines, the ability of newspaper websites to serve as a
mass medium remains a challenge both to the media and the audience.
However, these structural and social challenges have not precluded
Cameroonian newspapers from going online. In addition, with the internet
being a relatively new medium in the country, there are currently no specific
laws regulating online publishing in Cameroon. Besides the Post, English
language newspapers such as Eden Newspaper, The Sun, The Entrepreneur, The
Frontier Telegraph, and L’Effort Camerounais have subsequently established news
websites. The majority of these were launched between 2006 and 2007.

The Post

The Post is a private, bi-weekly English-language newspaper with head offices
in Buea, the provincial capital of the South-West province and offices in
Bamenda and Yaoundé. The paper has a staff of 20, with 18 stringers around
the country. Within the staff, three are women. It has a print run of 4000,
which occasionally sells out depending on the content. Similarly, depending
on the lead story, its print run occasionally exceeds 4000.

The newspaper’s foray into online publishing in early 2004 was short-lived.
The site www.thepostnewspaper.org, hosted by an internet service provider in
Paris, was designed and edited by Clovis Atatah, a staff reporter at The Post based
in Yaoundé. Stories to be posted on the site were sent to him via email and he
then uploaded these. The website had several design flaws, such as inconsistent
colour and navigational schemes, the use of large graphic files that took long to
load, a lack of consistency between pages and a poor mixture of graphics and
text. These design flaws, as well as the difficulty of coordinating between the
newspaper’s head office and the web editor in Yaoundé, meant that the site was updated irregularly. Before the current site was launched, the old one had not been updated for more than three months. The site subsequently closed down and in August 2004 www.postnewsline.com was launched (see Figure 1).

Described as an ‘interactive feature of The Post newspaper’, the current website uses TypePad – a technically unsophisticated weblog software that facilitates interactivity between the site and its users. Like most weblogs, a comments section accompanies each story.

**Motivation for going online**

*The Post*’s decision to go online came from a combination of pressure from Cameroonians in diaspora and an acknowledgement that having an online presence was increasingly becoming the trend in newspaper publishing around the world.

All along we knew about the necessity of going online. But somehow we were criminally reluctant. We were dragging our feet. We got accosted by Cameroonians, especially those of them in the diaspora. They were asking: ‘Every now and again, we get to pick up one copy of *The Post*. Why don’t you go online so that we can, through you, know about what is happening back home?’ We tried a few times and failed. First, I think the resources were not there since we were still grappling with the characteristic poverty of the Cameroonian press … But

![Figure 1](http://nms.sagepub.com)
somewhere along the line some Samaritans came to the rescue and set up this website for us. I think before they did it, we set up one which failed. Somewhere along the lines these guys came and we had free lunch, more or less. (Editor-in-Chief, personal interview, 15 January 2005)

The reluctance to go online and the lack of relevant skills within the newspaper led to The Post adopting an online publishing model that entails its online operation being owned and managed by two Cameroonians in the diaspora. Chicago-based Dibussi Tande serves as the website administrator, while the site’s designer, Emil Mondoa, is based in Delaware. Both individuals are not employed by the paper but initiated the project out of enthusiasm about journalism in general, admiration for the newspaper in particular, and nostalgia for home news while away from home. Between 1990 and 1993, Dibussi Tande worked under The Post’s current executive editor and owner (Francis Wache) as a journalist and subsequently became editor of Camlife and Cameroon Today – both owned by Francis Wache. Emil Mondoa is a medical doctor with no prior relationship with the paper. Both individuals conceived the idea of designing a site for the paper while in the process of developing a multimedia content company to publicize the works of Cameroon artists:

We realized that we could use weblog technology to quickly create websites that could easily be updated, even by people with absolutely no knowledge of web design. We therefore decided that the first phase of the project would be the creation of professionally designed weblogs for selected members of our target audience. Since we happen to be news junkies and were thoroughly disappointed with the initial Post website, our first target was The Post. (Site owner/administrator, 12 May 2005)

Both individuals subsequently approached the owner of The Post with the proposal of designing a website for the paper using weblog software. The simplicity of the software meant that anyone with basic computer literacy skills could use it. That way, staff at the paper would be able to load content on the site easily. They describe their relationship with The Post as ‘pro bono web interface editors’ for the paper. Their multimedia company, Jimbi Media, currently designs and hosts sites for several African and Cameroonians authors, academics, artists and various civil society organizations. In providing professionally designed weblogs, where the writings and opinions of individuals and organizations are given greater visibility online and interaction with audiences is enhanced, Jimbi Media functions as a platform for the proliferation of diverse local content online.

The need for news from the homeland is a trend among diasporic communities which has been noted in the literature (Bastian, 1999; Christiansen, 2004; Karim, 1998). Indeed, a visitor locator map introduced on postnewsline.com in January 2006 to track and cluster its users’ geographic
location based on internet service provider (ISP) addresses, points to a significantly large amount of traffic from North America, Europe and Asia. However, as the above quote illustrates, the quest for news from home can be the impetus for a new dimension to the relationship between migrant communities and the homeland. This sponsorship of *The Post’s* website by a diasporic audience is a means of ensuring the continuous supply of home news to this audience. However, it can be viewed simultaneously as a strategy to appropriate the expertise and resources of the Cameroonian diaspora to the homeland, particularly in the face of weak telecommunications infrastructure and a lack of skills in website development and management in the country. Based on their location in western countries, most Africans in the diaspora have more access to personal computers connected to the internet (Olorunnisola, 2000). Establishing and sponsoring a website on behalf of a newspaper in their country of origin is one way of capitalizing on such access. The diffusion process observed here sees the diasporic-based sponsors as the change agents partly responsible for shaping the manner of adoption of online publishing by serving as facilitators. It demonstrates the centrality of relationships within the social system in the adoption of an innovation. The result is a relationship of mutual dependency where the newspaper benefits from the expertise of its audience to maintain an online presence, while the ready availability of news online ensures that the diasporic audience has frequent access to news from home.

Having identified the reason for going online and the approach adopted so far, the next section describes how the website is structured and managed. Specifically, it examines the interconnections between the website and the print edition, and how this atypical model of establishing an online presence is transforming work practices and decision-making within the newspaper.

**Organization**

The website functions through a coordination between the newspaper’s website coordinator in Cameroon and the website owner in the USA. Deadlines for uploading stories are flexible: the evening that the paper goes to press, or on the morning that the paper is available on newsstands. Once news stories are loaded on the site by the website coordinator, they are ready for public consumption. However, in spite of the six to seven-hour time differences between Cameroon and the USA, the site’s Chicago-based owner accesses the site almost daily to ‘perform routine administrative, technical and other tasks’ (site owner, personal communication, 12 May 2005). These tasks include rearranging pictures, checking layouts on stories and updating the site with other relevant stories culled from the internet.
Multitasking

The Post's head office is equipped with four computers: one in the newsroom, two in the production room and one in the managing editor’s office. These computers are not connected to the internet. However, the newspaper shares its offices with a cybercafe and this enables staff to access the internet frequently. One reporter, who serves as website coordinator, is responsible for uploading stories to the website. She describes her role as follows:

Actually, what happened is when Clovis started the former website, I had to work with him, so he told me how to build up a website. He just gave me some basic training on that. And when it failed, Mr Dibussi came up with this. He just used to tell me how to place stories on the site. And then sometimes when I have difficulties, he gives me directions. (Coordinator, personal interview, 13 January 2005)

The website coordinator is the bridge between the print and online version of the paper. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of her time is spent on reporting duties for the paper. Whereas the basic training obtained by the website coordinator under the tutorship of the reporter who designed the previous website has been capitalized on by the US-based site owner, it is not evident that the existing arrangement facilitates capacity-building. At the time of this research, neither the website coordinator nor any other member of staff had undergone further training in the design and management of websites.

Editorial decisions

The print edition of the paper remains the focus of editorial decisions. Stories assigned to reporters during bi-weekly afternoon editorial conferences are specifically for the hardcopy. Shortly before the printing and distribution of the print edition, or immediately after production, the desk editor or the editor-in-chief decide what stories go on the website. The website coordinator, who uploads stories, checks the site regularly for comments from readers with a view to including these in the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of the hardcopy. Her say in editorial decisions is limited:

When it comes to decision-making, my opinion is just about 20 percent. It is mostly the top people and Mr Dibussi who discuss on that. Sometimes we get to discover new things and on inquiry you learn it had been discussed with the managing editor. (Website coordinator, 13 January 2005)

However, in the absence of both the desk editor and the editor-in-chief, the website coordinator can decide which stories to upload on the site. Given his frequent access to the website, particularly to perform ‘routine administrative,
technical and other tasks’, the website owner describes his role in the decision-making process as follows:

The stories are straight from the print edition. There is however one area where we influence content; that is with breaking news items. Being print media guys who are working for a bi–weekly paper, The Post team is having a hard time grasping the concept of real time news. Thus, even when a major event (e.g., cabinet reshuffle) happens a day or two before the print issue comes out, they sit on that story until after the print issue hits the street, before updating the site. In such situations, therefore, Dr. Mondo or I usually update the site with the breaking news in real time. A recent example is the pictorial montage of the violence that erupted when the police prevented UB [University of Buea] students from accompanying Gilbert’s corpse to Mile 17. The Post’s photographer had sent me some pictures a couple of hours after the event but this was some 48 hours before the print issue was supposed to come out. However, no one in Buea thought that it was imperative to beat daily news organs like Mutations with regards to this story. So I unilaterally decided to go ahead and post it on the site. Did I actually influence content? Not really because the picture captions were based on the report from The Post’s photographer. That said, I should point out that The Post online edition has become a force to reckon with because of these breaking news stories.

(Site owner, personal communication, 12 May 2005)

The difference between the site owner’s perception of his role, and the use of that position to make certain decisions about news in particular contexts, points to some of the flaws in The Post’s current approach to online publishing. Within the newsroom’s structure, the desk editor and the editor-in-chief respectively decide on what stories go on the paper’s website. Yet, the interest of the site owner (and by extension many English-speaking Cameroonian in the diaspora who frequent the site) in ‘real time’ and ‘breaking news’, as well as the need to ensure that the paper remains a ‘force to be reckoned with’, are apparently not sufficiently prioritized by the newspaper itself. Hence the site owner’s decision to act ‘unilaterally’, in order to ensure that the website provides scoops. As the above quote illustrates, the imperative to supply and update breaking news means the website potentially scoops the bi–weekly print edition. However, with a target online audience of Cameroonian in the diaspora and a bi–weekly hardcopy, the newspaper is not concerned about the web edition scooping the hardcopy. Similar practices exist in newsrooms of some weekly newspapers. The respective online editions of the Mail & Guardian and the Sunday Times (both weeklies) in South Africa provide daily news coverage.

The unclear boundaries between the site owner (as administrator) and the editor (as provider of news content) with regards to editorial decision–making became evident in January 2005, when one of the site’s owners uploaded a story on the website which had not been written by any staff at The Post. The ‘special report’ on corruption at the Douala seaport contained two stories:
one with no byline and another with the author’s name withheld. Both reports had not been commissioned by anyone from the newspaper and were uploaded to www.postnewslinel.com without the editor’s prior knowledge: ‘I just saw it there and I know it was not written by any of our reporters’ (website coordinator, personal interview, 14 January 2005). The site owners’ interest in keeping the site vibrant resulted in their taking what was clearly an editorial decision, and doing so without the knowledge of the paper – an action which they justified as follows:

In December/January, 2004/5, the entire Post staff took its end-of-year vacation and the site was not updated from Cameroon for about five weeks. While it was not obvious to the team back in Cameroon, we realized that such long silence had the potential of creating a disgruntled readership in the long run. So we did what we could during that period to post relevant Cameroon stories from news agencies such as AFP and Reuters, including a special report on corruption at the Douala Port which originated on CAMNET [SIC]. (Site owner/administrator, personal communication, 12 May 2005).

The editor-in–chief, who at the time of this research had yet to visit the paper’s website, admits that the absence of an agreement clearly articulating and appropriating specific roles between the hardcopy of the paper and Jimbi Media was a flaw in the current arrangement between The Post and Jimbi Media:

That is because of carelessness on our part because if I personally get to see that, I will react … I do think that if I were a bit more conscientious than I am now, then I would be a regular visitor to that site and watch out for such blemishes. (Charlie Ndi Chia, Editor-in-Chief, personal interview, 15 January 2005)

Despite the concerns about this particular incident expressed by the web coordinator and the editor respectively, at the time of writing this article, the special report was still available on the website.

**Gatekeeping and the use of online feedback**

Targeting the Cameroonian diasporic audience has equally transformed the news production process at the level of gatekeeping. Stories to be loaded on the paper’s website are selected specifically for their quality (what the editor described as ‘strong, relevant and the best’) and presumed appeal to the site’s target audience and users – Cameroonians abroad. The implicit assumption here is that the online audience deserves a better and cleaner product than the readers of the hardcopy, who are resident in Cameroon and buy the paper. This introduces another level of gatekeeping in the news production process:

Even in selecting the best, we consider taste, the human interest, economics, politics and so on. And I think it has worked because most of the stories we have posted online have elicited so much feedback. The reactions have been
wonderful and in that way, there has been some real participation, interaction between our audience and us, which is the modern trend in journalism now. (Editor-in-chief, personal interview, 12 January 2005)

Given the site’s description as an ‘interactive feature of The Post newspaper’, reader participation through comments and other feedback on news reports online is valued by the newspaper. Comments from readers of www.postnewsline.com are published frequently in the hardcopy, even though letters sent to the hardcopy are not featured on the site. Nevertheless, a flaw in the feedback mechanism is the use of anonymity by most participants and the inability to monitor comments before they appear on the site (i.e. in a similar way to which ‘Letters to the Editor’ are edited before appearing in the hardcopy of the newspaper). This was evident in April and May 2005 during the student strikes at the University of Buea, when riot police fatally shot two unarmed students – a story of major national significance and consequence. Being located in Buea, The Post covered the strikes extensively – coverage which elicited an unusually high amount of feedback from its online readers. The US-based administrators suspended the site’s comments feature temporarily after the volume of comments and the increasing resort to personal attacks and insults by some readers overwhelmed it. The feature was restored in late May 2005 with additional security measures requiring readers to register through an online authentication service before posting comments on the site. The requirement to register before posting comments has however, not deterred the creation and use of ghost identities by users when commenting on news stories.

Revenue generation
To help generate revenue for the site, advertising was introduced in October 2004 by the site owners. The advertisements dominantly target the North American–based readership. Products advertised on the site range from telephone cards and mobile phones to diet pills, online shops and American service companies. In addition, readers are encouraged to make voluntary contributions to sustain the site. However, according to the site owner, the revenue generated from both advertising and voluntary donation to postnewsline.com is not sufficient to sustain the site. The newspaper’s own attempt to generate income through advertising on the website so far has been unsuccessful, owing to inadequate expertise in advertising sales and the absence of credit services in the country. Given the target audience of the online edition, the paper’s editor-in-chief concludes that:

The volume of advertisement on that site is very likely for a long time to be dependent on the diaspora, i.e. foreign advertisers. Cameroonian advertisers? I do not know how many people in this country go on that website. (Editor-in-chief, personal interview, 12 January 2005)
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a small, underresourced but influential paper, a lack of personnel skilled in the use of new media technologies and the generally weak telecommunication infrastructure in the country hampered the paper’s adoption of online news publishing. The decision to target its online version to an elite audience of Cameroonians in the diaspora who have ready access to the internet and are keen to consume news from the homeland, heeds to Olorunisola’s (2000) suggestions discussed earlier. However, the model adopted by the paper is one where members of the diasporic community go beyond being beneficiaries of such ‘exclusive focus’ to becoming virtual landlords for content providers based on the continent. In opting for this route, an alternative model of publishing online becomes evident. In relation to the home, the Cameroonian diaspora in general, and the link between Jimbi Media and The Post in particular, have been influential in the diffusion and adoption of online news publishing at the newspaper. It is a reflexive adoption of technology which, while acknowledging the benefits of news publishing online, differs from the prevalent (mainstream) ways in which newspaper publishing online has been executed.

This model of online publishing equally illustrates how the skills of the Cameroonian diasporic community and its access to new media technologies are being appropriated towards the homeland, particularly in the face of poor telecommunications infrastructure and inadequate skills in website development. As consumers and owners, the US-based sponsors of postnewsline.com can be characterized as attempting to bridge the digital divide. Indeed, the constitution of the Digital Diaspora Network for Africa (DDN-A) as a platform to draw on and mobilize the African diaspora’s technological, entrepreneurial and professional expertise and resources in bridging the digital divide (Badshah and Thumler, 2003), epitomizes recognition of this form of engagement between the African diasporic community and the homeland.

The ready availability of news from home through www.postnewsline.com further augments the linkage between the diasporic network of Cameroonians and Cameroon. For The Post, the geographic disparity of its target audience has been significant to developing its online version and subsequently influencing the production of its online content. It is a relationship of mutual dependency that allows Anglophone Cameroonian emigrants frequent access to news from home while enabling a home-based newspaper to publish regularly online. This synthesis is one possibility of how newspapers in Africa can move into online publishing in the absence of adequate telecommunications and computer infrastructure as well as resources. Postwatch Magazine, a privately-owned publication and L’Effort Camerounais, a Catholic-owned weekly, have subsequently partnered with Jimbi Media to establish online editions of their respective publications.
The evidence so far demonstrates that the partnership between the print side of the newspaper (as content provider) and the website (externally owned and administered) lacks a clear articulation of roles and responsibilities. This has resulted in less control over the online product, with the website owner sometimes using his technical expertise and ready access to the site to make editorial decisions. This poses challenges to the paper’s editorial decision-making, the integration of the website into the organization’s structure, and the management of its online product. The additional level of gatekeeping introduced in selecting stories for the online version of the paper illustrates the manner in which the decision to go online and the online target audience respectively are transforming the news production processes.

The developments outlined here contrast sharply with the experience of online newspapers that is available in the literature so far. Whilst these findings should not be generalized to other countries with similar infrastructure problems or to other newspapers within the country, the findings however, speak to the need for more work examining the organizational aspects of online news publishing in developing countries, in order to see if these trends are replicated. A comparative examination of other online publications in the country will be a good place to start.

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Notes
1 ‘African diaspora’ is used in this article to refer specifically to the African migrants of the late 19th century, variously referred to as the ‘new African diaspora’ (Agbo, 2003; Gordon, 1998) and the ‘contemporary diasporas’ (Zeleza, 2005), constituted as a result of colonization, decolonization, refugee movements and the destabilizations resulting from structural adjustment policies on the continent (Zeleza, 2005).
2 Other transnational practices include sending remittances to the homeland, sending children to schools in the homeland, marrying spouses from the homeland and visiting the home of origin during holidays (see Christiansen, 2004; Nyamnjoh, 1996, 2005b; Tettey, 2002).
3 Even in South Africa, access to ICTs is limited to a minority of the population (predominantly white and middle class).
4 This is the case for privately-owned newspapers such as The Herald, Dikalo, Le Messager, Quotidien Mutations and Nouvelle Expression.
5 In the absence of connection to the internet or in the event of power outage, this is delayed until electricity and/or internet connectivity is available.
6 One hour of internet access cost an average Fr500 (about US$1). The Post staff pay for access to the internet individually.
7 Significant news events and developments sometimes prompt the paper to publish stories online before its print edition: for example, the April and May 2005 strike by students at the University of Buea, the death of a prominent Anglophone politician.
and human rights activist, Albert Mukong (August 2004), the collapse of the Mungo Bridge (August 2004) and the Cabinet reshuffle (December 2004).

8 *Mutations* is a French daily publication.

9 Cameroon: work is a Yahoo! electronic group of more than 900 (mostly Anglophone) Cameroonians located in North America and Europe.

References


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