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Arithmetic of the sound of silence: Adding, subtracting and taking back women's voices in media spaces

ABSTRACT

The web 2.0 has revolutionised the way in which we communicate with the effect that marginalised groups, including women, can represent themselves – instead of being represented from another's perspective. However, this article argues that the blur of mainstream media and web 2.0 allows men to assume a superior status to women – especially in the global South. The thesis of this article proffers a fresh insight that goes beyond the descriptions of how the web creates contraflows of information for Southern women. At the heart of the debate is the impact garnered – or rather lack of it – when user-generated content from the web 2.0 is used to counterbalance issues from a mainstream point of reference. Using two independent Ugandan media houses as case studies, the article explains data collected through participant observation and unstructured interviews. The article finds that while Southern women have managed to use online spaces (periphery) to acknowledge their sisterhood, an awareness of intersectionality in the mainstream (centre) is conspicuously absent. It draws on the feminist communication theory as informed by feminism and finds that men continue to be privileged when online (periphery) and offline (centre) communities are blurred. To address this, women will have to robustly participate in the news construction process at the "centre."

INTRODUCTION

Spatial analysis can be considered a viable means to investigate the erasure of the voice of many women. This is due to the simple fact that discursive spaces allow people to articulate vantage points of their own. Space in this case is considered to be a medium through which people express themselves. It also enforces negotiation of relations between contrasting social entities and genders. Gendered spaces in African societies have gained traction over time because of the existence of cultural verities that diminish women. Southern women have found themselves unable to compete in a masculine space where views are perpetuated by a patriarchal legacy. Patriarchy has relegated women to an idealised domestic life, but they seem to have found a panacea in online spaces.

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The web 2.0 has been idealised and thought to provide a space where women contest their erasure and subordination from an embodied realm. The "spaces" the web 2.0 invents are not fitted into fixed dichotomous structures. They avoid creating "otherness" by eschewing binaries of presence/absence, speech/silence and male/female. The interactive platforms of the web allow women to go beyond marginalised figures and articulate themselves in a manner that does not hold them to an assumption of female inferiority. The web 2.0 basically offers new forms of possibilities in the form of text and voice that ultimately liberate women. This contraflow of information is supposed to go against patriarchal structures that control women's lives. It provides rhetorical and performative spaces that women use to foster a sense of belonging in a "male world".

Writings on online spaces such as De Bruijn et al. (2009) have tended to tackle an array of motifs in feminism, such as voice, victimhood, agency, sisterhood and subjectivity. The texts on the platform usually offer a subtle if thought-provoking analysis of gender and women's oppression. While in this gendered space, Southern women have started contesting the strictly defined roles which society has assigned them. This has often questioned the privileging of men in African societies.

This article attempts to explicate the relationship between dichotomised notions. In acknowledging that the web 2.0 to a certain extent gives a voice to Southern women, it investigates whether the interactive platform has a transformational effect on mainstream media. The paper particularly interests itself in user-generated content from Southern women and the place it takes up in mainstream media. Two independent Ugandan media houses are used as case studies. They include: Nation Television, hereafter known as NTV Uganda, a Ugandan commercial TV network headquartered in Kampala whose transmission signal has been operational since 2007; and Radio One, a commercial radio network in Uganda founded in 1997 with a target audience of urban and peri-urban English-speaking adults.

Uganda is on the cusp of embracing what Hermida (2010a, 2010b) has loosely described as participatory news. This is largely due to a robust uptake of a digital media culture that has made the news process at once participatory and self-expressive. Participatory journalism has manifested itself in the publication of content created by users. The constraints of traditional media are nevertheless traceable in media logic, agenda setting, and gatekeeping that reward prosumers that follow the lead of mainstream editors. The editors at NTV Uganda, for instance, suggest topics and cherry-pick only comments deemed to be pertinent to the subject matter at hand. An anchor reads the comments during the primetime bulletin (this was revealed by the television station's news manager in an interview).

But whilst traditional media still provide the main national agenda, there is a growing body of evidence that points to that agenda being supplemented – even challenged – by content from social media. Allan (2006) has suggested as much. From the grainy mobile phone video of the July 2005 London terrorist attack to the 2009 Twitter photo of the airplane in the Hudson River, and not forgetting the 2011 Arab Spring, social journalism has produced unparalleled iconic images this side of the twenty-first century.

The mainstream's jurisdictional claim to news or what Walter Lippmann (1922:29) once described as a "principal connection between events in the world and images in the minds of the public" has been disrupted. This though has been less of a full-blown disruption and more of so-called ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010a, 2010b) where both journalists and audiences construct news. The explosion of participation in the news process in Uganda showed itself true when TV stations used phone footage shot by a citizen reporter minutes after a legislator had been gunned down in 2018 (footage of the assassinated legislator was uploaded to Facebook).

There are many other such media products that bring to life the notion of a participatory media culture that questions the agenda-setting role of traditional media. The formation of pictures of civic life through social networks has consequently made digital spaces an integral part of the newsgathering routine. Indeed, as Callahan (2003) notes, journalists research story ideas and find sources online. Uganda is no exception. Hashtags have particularly positioned themselves in the East African nation as news sensors, providing rapid diffusion of short bursts of real-time content in breaking news scenarios.

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) estimates in its Q3 2017 that Internet users in the East African nation are 18 million or thereabouts. The communications industry watchdog bases the guesstimate on Internet usage figures it collates from telcos and internet service providers (ISPs). Unfortunately, this data is not fragmented into constituencies such as gender, usage and income group to mention but three. The UCC, however, puts the mobile Internet penetration rate in Uganda at 77% (report for quarter ending September 2017). Elsewhere, different reports (such as Internet Stats, Jumia Uganda and Hootsuite Digital East Africa) are unanimous in putting the number of social media users in Uganda at 2.6 million.

Social media statistics compiled by the independent Dublin-based web analytics firm GlobalStats Statcounter from February 2017 to February 2018 (during which period the research that informed this study was conducted) have Facebook leading the way in the social networking landscape with 81.45% of the market. Twitter comes in second at 4.77% with about 124,000 users. Live stats from Facebook Partner meantime put the gender ratio on Facebook at 67% male against 33% female (the statistics were generated after choosing Uganda as a focal point for an advertisement via Facebook Ads.

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics' 2017 Statistical Abstract makes it abundantly clear that a little over 75% of Uganda's 37 million-strong population is rural-based. It should also be noted that the quality of Internet in rural areas leaves a lot to be desired. So, ideally, Uganda's urban population of 7.4 million occupies a disproportionate part of the 2.6 million social media users, with men topping the pile. The male urbanites that populate the online environment are widely believed not to work out the thematic aspects of their conversations according to the conventional archetypes of patriarchy. Daniel Kalinaki, Managing Editor for Regional Content at the Nation Media Group, noted as much during the 2016 Uganda Social Media conference, as per the news report of the website www.africanfeminisim.com (African Feminism, 2016), but added that "online activism must be preceded with offline engagement" if those offline [and some online] males raised to link manhood to power and money are to be demystified.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is to establish whether the web 2.0 allows Southern women to become mass communicators via a periphery-centre abstract idea.

1. FLIGHT FROM CONSUMER TO "PROSUMER"

User-generated content has been widely lauded for democratising content production. It has been said to achieve this by circumventing so-called gatekeepers and filters in the news production process. Castells (2004) readily identifies the Internet's latent qualities that enable it bypass the control of the traditional media. With people able to publish their own content as well as comment on other people's, Deuze suggests that such participatory users be referred to as "prosumers" rather than consumers (2003:212). This audience-generated feedback and news coverage has predisposed the mainstream media to do less gatekeeping and more of what Bruns (2003) calls gatewatching.

Gatewatchers steer their readers to gates that are most likely to open into useful resources (Bruns, 2003). So rather than having a rigid dichotomy between the old and new, it is not unusual to have mainstream media and the web 2.0 dovetailed. Herbert and Thurman addressed the subject of "a complementary relationship" with, for one, the printed newspaper being "more portable, tactile and flexible" as "the website offers searchability, immediacy and "permanence" of older content" (2007: 214).

Elsewhere, Chan and Leung (2005) hold that online news does not offer an alternative as much as it supplements. By this they mean that it is supposed to work in tandem with mainstream media. The problematics of this complementary relationship cannot, however, be airbrushed when it comes to empowering women. On the one hand you have women using online spaces to contest the erasure of their voices; on the other you have mainstream media that show the reside of maleness as the "unmarked" standard and the "otherness" of women. The two contrasting positions are bound to clash, with one putting a gag on the other. This intersectionality creates overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and at times disadvantage.

Mainstream media have earned reputations as masculine spaces whose newsworks defeminise and desex women. This is not just a Southern problem. Bulkeley (2004) notes that women hold about 40% of US network news jobs. A 2017/18 UNESCO report titled "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development" also points out in no uncertain terms that women were responsible for 37.7% of news reports at 20 of the USA's top news outlets in 2017. The figure stood at 37.3% in 2016. The report further adds that women's views and voices are barely captured in stories carried out in North America (32%), Caribbean (29%), Latin America (27%) and the southern African region (20%).

The underrepresentation of women both as reporters and news subjects has a knock-on effect on the contraflow that proffers a "periphery–centre" idea. This paper holds that for content to flow from the periphery (online spaces) to the centre (mainstream), gender equality in decision-making positions on boards and in the newsroom as well will have to show a robustness that continues to

elude it. The European Institute for Gender Equality's 2017 report put the overall ratio in Europe at 69.3 to 30.7% in favour of men. In South Africa, Steyn and De Beer (2004) have noted that newsrooms dotting the country remain white and male. At NTV Uganda, there was a ratio of seven to two in favour of male producers during the time of this study.

For a balancing act or leveller to be realised where there is a blurring of the online and offline, it is vitally important that women have the numbers on boards and in newsrooms to enforce the inter-exchange. This article intends to show that the "negotiation" for some space by Southern women's online voices in mainstream media rarely turns up evidence of success.

Southern women have surprisingly predisposed themselves to the new technology. De Bruijn et al. (2009), for instance, note that women have showed an enthusiastic uptake for mobile phones so much so that they practically harness them as "vehicles for identity and identification" (2009:14). The mobile phone is especially seen as a change agent in the South because it provides a gateway to the web 2.0. A 2017 report by Qwerty Digital, for instance, spells out that close to 75% of all website traffic in South Africa comes from mobile gadgets.

This is not to say that the experience is without impediments. Social dynamics, financial bottlenecks and poor connectivity deny many a Southern woman access to the web 2.0 via mobile telephony. Those that don't have to grapple with the aforesaid problems at times are none the better off. Archambault (2011) for one has observed that the mobile phone arouses feelings of disconnection for female youth in Mozambique.

This paper interests itself in a different type of "disablement", though. While the web 2.0 affirms an ontological status for women that is not provided for in the patriarchal orders of their societies, the online space doesn't enjoy a symbiotic relationship with mainstream media, and certainly not as far as the supplementary role that Chan and Leung (2005) envision is concerned.

Journalism on the web keeps gaining traction with each passing day. Such has been the impact of the web on journalistic practices that we have witnessed what Allan describes as a movement away from "the passive mono-directional dissemination patterns of old media (2006:2). Micro-blogging technologies have also moved the tectonic plates by allowing users to share exciting news with other like-minded people.

Although the web 2.0 contributes to a heightened sense of interactivity and transparency, its transformational effects are more idealistic than realistic. The frenetic flood of hope that met with its arrival questioned the web 2.0's potential to give a voice to the voiceless. It should be noted that the web 2.0 is the byproduct of the second stage of the rise of the Internet. The first stage led to the "burst of the dot-com bubble" in 2001 (Lister et al., 2003:211). The second stage is symbolised by the web 2.0 whose calling cards – mass participation, convergence and enhanced usability – have ushered in phenomena like social networking.

It is this aforementioned networking that ultimately gives a voice to the voiceless. Allan (2006), for instance, references the South Asian tsunami of December 2004 when locally-based "citizen journalists" stepped in to fill a void unwittingly created by the mainstream media's deficiencies. Allan notes that while the "helicopter journalism" of the mainstream media was detached and distant, the "bottom-up" approach of citizen journalists struck a chord (Allen, 2006).

The web has for all intents and purposes become what Deuze refers to as a "communications infrastructure" that allows one to "connect with other people, worldwide, unhindered, in real time" (2003:211). It continues to provide what Robinson calls "a rich sensory interface between users and their machines, allowing the user to control the pace and sequence of information" (2005:363). As noted, Deuze suggests that such users should in fact be referred to as "prosumers" rather than consumers (2003:212).

Prosumers are neither passive nor individualised. They fuse the roles of producer and consumer by outputting what has come to be known as user-generated content. Bivens notes that the influx of user-generated content has "revers[ed] the traditional flow of news" (2008:117).

While this paper agrees with Beers that "the culture of citizenry modelled online … is one where news is … challenged, corrected, embroidered and, through individual agency, rippled outwards into society" (2006:119), it has reservations about the web being the leveller that it has been made out to be. Chan and Leung (2005) have talked about the new media's democratic open-content approach paving the way for the non-linear consumption of news. This paper doesn't dispute this, but nevertheless believes it's judicious to add a caveat. Dahlberg (2007) offers one. He holds that for online media or the Internet to become the very embodiment of the public sphere it needs to address "inequalities in access and participation, unreflexive communication, corporate domination of online attention and state surveillance and censorship" (2007:828).

The concept of a public sphere in a way resonates with this study. In *Black feminist thought* (1990), Collins theorises that while subjugation "may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within that social space where Black women speak freely" (1990:95). Besides highlighting a sort of collegiality where women have each other's back, Collins was also alluding to cultural expressions that have since time immemorial given voice to the voiceless.

1.1 Participatory culture of web 2.0

Online spaces create a subtle collegiality by way of online communities that foster a sense of belonging through demystifying identities. Thus, this paper believes the idea of equating the web 2.0 to a "safe space" or even the public sphere as articulated by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas cannot be dismissed out of hand.

In his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas postulated about what Hauser referred to as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common

judgment about them" (1999:61). This was the first time the term public sphere was used. Habermas held that mass media have had an erosive effect on the public sphere. It's been suggested by scholars such as Lister et al. (2003) that online media will trigger a return to the values that the public sphere theory cherishes.

That the democratisation of information through technology continues to be refracted through the lens of the public sphere perspective does not insulate it in any way from pluralising criticism. The public sphere essentially facilitates the circulation of information, ideas and debates in an unfettered manner. The vision of an integrated public sphere has nevertheless faced strong headwinds in the face of growing pluralism. Yet despite all of this, the Internet's contribution to the public sphere cannot be understated. The "massification" of communication online particularly gives the public sphere an amorphously expansive look and feel. This sprawling quality often blurs aspects of representation and interaction. However, there remain intense contestations as to the extent to which the Habermasian concept of public sphere is effective.

Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy has especially brought into sharp focus the shortcomings of Habermas's emphasis on rational consensus. Rather than seize upon how such criticism limits the utility of the Habermasian concept, this paper embraces the "theoretical eclecticism" espoused by Karppinen, Moe, & Svensson (2008). The eclecticism combines normative theories from both sides of the aisle, or at least their merits. Take, for example, the norms of equality and symmetry that govern participation in deliberations as framed by the Habermasian concept, or the impossibility of reaching rational consensus on decisions without exclusion. As Mouffe (2000) has pointed out, precluding the possibility of contestation in so-called rational agreements is utopian. Both norms (of equality, symmetry) and impossibilities (that privilege consensus, whitewash agonism or even antagonism) are palpable in debates on online spaces. There is also the odd common insistence – an allegiance to values affirming "ethico-political principles" (2000:15) – that leads to the formation of a collective identification.

The need to acknowledge the ineradicability of the Internet's status as a valuable tool is backed by a rich body of scholarship. The "participatory culture" imbibed by the Internet – where the top-down hegemony of greedy media corporations is replaced by a horizontal network of "prosumers" – projects it as a democratising space. But does this indicate a decisive victory as some would have it? Broken down to granular detail, such a jurisdictional claim comes off as being contestable especially when seen through a gendered lens. Its universal reach notwithstanding, there is a telling digital gender divide that threatens to foreclose any possibility of women being empowered on the web 2.0. But while conversations online have tended to be narratives shaped by dominant (male) voices, the US Global Development Lab reported that anywhere between 77 to 84% of women credit the Internet for furthering their education. A further 70% of them attribute their feeling of liberation to online spaces, with another 85% saying the web 2.0 provides more freedom.

While the space's values are to be seen as elements of democracy rather than as constraints upon it, the digital gender gap threatens to become a yawning chasm. One 2017 study put it at 12% worldwide and 31% in the least developed countries such as Uganda. The report went on to reveal that there are 200 million fewer women online than men. This is regrettable particularly because the presence of women online is known to have rich rewards not just for them. The European Institute for Gender Equality has for instance reported that bringing an additional 600 million women and girls online around the world would spike GDP well north of USD $18 billion. Such is the potency of online spaces. Yet Live statistics from Facebook Partner put the gender ratio on Facebook in Uganda at 67% male against 33% female. The 2016 Uganda Social Media conference heard that toxic masculinity, low literacy levels and feeble purchasing power are responsible for the measly uptake amongst women.

Female participants at the conference, however, affirmed that the Internet has become a marginal space of sorts. For instance, Godiva Akullo, a feminist lawyer, was quoted by the website www.africanfeminism saying that the web 2.0 has "democratised information, giving women a deeper consciousness as women and citizens of the world". Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994) examined the issue of marginal space that oppressed African women occupy with his concept of the "Third Space." But while Bhabha's Third Space is an intervening space that paves the way for "initiat[ing] new signs of identity" (Bhabha, 1994: Location 1), the web 2.0 has moved away from the singularities, peculiarities and ambivalences of imagined realities. The new forms of possibilities it offers in form of text and voice are tangible in both the literal as well as metaphorical sense. These possibilities have impacted on journalism in four broad ways as identified by Deuze (2003). These include: orientating journalism (focuses on editorial content); instrumental journalism (offers functional, specialised information to interested audiences or customers); monitoring journalism (takes on a FAQ – frequently asked questions – outlook, with online editors and reporters answering demands of their publics) and dialogical journalism (where the line separating producers and consumers is blurred).

This study interests itself more in the strand of dialogical journalism with the key task of finding out whether women-themed conversations on online spaces are amplified.

2.   METHODOLOGY

The main data gathering method used for this study was what Stakes (2000) classifies as a collective case study. Seen as a process of discovery learning more than anything – a narrative for one – the purpose of the case reports was not to represent the world as much as the case.

The approach taken was what Bogdan and Biklen (1982) categorise as observational. Concerned with a contemporary scene, the case study took on an instrumental outlook with the key goal of providing insight into a particular issue.

A case study is essentially a detailed examination of an event, issue, a depository of documents or subject matter. The aforesaid description shows in the most profound sense that a case study is typically known to be a matter of judgment (Stenhouse, 1985).

The collection of cases that inform the findings of this article superficially resembles a sample. The study sampled 20 talk shows on Radio One, a Ugandan urban contemporary radio station that by its own admission (as per its official website) "targets adult listeners." The focus of the study was to establish whether female-themed user-generated content from the web 2.0 was used to counterbalance issues from a mainstream point of reference.

The impact of hashtags that trended across six days was also considered vis-à-vis the news production process of NTV Uganda, a leading TV station in the East African country (as per its verified Twitter account).

Data collection took the shape of participant observation and unstructured interviews with requisite new producers. For the case of the 20 radio talk shows, observed over 20 days, the interest was whether user-generated content from Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter helped women compete in what is by all measures a masculine space.

Elsewhere, the uptake of feminist-identified themes on hashtags spread out across six days was monitored with the goal of discovering if indeed they undid the maleness of news in NTV Uganda's news bulletins.

When the test setting of a case study is used, the issue of sampling always surges to the fore. The generalisability of case studies has always been called into question, with age-old concerns about size and representativity often but not raised.

The problem of instrumentation is bound to arise with this particular study, especially since the actual case was for all intents and purposes secondary. The study set out to develop understanding and knowledge of whether user-generated content counterbalances issues in mainstream media that are perpetuated by a patriarchal point of reference.

Observation and subsequently interpretation of data collected by such an undertaking can either be theory or value laden. But, as the research of Roizen and Jepson (1985) shows, the richness of material collected from a study of cases more than anything facilitates a series of interpretations that allow one to use their own experience to evaluate data.

3. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

3.1 Impact of hashtags on NTV's newscasts

This article's findings express doubt over the much-vaunted contraflow that essentially proffers a "periphery–centre" notion. The flow of user-generated content articulating Southern

women's issues from the periphery (online spaces) to the centre (mainstream) is constricted to the point that it has done little to undo the maleness of [mainstream] news.

Hashtags on the micro-blogging site Twitter with feminist-identified themes never drove the narrative at the centre on NTV Uganda's prime-time news bulletin across the six-day period.

For instance, the hashtag #SRHInfoAccess trended at number one for large spells of the second day of the study, and at number two later in the evening, but never impacted on the NTV Uganda news bulletin at all. The hashtag captured the rich sense of information postulated at an e-health forum organised by UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) Uganda.

The forum discussed how ICT (information and communications technology) is increasingly being positioned to improve access to SRH (sexual and reproductive health) information and services for young people. An app – Safe Pal – that helps someone confidentially report sexual violence cases captured the imagination of hordes of people on Twitter, but not that of the NTV Uganda news desk. Deliberations from the e-health forum did not in fact make it to the ten news items that constituted NTV Uganda's news bulletin on that day.

Another hashtag which trended that day was #LiveYourDreamUG. The hashtag spotlighted a number of women issues, including pregnancy mapping tailored to end maternal deaths in Uganda. However, just like #SRHInfoAccess, it never managed to hold the "centre" captive.

The news items that made it to the "centre" comprised two pieces about mooting a referendum for a proposal of a seven-year term for the Ugandan president and legislators. Other story items included a report on the fishing sector, a piece on corruption in the judiciary, something on the police summoning an opposition politician, a farming feature, as well as a couple of pieces on an age limit bill that was taking the Ugandan parliament by storm. Remarkably, there were also news items on a socialite who had courted controversy, as well as a man from a backwater who wedded three women.

On another day, the hashtag #UIGF17 did not make it to the "centre" despite trending at number one in the morning and number four in the evening. The brainchild of Uganda Internet Governance Forum, #UIGF17 deliberated over a multiplicity of issues such as the future of the Internet in Uganda and the effect of digitisation on the Ugandan economy. It was, however, the issue of gender inclusion in the ICT subsector that triggered a stir on Twitter, thereby making the hashtag go viral. The hashtag's content, however, did not make it to the NTV Uganda news bulletin.

In fact, in the main, the performance made for grim reading across the six days of the study. Sixty-five stories were carried in NTV Uganda's news bulletin during that time. Of those, only nine (14%) bore a semblance to the hashtags that trended. All the aforementioned nine stories fitted the bill of out-and-out hard news. Political in nature and outlook, the stories effectively made no attempt to address women's issues.

Also worth noting is that 46 of the 65 stories (71%) carried during the period of the study were packaged (i.e. scripted and voiced by a reporter as opposed to being anchor readers or direct sound bytes from a news subject). Female reporters were restricted to the margins during the six-day period, with their male counterparts packaging 43 of the 46 (93%) stories that ran. Female reporters packaged only three stories (6.5%).

3.2 User-generated content on Radio One's talk show

At face value, there appeared to be woman's complicity in her oppression when it came to the 20 radio talk shows observed over 20 days. The standout finding from the study was that the silence of women did not facilitate a sense of liberation. Social networks and the web 2.0 are widely believed to teem with potentialities whose narratives amplify or diminish conversations. Usually the depth of voice on the platforms becomes more pronounced depending on the degree of alienation from a subject's prior experiences.

The radio talk show that was the subject of the study is circumscribed by the knowledge that it uses traditional and nontraditional methods to sample feedback from listeners. The talk show is not only predisposed towards phone-ins (traditional), but also picks up user-generated content from Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. This binary system is thought to collapse singularities of voice through negation of linearity.

The study discovered that the narrative constructed by traditional methods (i.e. phone-ins) was fully aligned with patriarchal values. The success of disentangling phone-ins from the male world was, however, limited. Women's voices were virtually erased during the phone-in discussions. Male voices occupied a disproportionate part of the phone-ins. Patriarchy manifested itself in the power structures of the 20 talk shows with 119 (99%) of the 120 calls taken during the 20 days of the study being male. Women voices were on the fringes, accounting for just one (0.8%) of the 120 calls taken.

The study also found that user-generated content from the periphery (i.e. social networks) did successfully find its way to the centre (i.e. radio talk show). Seventy-five messages from Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp were read on the talk show during the 20 days of the study. They failed spectacularly, however, at demasculinising the centre. At least, the numbers point to a failure. Of the 75 messages read, 73 (97%) were from men. Only two messages (2.7%) sent by women were read during the 20 days of the study.

3.3. Constructions of the unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews were held with the NTV Uganda news manager as well as two producers on the news desk. The host/presenter of Radio One's Talk Back – who doubles as the talk show's researcher and producer ("I practically do everything," he said during an interview on March 1, 2018) – was also interviewed.

This study heeded the advice of May and Mason (2003) by opting to construct data from attitudes and beliefs "in there" as opposed to excavating data from ideologies "out there". This meant that the study's interviewees weren't reduced to mere informants. As such, questions were not asked in a decontextual manner. With interviewees being co-participants, a relationship was forged that ultimately led to a construction of knowledge.

It was the use of interviews as a social construction that led the Talk Back host to confide thus: "Whatever is making the headlines in the broadsheet dailies is pretty much what informs my topic selection."

For his part, the NTV Uganda news manager said, "a morning brainstorming meeting with reporters and producers populates our running order". He further added that an afternoon "meeting of minds involving producers" casts the running order in stone. At the time of the study, the male producers outnumbered their female counterparts by a seven-to-two ratio.

Both the producers this study interviewed were male. One of them attributed the constriction of women's voices in the newscast to "few or no female sources that can offer commentary on the subjects that captivate our audiences." It is a thought that also came out quite clearly during the structure-free interview with the other male producer. He said thus: "We find ourselves immersed in politics and similar hard news because that is what interests our viewers."

4. DISCUSSION

Giving voice is a necessary tool to empower marginalised groups. Although it has not quite led to the development of a female identified language, the web 2.0 has been widely lauded for offering new forms of possibilities in form of text and voice that ultimately liberate women. This contraflow of information is said to contest the strictly defined roles which society has assigned women.

Mass media have long been deemed to play an undemocratic role in society. Seen as a tyrannical beast, these vehicles have attracted criticism for being beholden to corporate interests. Failure to use their power, wealth and stranglehold over flow of information to hold those in positions of authority to account has left them grappling with an increasingly disengaged audience.

The web 2.0 has been touted as the panacea for all of the mass media's ills. Theorists like Wasserman (2006) have in fact equated the Internet's transformative technology to that of Gutenberg's printing press (see McLuhan, 1962). Elsewhere, Lister et al. note that the calling card of the Internet is such that its users are active and not passive consumers of content (2003:177).

They essentially envisage the Internet as revolutionising the way we communicate. Lister et al. (2003) are not alone. Mosco holds that a technology merits a transformative tag when it "leaves mythology and enters banality" (2005:19-20). Put another way, the technology has to offer more than the "cyberhype" pejorative that Meikle references (2002:36).

This study examines the aforementioned "cyberhype" pejorative by establishing whether a contraflow of information actually takes place. This contraflow of information is supposed to show itself true in voices of women being teleported from the periphery (online spaces) to the centre (mainstream media). The uptake of women-themed user-generated content by the centre, however, is devastatingly poor.

No hashtag with a feminist-identified theme on the micro-blogging site Twitter drove the narrative at the centre on NTV Uganda's prime-time news bulletin across six days. Also, only two messages (2.7%) sent by women from social networks were read on Radio One's Talk Back talk show during the 20 days of the study. This barely facilitated a sense of liberation on the part of women.

The findings of this study were anything but novel. It is helpful trying to unpack what occasions such a devastatingly poor uptake. It is worth noting that the Nation Media Group to whose stable NTV Uganda belongs projects itself as a gender-sensitive media entity. The Group has 14 print titles in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. It also has a footprint in the electronic media with eight vehicles straddling the three countries.

One of the Group's editorial objectives reads thus: "Women's coverage should not be confined to cosmetic and domestic issues, but must concentrate on the many important women's issues in East Africa today."

It goes on to add: "The contents in the women's pages or programmes, where these exist, must be properly discussed and planned at editorial conferences and should be relevant, topical, professionally written and presented."

NTV Uganda has struggled to fulfill the aforementioned objective, however. The enormity of its struggle is probably best captured by a statement from the Group's Managing Editor, Regional Content, Daniel Kalinaki, in the Nation Media Group tracker. The tracker – started in July of 2017 – is tailored to spot trends and patterns that speak to underlying challenges or systemic gaps in the Group's newsrooms in Uganda. It also includes a list of suggested stories for follow up.

In the aforesaid statement, Kalinaki proffers thus: "The Fourth Estate talk show, as with many others [programmes] on television and on radio [in the Group's stable], featured once again an all-male panel, or a 'manel'. Producers and editors must put in extra effort to ensure that talk show panels or sources interviewed for stories reflect, in the greatest way possible, the variety and diversity of the audiences we serve".

He adds: "Women, who make up half the [Ugandan] population, should not only be relegated to speak about 'soft' topics like children or domestic issues in a perpetuation of patriarchy; we will grow our audiences and deepen our engagement with them if people can see themselves in our content. To that can be added people with disabilities and people from ethnic or religious minorities".

The approach of diversity and inclusion is undoubtedly a noble one. Although it often smacks of mere tokenism, it goes a long way in amplifying the voices of those deemed to be minorities. It also most certainly guarantees variety. Content analyses continue to make discoveries of "gender otherness" in topic selection with a raft of "hard" news subjects. Lavie and Lehman-Wilzig (2005) allude to a female preference for "soft" news. They conclude that women must "overcome their 'professional-psychological block' about being true to their innate value system" (2005:84).

This study found that the subject matter on Radio One's Talk Back talk show could be pigeonholed in four broad categories. Politics led the way, accounting for 38% of topics discussed during the period of the study. Education (31%), health (23%) and economics (8%) followed in that order.

The topics met the categorisation of "hard" news, which brings into sharp focus the issue of news construction and production. The topic construction is by way of selection, interpretation and preservation of an ideology of the ruler (male) as opposed to ruled (female). One person – a male – does research, production and presentation of the talk show. In an unstructured interview, the presenter/researcher/producer of the programme said that headlines in mainstream – mostly "broadsheet" – newspapers inform the choice of the topics. This delimits the place of production in the sense that narratives aligned with a feminist mould are bound to be overlooked. The topics are as such rarely insulated from male influence.

A 2005 study conducted by Global Media Monitoring Project on radio talk shows in Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe returned strikingly similar results as those of Radio One's Talk Back. The study found that women compose only 25% of callers to radio talk shows in South Africa. It also discovered that while men were keen on current affairs (27%), only 15% of women warmed to them. Women (27%) were actually more predisposed to social issues (lifestyle and health to mention but two) than men (21%).

Global Media Monitoring Project's 2005 study also found that only 38% of reporters in South Africa were female. This gender gap is not dissimilar from the one at NTV Uganda, which at the time of this study had women occupying only 28% of the news production jobs. The composition of NTV Uganda's general/news desk from a reporters' perspective also makes the erasure of the voice of women inevitable. The desk had just one female reporter at the time this study was conducted. The NTV Uganda News Manager revealed in an interview that the female reporter doubles as a news anchor. This greatly reduces the number of news stories that she is able to turn in. It therefore is unsurprising that the female reporter in question packaged only three of the 46 stories that were carried in the television station's news bulletin across the six days the study was carried out. This further diminished the female voice while entrenching male privilege.

The findings about NTV Uganda confirm the diversity of views that continues to elude the Nation Media Group in Uganda. A random review of a Sunday newspaper (Sunday Monitor) in the Group's stable returned startling results. The survey was carried out with Sunday Monitor's print of August 21, 2017 as a baseline. Its findings were tallied and detailed by the Nation Media Group Uganda Tracker 006. The results from the photo selection in the newspaper were thus: the cover

photo was of a mass wedding with smaller photos of a male judge, a young boy and President Museveni.

Of the 13 pictures on pages 2 to 13, only two featured women. One was of a woman in distress, another of two women among a group of criminal suspects. The men featured, on the other hand, were successful and powerful figures of authority: presidents, senior judges, cabinet ministers, etc.

Furthermore, three of the four pictures/interviewees in the vox pops on the letters' page were male, despite the neutral question: "would you let your children undergo military training?" The cover of the "People & Power" section featured President Yoweri Museveni and Uganda's former principal judge, also male; all five pictures on pages 14-15 were of men, followed by a centre-spread article with three pictures of Museveni.

In fact, all the news stories and photographs on pages 1 to 7 of the edition, including the stories in briefs run on page 7 were by male writers, while all eight columnists in the newspaper are male.

The Tracker 006 grimly noted: "It must be noted that three of the five columnists in Life Magazine, which is edited by a female editor, are women, but this stands out for its exceptionality".

"The lack of diversity and representation of women is not limited to the Sunday Monitor. Between Monday August 21 and Friday August 26, only one of the 15 main op-eds carried by the newspaper was by a female writer."

What these findings from the Tracker 006 survey show is a failure of the "centre" to disentangle from the male world. It therefore goes without saying that such narratives from a "masculine" point of reference need a counterbalance. While the web 2.0 has gone a long way in giving women a voice, the "centre" has not subsumed the female-themed content that abounds on it. The findings of this study say as much.

The study also reinforces questions about the impact of the web 2.0. It should be noted that new media is not new in the actual sense of the word. Pavlik addressed the subject by defining new media as "the convergence of computing, telecommunications and traditional media" (1999:54). A streak of "sameness" rather than "newness" therefore runs deep. So deep that Lister et al. opine that new media are the "technological correlative of postmodern thought" (2003:192) and that they are moulded by human thought patterns (2003:215-216). This study finds that those human thought patterns could in effect erase women's voices.

The contradiction in this chilling discovery revolves around the fact that many studies have been quick to point out the transformation of the role of a journalist from gatekeeping to gatewatching. Gatewatchers point out those gates to their readers that are most likely to open into useful resources (Bruns, 2003). In this case, gatekeeping is no longer seen as the most appropriate activity in the newsgathering process. Gatewatching is perhaps seen as a suitable alternative. Castells (2004) suggests that the Internet is the only medium through which interaction and debate take place in an autonomous, electronic forum, bypassing the control of the media. This

often but not always produces rich conversations. These conversations give the gatewatchers user-generated content that usually shapes narratives in mainstream media. Many studies have taken a blanket approach in explicating and contextualising the uptake of the said user-generated content. This study takes a slightly different route and makes some chilling discoveries. The web 2.0 does not stop men from assuming a superior status as far as the concept of information flowing from the periphery to the centre is concerned. This is due to the fact that men continue to control the news production process at the centre.

Mason (2002) has noted that no research is immune to the bug of theoretical orientation: researchers commence a project with a pretty good idea about what they are looking for. Case studies and interviews, which this study employed, tend to counter this limitation by giving one a chance to see what they were not looking for in the first place. This can, for one, be achieved through observation.

It is true, as May and Mason (2003) have noted, that a researcher orienting towards the perceived location of a social process under observation is straitjacketed in a way. Such a researcher reduces their objects of study to mere informants by excavating data from ideologies "out there." This decontextual manner can be quite counterproductive since, as May and Mason have noted, the researcher "cannot be in all of the relevant contexts to witness the operation of practices and processes" (2003:226).

It should nonetheless be noted that this study sought to address this limitation by using unstructured interviews as processes of social construction. Interviews are not without their downsides as they are seen by some as, at best, subjective and, at worst, biased. It is the position of this study, however, that the construed subjectivities/biases can be countervailed through reference to theory.

Less hard to shrug off are questions about generalisability. Case studies and interviews are notoriously known for dealing with small samples. This study was no exception. Generalising findings from the study therefore is bound to raise eyebrows. Also equally vexing was the fact that NTV Uganda and this study's researcher operated in close proximity. The advice of May and Mason was heeded in this case by "engag[ing] with the politics of talk" (2003:237). The researcher acknowledged the existence of power relations and struggles with the researched. This classic practice of reflexivity offset excesses such as representation of subjects from a less privileged position, among others.

5. CONCLUSION

Driven to the limits of what can be socially tolerated, women have found a "safe space" in the web 2.0. They use the space to contest and subvert identities that show the reside of maleness as the "unmarked" standard. This has helped them acknowledge their sisterhood with women around the globe while also eschewing patriarchal structures.

The primary interest of this project has been to explore if this site of enunciation online shapes the narrative in mainstream media. Many studies (such as Wanyeki's 2002 paper and Kelkar's 2004 study) have made us acutely aware of the fact that the web 2.0's culture of interactivity and openness gives a voice to the voiceless. The "periphery–centre" idea, which is anchored on the blurring of online and offline communities, is essentially supposed to empower women.

Because the privileging of men in African societies has involved an erasure of many women's identities and subjectivities in terms of choice and voice, it invariably follows that reconstituting this erasure in the centre is a hard and tenuous journey. The findings of this study paint a grim picture of women returning to their prescribed roles as subordinate beings.

The study discovers that instead of building a new paradigm, women are required to accede to the social reproduction of patriarchy. This patriarchy is the byproduct of a vicious cycle where a patriarchal newsroom leadership chain of command produces hegemonic masculinity that triggers gendered socialisation leading to power inequality.

The contraflow of information supposed to go against patriarchal structures that control women's lives has not quite materialised. The discursive practices of the mainstream media at the centre are a product of the ideology of the producer. These discursive practices keep patronage in its position over those seen to be subservient. Women play second fiddle in the power structures because they are deemed dispensable.

Women do not hold down many news jobs. A deeply sexist attitude that objectifies them and their practice on television continues to hold sway. A strand of instrumentality runs deep here. Craft (1986) has, for instance, suggested that women's attractiveness has limited shelf life. Craft was demoted as co-anchor for an ABC affiliate in 1981 after only eight months because she was deemed too old, too unattractive and wouldn't defer to men.

Craft's experience best captures how women are seen as a means to an end. Not much is thought about their choices and voices either. As this study discovers, male-centric subject matter is the centre's preference. This disposition virtually shuts out the female-themed user-generated content that teems in the periphery.

In conclusion, this study finds that the "centre" does not quite subsume the female-themed content from the "periphery." This contraflow is turned on its head principally because people engaging the levers of power at the "centre" are hardly gender-sensitive.

The implication therefore is that the "periphery–centre" notion will not yield dividends unless those running the rule over the news production process become sensitive to women's issues. This can be decisively addressed through bona fide affirmative action tailored at growing the numbers of women in newsrooms.

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