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Media accountability:
Critical analysis of citizen journalism

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Abstract

The media is considered to be the fourth pillar in a democratic country. It acts like an effective control mechanism to check the other branches of the government. But this is only consequential when the media functions in an independent and transparent fashion with trained and neutral professionals who are aware of the accountability and consequences of their work. All these factors together would further the country as a democratic institution. Traditionally, it was legacy media responsible for a one-to-many communication process. Their goal was to provide information to the citizens. But this changed with development in technology and the use of social media in daily life. The internet brought with it new media formats which are easily accessible but also unstructured. These lowered barriers of entry in the media enabled citizens to become active participants in the

communication process. As a result, these citizens developed a different relationship with the already existing media wherein they were not only the receivers to information but also co-producers. Real time information allows users to communicate with each other and in turn widely generate public opinion on internet platforms. A many-to-many communication style emerged. While on the one hand, this type of discourse could be an opportunity for citizens to exercise their fundamental freedom of speech and expression, it is on the other hand, proving to have a detrimental effect in two parts: Lack of neutrality, polarized views and pre-existing misconceptions on the part of citizens as well as algorithms and formation of echo-chambers on the part of technology. Some questions arise in this scenario about the capability of citizen journalists, the duties they should adhere to along with the

enjoyment of their rights and freedoms, the risks involved in an unchecked method of communication and the effect of citizen journalism in the democratic process.

Keywords: Citizen journalism, participatory journalism, public opinion, critique, media reporting

Introduction

On November 19, 1863 in the Gettysburg Address, then American President Abraham Lincoln said. “Of the people, by the people and for the people”.¹ His famous words describe the relationship between a democracy and its citizens. It pre-supposes that the people have the freedoms and rights to take part in the processes of the country. Such active involvement is witnessed in various aspects primarily during elections, but this paper only concerns itself with the formation of public opinion through citizen journalism. This paper adopts a deductive theoretical approach developing the hypothesis that citizen journalism is marked by limitations. Therefore, it takes a critical look into the concept of citizen journalism. The goals of this paper are to understand what citizen journalism is, how it differs from traditional media and the reasons for citizen journalism to go wrong. Hence, through deductive analysis, the paper aims at generating new information at a theoretical level. Citizen journalism engages ordinary citizens -who are not media-persons-

in reporting. Also, known as participatory journalism, it is very commonly defined as, ‘all the acts by citizens or group of citizens who collect, report, analyse and disseminate news and other kinds of information’.

Citizen journalism involves the contribution of these citizens in the news-making processes.² This participation creates citizen-generated content (CGC) through photos, videos, comments and stories. It encourages discourse in democratic systems in the public sphere – which, according to Jürgen Habermas, world-renowned German philosopher and sociologist constitutes all the domains of social life- where public opinion can be formulated³. This public sphere is open to all citizens in their capacities as private persons. Although this type of journalism existed even before the age of the internet, with the emergence of social media in the daily lives of the people, it has been tremendously boosted. The tsunami in South Asia in 2004 can be considered as the event that put citizen journalism on the journalistic map.⁴ Citizen journalists primarily use the internet for spreading information. This not only allows them to reach a wide network of people but also provides a range of formats for the dissipation of information in the form of photos, videos, live footage, first person accounts etc. It is interesting

Cornell University,
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/gettys->

burg/good_cause/transcript.htm, retrieved on December 23, 2018. 2 Nah, Seungahn/Namkoong, Kang/Record, Rachel/Van Stee, Stephanie K (2017): Citizen journalism practise increases civic participation, In: Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 38 (1), p.62. 3 Jürgen Habermas defined the term public sphere in 1962 in his book Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit in Germany. Later the book was translated into The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and first published in 1989, Blackwell Publishers, UK. 4 Allan, Stuart/Thorsen, Einar (2009): Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives, Peter Lang, New York, to note here that most people who fulfill this role on a regular basis may not even be fully aware of their position as citizen journalists. They are simply so habituated to recording all details of their lives and uploading it to the internet on the many social media platforms and apps such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, YouTube etc, that it is now second nature to them. Nevertheless, this real time flow of information enables a many-to-many style of communication by bearing witness to events and happenings from a very personal perspective. In addition, it also excludes the interference and influence from traditional legacy media houses which is an important characteristic of citizen journalism. Citizen journalists have the most cru-

cial advantage of accessibility. They are there in times and places, when and where media persons cannot be. This has no doubt proved very helpful in most scenarios. On July 7th, 2005 the bomb attacks in London's underground in particular changed the approach to journalism. Witnesses on the scenes were instrumental in sharing photos and videos from their personal mobile phones. With the advent of affordable and userfriendly mobile technology, more and more people have the tools to become citizen journalists. Here doubts arise regarding the skills and literacy of users to make proper use of this technology to benefit the situation. This important aspect will be discussed in the later part of the paper. Therefore, in the instances of crisis, the eye-witness accounts of citizens have been decisive in providing timely aid and assistance. During earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters, the affected areas become inaccessible for external help. Here, citizens on the ground can be very helpful in providing information about what is going on. Citizen journalism also plays a wide role in fighting for many causes including human rights, climate change, women's rights by raising awareness in the world, generating support and momentum. This is particularly important in democratic countries. When official insitutions fall short, participatory journalism sets in. Also, the limitations of mainstream media's agenda setting ignores

certain kinds of news topics or hierarchical gate-keeping excludes news, the important alternative of perspective is provided by citizen journalism.⁵ This argument is further strengthened in countries where the mainstream media status is weak. Monopoly of media ownership, undue influence of the State and lack of Press Freedom are some aspects which could give further momentum to citizen journalism. As the readership of mainstream traditional media declines, the audience is looking for other alternatives to acquire their information. Even though, this all seems very straight forward, it can in reality be problematic.

Gillmor, Dan (2004): We the Media: The Rise of Citizen Journalists, In: National Civic Review, Vol 93 (3), pp. 58-63.

There is a lot of research and talk on the benefits of citizen journalism but not on citizen generated content (CGC) in particular. The first and foremost fear in this type of content is the lack of verification involved. When someone without the right skills of verification and factchecking comes into contact with information, he would not be in the capacity to further dissipate that information. But inadvertently he does. The lack of gate-keepers in the spread of information through the internet has led to a global issue of fake news which is further enabled by the spread of information by people without realising

what they are doing. This inadvertent and unintentional spread of fake news is termed as misinformation by Claire Wardell.⁶ Misinformation is a possible ill-effect of citizen journalism especially in cultures where the people of the country believe that they are helping others by sharing the information they possess but on the contrary are not. This raises questions about the reliability of the citizen reporter. On October 3, 2008 an anonymous iReporter⁷ sent in the news about Steve Jobs being rushed to the ER after suffering from a major heart attack. This news had major repercussions. Within minutes the stock market was spiraling and once the rumour was shot down as fake, CNN's credibility was on shaky ground.⁸ As previously mentioned, development in modern technology has brought gadgets and social media into the daily lives and homes of people. Simply the availability of such tools does not necessarily imply the possession of the appropriate skill set to handle them. Citizens need literacy training to firstly know how to navigate through the burden of information they come into contact with so they can verify the facts. This would also keep them well-informed about current events and circumstances. Secondly, citizens also need the media literacy to be critical. A simple definition of media literacy is, 'Media Literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms'.⁹ This would

ensure neutrality in their reporting of incidents. It should shy away from personal opinions and concentrate on the facts of the situation: a task very difficult for ordinary people to conform to without practise and training. Such characteristics mark the biggest differences in values between mainstream journalists and citizen journalists. This is no way an admittance of unwavering neutrality in the work of all mainstream media but it simply reflects on the universally accepted qualities of media professionals. Reflecting back on preexisting stereotypes and emotions, citizen journalists are known to wrongly provide only a one

Wardle, Claire (February, 16, 2017): Fake news. Its complicated, <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-itscomplicated-d0f773766c79>, retrieved on December 23, 2018. 7 iReport is a user generated news platform owned and managed by CNN. 8 Allan, Stuart/Thorsen, Einar (2009): Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives, Peter Lang, New York, p 3. 9 Center for Media Literacy, <https://www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more>, retrieved on Decemeber 22, 2018. sided account of situations. Combined with algorithms and the formation of echo-chambers, this information is circulated vastly amongst people with the similar mindset. While on the one hand this automated functioning of algorithms filters information, on the

other hand users are in the position to actively choose the media content they wish to subscribe to. Such play on access leads to selective discourse and possible polarization of public opinion in the society.

Another major criticism of citizen journalism is the lack of ethics involved in the dissemination of information. This aspect again reflects on the lack of education and training of citizens. While on the one hand, the freedom of expression permits people to share all kinds of information, on the other hand there should be a duty placed on the citizen journalists to report in a moral fashion. Such ethical sensibility is particularly important in news of sensitive nature for example, involving children or women. In such regard, professional journalists are bound by rules of conduct, holding them accountable for their work. There are strict laws which state what must be done or must not be done in reporting, failing to follow would be considered violations and lead to punishments. This fear of accountability gets hazy while discussing citizen journalism because the communication takes place primarily on digital platforms. The use of the internet permits the possibilites of anonymity to its users, hence giving rise to lack of accountability. Considering the limitless reach of the internet, the question then arises about the possible dangerous consequences of citizen journalism without ethical boundaries or fears of liability.

Conclusion

This paper took a brief look at the meaning of citizen journalism and at its merits primarily accessibility of information and technology, in circumstances when mainstream media failed. This set the base for discussing the demerits of the concept of citizen journalism. The main criticism stems from the possible lack of capabilities of citizen journalists to be objective, neutral, professional and transparent in their style of reporting. Unlike mainstream professionals, citizen journalists are not trained or educated in the work they invariably do. Additionally, there is a focus needed on verification of information to ensure its authenticity. From an ethical perspective, this style of reporting needs some guidance. In this regard, the collaborations between citizen journalists and main stream media could be a possible solution which would benefit everyone. Such collaborations give credibility to the citizens who share information and also the media houses which are willing to involve citizens in the reporting process and benefit from the changing patterns of journalism and interaction with the audience.¹⁰ While there is always a possibility for error, it is safe to conclude that the journalistic landscape has changed to include more players, adding to competition and encouraging interesting alliances in the future.

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