

# **NOVENA**

## **JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION**

**VOL.1, 2016**

**A BLIND PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL**

**PUBLISHED BY THE  
DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION  
NOVENA UNIVERSITY  
OGUME, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA**



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## **An Evaluation of Sahara Reporters as a Platform of Participatory Journalism**

**Patrick Udende**

Department of Mass Communication  
University of Ilorin, Ilorin  
udendepatrick@yahoo.com  
08051518456

**James Aondowase Ashiekpe, PhD**

Department of Mass Communication  
University of Jos, Jos  
08032570218

**Maryam Lasisi Mustapha**

Department of Mass Communication  
University of Ilorin, Ilorin  
mayspecial@yahoo.com  
08026285739

### **Abstract**

*This study examined the role of Sahara Reporters as online media. The aim was to make sense of the phenomenon of participatory journalism considered in the context of the historical evolution of public communication. The study, which was anchored on libertarian theory of mass communication, adopted qualitative content analysis. It purposively selected some publications of Sahara Reporters between January and June, 2014. The news stories purposively selected cut across social, economic and political themes. Results showed a robust coverage of issues and active participation of audience with a bias in certain issues particularly insecurity which is the dominant theme. Also, audiences have diverse impression on the type and quality of issues Sahara Reporters cover. Therefore, it recommended among other things, self-censorship by reporters including the active audience that participate on the online platform.*

**Keywords:** Sahara reporters, participatory journalism, online media, libertarian theory, objectivity.

### **Introduction**

The rise of interactive online and networked media makes it possible for citizens to participate in journalism. The possibility for more inclusive public engagement in the deliberation of policy issues is due to the emergence and adoption of new information and communication technologies (ICT). Citizens now become producers of content and distribute it globally. By implication, the



phenomenon of ICT has become so prevalent such that the hitherto exclusive duty and responsibility of professional journalists has changed. It has rapidly evolved to a practice where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community. It is this free-for-all practice that is commonly referred to as participatory or citizen journalism. Some of the technologies that have come to characterise citizen journalism are catalogued by Gillmor (2006, p. 27) as follows: mail lists and forums, made of diverse communities of interest; weblogs, a 'many to many, few to few' medium whose 'ecosystem' is 'expanding into the space between email and the Web, and could well be the missing link in the communications chain'; Wikis, server programmes that allow users to collaborate in forming the content of a Web site; SMSs, a service offered by network providers which allows customers to send text messages over the cell phones; Mobile-connected cameras, which include the every-day digital cameras that allow users to download, store, edit, and transmit pictures anytime, anywhere; Internet 'broadcasting', whereby ordinary people can record and upload anything on to the Internet, as well as distribute it; Peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing of files; and RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which allows readers of blogs and other kinds of sites to have their computers and other devices automatically retrieve the content they care about.

When news events occur, ordinary citizens, who are interested in the event immediately post messages on the internet for others to read. Adum and Ekwugha (2008, p. 189) aptly put it that "the ordinary persons automatically become reporters, editors, and publishers." Citizens of several countries are recognised to have been deeply involved in participatory journalism. Okoro, Diri and Odii (2013) pointed out the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the 2013 military takeover of power in Egypt and the attendant protests, 2012 elections in the United States and Ghana, as some examples. Continuing, Okoro *et al* (2013) reiterated that in each of the instances, ordinary citizens gathered information, including action pictures from scenes of incidents, and uploaded to the Internet for global consumption, within split seconds.

The trend has been borrowed by ordinary citizens of Nigeria. The absence of central control of internet makes it possible for Nigerians also to freely exchange information. Few examples will suffice. The moment Nigerians got wind of the seizure, by the South African government, of a Nigerian jet with three passengers on board owned by Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN, together with \$9.3m, messages flooded the social media. Users of such platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on, were privy to the information. Even before then, news about the jet crash involving then Governors Danbaba Suntai and Patrick Yakowa of Taraba and Kaduna States respectively received viral attention. This was also the case before, during and after the gubernatorial elections in Ekiti and Osun States.

At all times, Sahara Reporters has been alive not only in bringing to public domain social, economic and political issues in Nigeria, but also provides citizens



opportunity to make comments. This practice opposes what is done in the traditional media.

In journalism, reporters decide what the public needs to know, as well as when and how such information should be provided. By doing this, they are said to be playing the gatekeeper role which is maintained and enforced by professional routines and conventions that guarantee the quality and neutrality of institutional journalism. But Massey and Haas (2002) argued that contemporary critics have for long advocated public journalism as an alternative that asks for a more reciprocal relationship between reporters and their audience. According to Gillmor (2004) and Kunelius (2001), this reciprocal relationship between reporters and their audiences suggests that news should be a conversation rather than a lecture. It is against this backdrop that Sahara Reporters, which enable people to actively participate in publishing, content for a potentially global audience was introduced.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The online culture has opened a new chapter in information gathering and dissemination. Rather than relying on the top-down monopoly of information flow common with the traditional mass media, the reverse is now the case. In the contemporary new media environment, the public is increasingly taking up the sender role as well. With the Sahara Reporters website and other social media platforms, it is certain Nigerians have joined the global community in this direction. For example, in a study by Odii (2013), findings show that 77% of the respondents had participated in Nigeria's democracy through citizen journalism. This is corroborated by Webster's (2010) assertion that President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria had more Facebook fans than the combined tally of British Prime Minister, David Cameron; German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and South African Head of State, Jacob Zuma. What is uncertain is the comments Nigerian participants make about burning issues among which are corruption, poverty and health challenges as reported by Sahara Reporters. More fundamental, is whether or not participants on the platform make informed contributions to issues raised. It is against this backdrop that the study seeks to determine the type of stories Sahara Reporters carry and analyse quality of comments made by audience in relation to issues that are reported.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the dominant themes of Sahara Reporters news content.
2. Evaluate audience participation on the Sahara Reporters website.
3. Determine what audiences think of Sahara Reporters as a genre of journalism.

### **Conceptual Clarifications of Participatory Journalism and Sahara Reporters**

Participatory journalism refers to a wide range of activities in which people contribute information about news events. Participatory /citizen journalists are independent, freelancing citizen reporters. They are not constrained by conventional



journalistic processes or methodologies, and they usually function without editorial oversight. Ross and Cormier (2010, p. 66) elaborated that participatory journalists “gather, process, research, report, analyse and publish news and information, most often utilising a variety of technologies made possible by the internet.” As people-centred journalism, Banda (2010, p. 26) observed that citizen or participatory journalism is about “democratic citizenship.” Banda (2010, p. 26) goes on to elucidate that the notion of participatory journalism is an “indictment against what are seen as the undemocratic rituals of conventional media and journalism.” To that extent, Gillmor (2006) concluded that participatory journalism is a people-centred, largely online, movement of the so-called “We the media.”

Sahara reporters is an online media that was established by Omoyele Sowore in 2006 with a focus on promoting citizen journalism. Based in New York and supported by the Ford Foundation, it encourages everyday people to report stories about corruption, human rights abuses and other political misconducts in Nigeria (Sahara Reporters, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored on the Libertarian theory of mass communication which is one of the normative theories of press. Libertarian theory, also known as the free press theory originally came from libertarian thoughts from 16th century in Europe but was popularised around the 17th century through the United States of America’s first amendment which protected the press from any law abridging its operation. Firdaus (2012, p.7) rationalised that “in an environment where ideas and opinions can be disseminated and received freely, the best ideas and the soundest opinions will prevail over ‘bad’ ones.” Key proponents of the libertarian theory include Lao Tzu, an early 16th century philosopher, John Locke of Great Britain, John Milton, the epic poet and John Stuart Mill.

The libertarian theorists are against the authoritarian thoughts. That is to say, Libertarian theory considers people to be capable of finding and judging good ideas from bad ideas. Contributing on the theory, Biagi (2003) noted that people are rational and their rational thoughts lead them to find out what is good and what is bad so as to make good choices. This is what Brown (2012) captures succinctly that this theory takes the philosophical view that man is rational and able to discern between truth and falsehood.

Therefore, no one should restrict anything even a negative content may give knowledge and can make better decision whilst worst situation. This explains why Suresh (2003) remarked that the theory is based on the rights of an individual and advocates absence of restraint. This theory helps the people keep an eye on the government (Ojobor, 2002), thus making corruption and abuse of office minimal. This, however, does not mean that there is no law for the press. The laws of libel, sedition and slander still apply to them. This requires reporters to examine such basic issues as truth, honesty, privacy, confidentiality and protection of the public from offensive contents. The news emanating from Sahara Reporters provide knowledge about government activities, Organisations and individuals which helps



people to identify what is happening in the society. Apart from the reports that keep people informed, the platform provides citizens the opportunity to make comments on such issues based on their interpretation.

## **Review of Related Literature**

In participatory journalism, audience members have the opportunity of reacting to news content. In reference to Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis (2003), Lih (2004, p. 2) described participatory journalism as the "act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information." Lih (2004) further elucidated the intent of this participation which is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.

Predicating on the above, participatory journalism does not only report news, but also provides a feedback mechanism. Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer and Vujnovic (2008) as well as Hermida and Thurman (2008) pointed out that as it opens the gates to user-generated content, it embraces such things as comments, photos/videos, reader blogs, and even reader-assembled news articles for examples and implications. Similarly, Zuckerman (2009) reiterated that social media, in particular blogs and fora, also have strong discursive component and have been turned into spaces for discussion. This prompts traditional media to improve on quality of reporting. Salawu (2011) is of the view that participatory journalism also re-engages members of the public who no longer tune into the mainstream media and are disconnected from society. In reference to Brian Reich cited in Lang (2010), Salawu (2011) posited that people like to hear from voices they recognise. Therefore, engaging the community in creating news may be a way to reconnect people and reinvigorate interest in what is going on around them.

Reporting news is quite naturally a major part of participatory journalism, especially in crises situations. Giving perspective on participatory journalism, Moyo (2009) averred that in most of the areas studied which come with an absence of reports from traditional media; citizens take it upon themselves to relay critical information. This is why Mutsavairo and Columbus (2012) have argued that participatory journalism takes place parallel to mainstream journalism.

Participatory journalism has been tested worldwide. Odii (2013) advanced the Occupy Movement in the United States of America and the Arab spring, as well as South Korean's, Ohmy News with the motto: Every Citizen is a Reporter as examples. In Nigeria, this genre of journalism played a crucial role in the nationwide protest against the 2012 fuel subsidy removal. It has been instrumental to the quest for the Bring Back our Chibok Girls campaign and the alleged diversion \$2.1billion meant for procurement of military armaments to fight Boko Haram insurgency commonly referred to as Dasukigate.

Participatory journalism has been criticised in many ways. Conduct of people is unprofessional. For example in event of an auto crash or other mishaps, while some people make fervent efforts to rescue victims, others would be busy



taking and uploading gory pictures to the public. Other critics consider it amateurish, fallacious, subjective and haphazard in quality and coverage. Okoro *et al* (2013) noted there was an outcry; especially by national leaders against the conduct of participatory journalists during the Dana Airline crash of June 03, 2012. Okoro *et al* (2013) further explained that while rescue operators were sweating profusely to see if there could be any survivors, participatory journalists were busy taking and uploading gory pictures to their friends. Consequently, findings by Odii (2012) emphatically showed that majority of the respondents suggested that Nigerians should be sensitised on the benefits and dangers of participatory journalism. This will enhance the quality of news audience receive from Sahara Reporters.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted qualitative content analysis as method. The period of study was between January and June, 2014. Choice of this period was informed at least for three reasons. It was during this period that Nigeria witnessed heightened protest by different groups about the abduction of over 200 Chibok girls. Secondly, this was a period when the spate of insurgency was on the increase. Thirdly, it was during this period that the country witnessed a rift between the former Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) over alleged non-remittance of funds to the Central Bank by the latter. Population of the study was the news content of Sahara Reporters purposively selected due to its role of purveying information on diverse issues in Nigeria. Few of the news stories of Sahara Reporters were purposively selected for analysis. Unit of analysis was paragraphs comprising news stories which theme was security. Text of the stories which constituted the data for analysis was considered necessary. The basis for textual analysis was premised on Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2004, p.305) assertion that "it is within news texts that comments are made, contested, resisted, or challenged."

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The news stories that constituted contents of Sahara Reporters were accompanied with varying comments, depending on theme, topic and subject involved. While some comments were very short, others were lengthy and those who commented either used pseudonym, anonymous identity with few using what appears to be their actual names. Sahara Reporters provides diverse information, be they economic, social or political. The broad spectrum of reports they feature can be seen starting from the base year the researchers selected for analysis.



**Table 1: Selected news stories under consideration.**

| Date         | News Report   | Audience comments |
|--------------|---|-------------------|
| Jan 14, 2014 | "Boko Haram, under the leadership of Imam Abubakar Shekau, has claimed responsibility for today's suicide bombing attack in Maiduguri, capital of Borno State" where "About seven persons were reported to have been killed."   |                   |
| Jan 27, 2014 | "Boko Haram is suspected in the killing of several villagers and burning down almost all the homes in Kawuri, Kondugalocal government (Borno State)...The attacks come barely a week after the new Chief of Defense Staff, Alex Badeh boasted that the military will crush the sect by April 2014." |                   |
| Feb 10, 2014 | Agip Oil Well Head Leak Pollutes Biseni Community in Bayelsa.   |                   |
| Feb 10, 2014 | Daniel Tsokwa — the younger brother of late former Speaker of the Taraba State House of Assembly, Haruna Tsokwa — has narrowly won the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) ticket for the assembly bye-election.   |                   |
| Feb 23, 2014 | There has been cold war between Governor Kashim Shettima and Nigerian military over Shettima's claim that Boko Haram wields more sophisticated weapons than the Nigerian military, an assertion both military and Federal Government officials debunked last week.                                  |                   |



Feb 23, 2014 The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) has faulted the legal advice provided the Attorney of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Mr. Mohammed Adoke to the effect that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, was empowered by the NNPC Act to remit only to the federation account, its net earnings after deducting cost of its operations.

March 21, 2014 DHQ spokesperson, Major General Chris Olukolade, said that the recovered weapons include anti-aircraft guns, rocket-propelled guns as well as other brands of machine guns. Also recovered from the location were thousands of various rounds of ammunition.

March 21, 2014 The Nigerian government has made available N7 billion (Naira) for the (national) conference. Each delegate is expected to be paid N4 million per month... Despite this huge amount...the delegates are still asking for more money to pay their aides.

March 21, 2014 A Federal High Court in Ikoyi, Lagos State, today scheduled March 31, 2014 for hearing on a suit filed by the ousted Governor of the Central Bank (CBN), Sanusi Lamido Sanusi.

**Olayinkauk:** I think Lamido Sanusi was removed because he kept having a go at Jonathan regime. What of Prof soludo that looted Cbn and still manage to keep his friends at the bank...

**Aisha:** No doubt many responses here are planted to discredit SLS. Many won't grapple with his detailed

response to the allegations against him.

**Khumalo:**

SAHARAREPORTERS has collected so much amount of money from APC...

**Anonymous** FloraOkonofua:

Its funny 4 anyone 2 think that by going 2 court, SLS is afraid. He would be a fool by going 2 EFCC as suggested by a few.

**Akiika:** There is no level of slander you guys can propagate that will hinder the truth. You Jonathanians are coming up with all kinds of outrageous accusations against Sanusi, but it will not change the fact that \$20 billion is missing...

April 16,  
2014

Joe Okei-Odumakin and AbiolaAkiode-Afolabi, leaders of The Women Arise for Change Initiatives and the Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center (WARDC) respectively condemn the terrorists for the abduction of the 200 girls and their continued target of innocent women, children and girls.

May 12,  
2014

Social and economic activities remain paralysed in the township of Kachia where Muslim and Christians' militias slugged it out burning mosques and churches.

May 18,  
2014

Boko Haram is preparing to attack Government College, Makurdi, Benue State, and

**Philadelphia:** Boko Haram plans to attack somewhere else. This is their usual trick; to post



Principal of the school, Mr. Godfrey Ugudu, has revealed the plot.

a dummy and hit elsewhere...

**TJohnson:** Shekau is not going to kidnap boys in Makudi to marry to the kidnapped girls from Chibok. This is the absurdity we have generated into...

**danboyigomsuk:** Nigerians, here's the home truth. The BH scourge is speedily drifting southwards!

May 31,  
2014

Oby Ezekwesili, history will remember you as one of the greatest amazons of our time...you crossed the tribal, religious, political, and other divides that overbearingly transverse the Nigerian landscape to stand for the rights of your people.

**Anonymous:** 1. Olu, in her we know that the capacity to draw international attention for a worthy cause is possible.

**DERI D REDEEMER**

Anonymous: from Nigeria's South-East resident in Jos were the worst hit community when bomb blast rocked the Plateau State capital...exactly a week ago, killing at least 118 and injuring many more...Oby finally dumps the ibos for the spoils of the boko haram war...

**JOHN OKONL:** Mrs. Ezekwesili is a person with outstanding international credibility!!!

**Anonymous:** Politics.

**Pedro:** She is roaming the streets of Abuja for her own selfish political end...

**HARDCORE IGBOMAN:**

Oby is shamelessly overstepping her boundary, she has hijacked a tragic incident and is using it as platform to unleash her dislike of the Jonathan's administration...

June 14,  
2014

Nigeria, again, will spend a fortune on officials traveling abroad with President Goodluck Jonathan's typically oversize presidential delegation to the World Cup in Brazil.

**KWALE MAN:** SR stop deceiving Nigerians with your fake reports and unnecessary outburst over nothing. We need people to cheer the eagles.

**MeneOjogba:** This article confirms Sahara Reporters desperate campaign against President Jonathan...

**Anonymous:** Our president who till today finds it irrelevant to visit Chibok, now find so much joy in attending to World cup issues. Ride on Presidona u biko...

**Anonymous:** The US "back office" team will far outweigh any delegation that Nigeria can ever hope to send...

June 27,  
2014

Justice Lawal Akapo of a Lagos High Court sitting in Ikeja, on Friday June 27, 2014, dismissed an application filed by Mahmud Tukur and Ochonogor Alex, praying the court to quash charges preferred against them by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC. The judge dismissed the application for lack of merit and abuse of court processes.

June 27,  
2014

Defendants in the case of alleged murder of their female social media friend, Cynthia Osokogu in July 2012 have opposed the presentation of a video recording as evidence by prosecution attorneys against them.

#### **Discussion of Findings**



Data reveal that Sahara Reporters is ceaseless in the coverage of diverse issues in Nigeria with insecurity as one of the key issues covered between January and June, 2014. This is evident from the news stories selected. It is significant to note that citizens are actively involved in posting comments on the website despite their biases. In all the stories covered, comments from audience are neutral, in support or against the issues, institutions, Organisations or personalities involved. Strikingly, comments generally reflect their ethno-religious and political leaning. For example, in a report on Sanusi, one of those in support of Sanusi posts: **Anonymous** Flora Okonofua: *It's funny 4 anyone 2 think that by going 2 court, SLS is afraid...*

On the contrary, **Khumalo**, one of those against Sanusi says: *"SAHARAREPORTERS has collected so much amount of money from ... SANUSI, THEY WILL NEVER CRITICIZE THESE CRIMINALS. NEMESIS IS CATCHING UP WITH THE FOOLANI MAN CALL SANU-NSI."*

Apparently, data reveal plurality of views on issues, a feature common to humanity. This by implication entails, there is no homogenous opinion on whatever report readers receive consistent with what DUCAUSE (2007) posits that the experiences of people personally involved with an issue present a different—and often more complete—picture of events than can be derived from the perspective of an outsider. However, the diverse opinions held are not balanced, meaning certain views have dominance over others. For example, when the issue of Sanusi Salisu came to public domain, out of the several comments that were made, most of them are in support of Sanusi, few either neutral or against Sanusi. Similarly, of the various stories that trail Oby Ezekwesili's story, most of them are unfavourable to her while few are either favourable or neutral.

On public perception of Sahara Reporters, there are evidently mixed reactions based on comments readers make. While some commentators believe the website is a veritable and credible medium of purveying information on social, economic and political issues, others have reservation on it. The following different examples as regards report on the bloated President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's team to the 2004 Soccer World cup in Brazil attest to this. Two of these comments not in favour of the website say: **KWALE MAN**: *SR stop deceiving Nigerians with your fake reports and unnecessary outburst over nothing...* **Obiaze**: *So what is wrong with the number of delegate...*

One of the commentators whose post favours Sahara Reporters says: **Yakub, KZ**: *Aminu mumu ... The problem is not about cheering the team but it's about how much of public money (in the billions of Naira) is spent doing that...*

A closer look at the news content of Sahara Reporters website, specifically comments made by readership is phrased using abusive and derogatory language without substantive claim in several cases. For example, in one of the posts in reaction to a story on Oby Ezekwesili's resilience in the 'Bring Back Our Chibok Girls' campaign, Pedro said: *She is roaming the streets of Abuja for her own selfish political end - In Nigeria people do not do things for free - given a situation where*



*she is a member of Tinubu's thieving inner circle - APC pays her heavily for all her work with them.*

This shows some readers are sentimental, unfair, not balanced, and not objective and their comments ultimately lack credibility. The foregoing affirms EDUCAUSE's (2007) view that the quality of any participatory journalism project reflects the contributions of those who choose to participate, and such projects can be havens for triviality or unreliable content. Perhaps, this inclined the 'Thought Leader' blog to adopt M&G editorial guidelines for contributions and comments that are written by interesting, influential and intelligent voices (M&G, 2007) cited in Banda (2010). Elaborating, Banda (2010, p.31) avers that "We welcome as much interaction and vibrant discussion between our contributors and their readers as possible – but we do want the website to be a mature and thought-provoking environment, so some guidelines apply for posting comments." This simply explains the essence of being a responsible participatory journalist.

### **Conclusion**

The study underscores the established fact that the internet world has changed the way people process and transmit news. The opportunities the internet offers enable every citizen including non-professionals to gather and post messages on websites. The emergence of Sahara Reporters as an addition to the existing platforms also makes it possible for what is known as participatory journalism. On their part, citizens have the tendency of abusing the platform for lack of editorial policy. This is evident in the findings that most comments are visibly influenced by ethno-religious and political affiliations.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are hereby given:

1. Participants on Sahara Reporters platform, who are less informed, should desist from sentimental and emotional outbursts that threaten our national unity.
2. Citizens, particularly the informed ones should be more disposed to involving in the public sphere to objectively comment on issues. Otherwise, the ideals of participatory journalism are rather narrow as the large majority of citizens are still unlikely to play an active role in the news making process. Professional practices suggests that relevant participation will be useful to assess to what extent participatory journalism can become a widespread practice and what can be its consequences for both the quality of journalism and the public sphere.
3. Due to loss of confidence in the news of Sahara Reporters demonstrated in several negative comments about some news reports, Sahara Reporters should place emphasis on objective reporting with a view to boosting the trustworthiness of reports. Notwithstanding the loss of confidence in reports by Sahara Reporters, the website should not be deterred in reporting as their



watchdog role remains relevant in repositioning government policies and programmes that affect citizens meaningfully.

4. Citizens, who participate on the Sahara Reporters platform, should improve on their level of media literacy. While conscientious professional journalists are careful to separate supportable evidence from opinion or speculation, many citizen journalists have a weaker sense of what constitutes a reliable story, free of conjecture. With media literacy consumers of citizen journalism will also understand that however, well-intentioned a participatory journalist might be, reading the news with a skeptical eye is a good practice.
5. In order to encourage a more robust contribution from citizens, access to internet is imperative. This can be achieved through appropriate policies by service providers to address it. One of these is operational problems that have to do with the lack of technical efficiency of power-plants, the low quality of the electricity network and the inaccessibility of transmission channels, such as satellites.

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