

ETHICS IN CITIZEN JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

The advent of internet and mobile technology brought in a sea change in the operations and functions of Media, slowly but steadily it witnessed significant changes over the years creating a platform and access to quick and speedy information across the globe. Slowly but steadily a virtual digital world was created without any boundaries or limitations backed up by technology creating a new platform for social interaction among people to share or exchange information, ideas, views, news and much more through Virtual communities and networks termed as Social Media.

Thus Social media gained enormous popularity and inroads in main Stream or traditional media with Micro-blogging, web-blogging, Citizen Journalism and so on. Today the potential benefits of citizen journalism as a source for quick news updates are widely acknowledged by all media professionals and Institutes, as result many mainstream media institutions are partnering with them.

The paper analyzes the ethical issues involved in citizen journalism as it overlaps with many ethical aspects of Journalism. In view of the fact that Firstly there are no specific media laws or editorial ethics in place for Citizen Journalists unlike journalists in the traditional media. Secondly Citizen Journalists do not adhere to any norms or governing body and thirdly given the instantaneous nature of the Internet and its fast potential global reach its power, impact and effect to pose political and social upheaval in the society at times of social unrest.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Social Media, Ethics, Citizen Journalism

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Research

Today technologies are constantly redefining and reshaping functions and operations of media. The internet and the mobile technology has created a new sphere and phenomena in every possible stream and is dominated the Media world. It has opened up a new frontier and introduced a concept where in any common man in his capacity as a citizen takes up an initiative and play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information on various events and issues in the world popularly termed as Citizen Journalism. While it is certainly true that technological developments have made it possible for citizen journalism to gain popularity and make a mark of its self in main stream media.

The world has never been as informed as it is today, nor has there ever been such ready and easy access to the news. Switching on the television or radio or flicking through newspapers is no longer the primary methods by which

consumers get their news. Instead, hands are drawn to picking up a telephone, switching on a laptop or checking a tablet, all of which provide access to social media, without a doubt the most significant advance in the recent history of the media.

American sociologist Herbert J. Gans said almost 30 years ago said that “the news may be too important to leave to the journalists alone” (1980, p322). While this statement may be even truer in the current mediascape, citizen journalism plays a vital role in reclaiming the balance of power between news organizations and audiences. By changing the relationship from a top-down lecture to a two-way conversation “news audiences have begun to reclaim their place in the news cycle” (Bruns, 2005, p9).

Citizen journalism is very much a social development, produced and shaped by the “former audience,” (Gillmor, 2004) which now chooses to produce journalistic content.

At present a number of Independent and exclusive citizen journalism news portals have also emerged that are trying their best in inviting and highlighting the unheard voices of citizens. In fact, the number of citizen journalism sites is constantly increasing as more and more new media writers are taking up the pen and the number of people accessing the Internet continues to rise. These news portals and blog sites are operating across the globe that offers Common masses a platform to be citizen journalists and share their stories with rest of the world. Citizens not otherwise employed as journalists find themselves with access to tools for recording and sharing text, photos, video, audio, and other content more quickly and easily than ever before. Apps for digital cameras contained within cell phones enable users to upload pictures instantly to social networks, blogs, and photo-sharing sites.

Now widely equipped with tools for recording and sharing content online, citizens have become much more active in producing and distributing news. The resulting expansion of the network of “mass self-communicators” (Castells, 2007) has led to a wealth of news and information content online that comes from outside the walls, or firewalls, of professional journalism organizations.

The Rise of Citizen Journalism during Arab Spring

For the first time in the history, countries in the Middle East witnessed a deluge of Citizen Journalists reporting events and posting photographs during the Arab Spring that began with the protest in Tunisia and spread across Yemen, Libya, Egypt and Syria.. It was a liberation sparked by one man’s shocking public protest through self-immolation and fueled by the power of citizen journalism and social media against injustice and oppression under Dictators.

Most of the incidents and events were reported by tourists and common citizen as and when it was unfolded. Anybody who was present on the streets be it tourists, protesters or shop keepers or passer-by become citizen journalists recording events using his mobile phone and camera and uploading it immediately. The power of citizen journalism was displayed with citizen updating information on Facebook, blogs, [Instagram](#) photos, and Twitter, you tube and sending information, news, video clips, photographs to news channels and newspapers. Many a times they relied on reports from citizen journalists who were present on the ground and reporting ground the clock.

Social media played a major part in instigating the revolutions which has brought about the shifts in power hence its influence and significance was acknowledged worldwide. Therefore, there can be no doubt that online media and citizen journalism have witnessed serious developments and influence during the course of the Arab Spring.

For many of the Arab Spring countries, the press has long served as an arm of the government. As the doors to

freedom and democracy swing open in the wake of revolutions, a flood of citizen journalists rushes in to take the place of media outlets held up by old regimes. But without training in ethics, accuracy and production skills, these new citizen journalists became a threat and risk.

Problem: Citizen Journalism its Ethics and Credibility

The issues of ethics and credibility poses a major challenge in citizen journalism as it overlaps with many ethical aspects of Journalism. As brave as citizen journalists are, their work raises a number of challenges. They are not professional journalists and they are often supporters of a certain cause, filming action as it unfolds around them. An interesting fact was that since the events were reported by common people and protests they were no journalistic ethics or reporting style that was followed.

Citizen journalists not only lack professional status but their emergence is relatively new and recent and hence there are no proper guidelines and code of ethics specified and rarely followed, since most of the reports are by ordinary citizen without any prior knowledge.

In view of the fact that Firstly there are no specific media laws or editorial ethics in place for Citizen Journalists unlike journalists in the traditional media. Secondly Citizen Journalists do not adhere to any norms or governing body and thirdly given the instantaneous nature of the Internet and its fast potential global reach its power, impact and effect to pose political and social upheaval in the society at times of social unrest.

Ethics in Citizen Journalism: A Reality Check

With the power of the media now in the hands of every citizen with a smartphone, questions about ethics and accuracy are working their way through the journalism industry — how do we know what we see on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter is true? Who are the media watchdogs for a form of journalism rooted in unedited immediacy?

Generally, accuracy and attribution are considered paramount, as is the duty to minimize harm. Moreover, many news media and journalism organizations do have codes of ethics or explicitly state ethical goals, values, or missions. The fact that ethics codes are commonly framed from a social responsibility perspective explains why codes are generally perceived to lie within the domain of ethics and moral philosophy as opposed to law and precedent; moreover, codes articulate both a set of rules for “normal journalistic practice” as well as to inspire the highest ideals in the profession (Brennen & Wilkins, 2004).

A few codes of ethics developed for online journalism have a great deal in common with

Professional journalists’ codes of ethics, the three principles of Cyberjournalist.net’s (2003) Blogger’s Code of Ethics are to be honest and fair, accountable, and to minimize harm. Martin Kuhn (2007) proposed a mix of ethical and practical guidelines for bloggers: promote interactivity, free expression, and the “human” element, and strive for factual truth and transparency. An ethics code for online journalism developed at the University of Southern California mandates honesty and disclosure of sources, conflicts and motivation to publish. The Huffington Post, which has enlisted the help of readers to generate news urges citizen journalism to conform to specific standards: stick to facts, avoid hearsay, omit irrelevant opinion, never plagiarize, never edit or alter photos, identify yourself when reporting, identify and fact-check sources. These express no ethical principles to which citizens might aspire, although they articulate rules governing both the content of citizen journalism and the behavior of citizen journalists.

An interesting aspect seen in the online citizen journalism website Mynews, an Indian-based site launched in 2006 requires all its “citizen reporters” to “abide by a strict Code of Ethics.” MyNews Reporter’s Code of Ethics requires its citizen reporters to identify themselves as citizen reporters while covering stories and to use “legitimate” methods to gather information. The rest of the principles were stated in the negative: The ethical citizen reporter does NOT spread information that is false, distorted, or based on groundless assumptions; use abusive, vulgar, or otherwise offensive language; damage reputations of people or infringe on personal privacy; or seek personal profit. Moreover, in an unusual addition, the code described citizen reporters as apologizing fully for incorrect or inappropriate coverage.

Many other news website gives ethics little attention and rarely took seriously the ethical obligations and issues of citizen journalists, beyond recognition of issues relating to privacy, accuracy, and copyright, as well as spamming. Generally the emphasis was on prohibited behaviors, such as not allowing content that is abusive, rude, inappropriate, obscene, or racist. Most sites made clear that engaging in specifically prohibited behaviors could result in removal of content or banning a user from the site. Prohibited behaviors were merely listed in legalistic language, apparently intended to eliminate liability for the site’s owners; most commonly banned were copyright violations, harassment, illegal or unlawful acts, and junk mail, spam, and advertising. Nearly all sites provided a Terms of Service or User Agreement, to which users indicated agreement by clicking a button on the registration page. A few sites discussed libel and defamation in a more general context than the terms of use policy, although very few explained what might constitute libelous or defamatory content.

Solution: Functional Aspects of Citizen Journalism

Online media are here to stay, but so is the practice of journalism, with the associated levels of professionalism, ethics and objectivity essential to transmitting the truth. Social media can be used for introducing good changes, it allows us to be more open, and lets us learn more about the world around us – but it can also be used to misinform and mislead people. “There is a lot of junk out there, and people need to be careful there is an immediate need for self-regulation to ensure that people do not use social media to misinform others and work as propaganda.” If professionals and consumers alike can remain vigilant in their approach towards citizen journalism, and maintain a balanced approach, then rather than fear and trepidation, online media can be viewed with excitement.

One of the main problems associated with online media is finding credible, verifiable sources. According to [a report by Social Media Today](#), almost half (49.1%) of online users have been tricked by false, supposed ‘breaking news.’ While false information can result from harmless mistakes, it can also be a dangerous tool to be abused, meaning that verifying the accuracy of any information is of the utmost importance.

‘News,’ photographs and video footage can be used for any of these means, and so it is essential that this kind of information is verified before it can be acted upon. People in conflict zones continue to use social media for a wide variety of reasons, whether for reporting the situation on the ground to the outside world or for gathering people for demonstrations, meetings or military operations.

And so professionals using citizen journalists as sources must ensure that they check the truth of their claims at all times. This is by no means a new phenomena; the difference is that potentially false information is much more readily available nowadays, and easy, quick access can provide serious temptation to cut journalistic corners.

Ethical questions arise when blogs are read as news and in turn create a new wave of online journalists – intentional or not. “New technology and delivery systems make it necessary for journalists to develop new, more sophisticated, ethical decision-making skills,” mentions Jay Black, the editor of the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. Citizen Journalism websites and channels where citizens contribute journalistic content vary greatly in their structures, goals, economic models and, especially, in their ethical principles or guidelines. Platforms for sharing information often include no more than minimal rules, such as requiring users to provide a username and password.

Most of the website and online platforms state general values or provide instructions for contributors about how to post information. On the other hand, few offered guidelines for gathering information; instead, they merely provide an end user license agreement or terms of use policy outlining the liability of each party—generally, limiting the liability of the owners and managers of the site. Moreover, although users must click a button stating that they have read the policy, the policy’s placement implies that users are not actually expected to read it; indeed, the detailed, formal legalistic language actively discourages reading. The same news organizations that hire ombudsmen and publish lengthy ethics statements offer little or no ethics guidance to commentators; they simply ban obscenity and rude behavior. Most conventional news organizations borrow, albeit inconsistently, from their parent outlet in offering thin rules for content contributed by nonprofessionals. Even the most sophisticated of these citizen news sites have given far less attention to ethical conflicts and dilemmas than have many online crowd-sourced projects. In addition, there has been no scholarly attention to this question. Sites also vary in the extent to which they attempt to prevent or punish violations of the codes or guidelines. Some, for example, merely follow Clay Shirky’s (2008) “publish, then filter” model: They allow participants to complain and to insist that content be deleted.

Lee Salter (2009) proposed understanding citizen journalism in relation to law, although applying law is especially challenging in an online environment said to transcend jurisdictions. For example, he pointed out that citizen journalists may seek rights as journalists but simultaneously seek protection in anonymity and a sense of freedom stemming from exploiting the technology by the Internet. But too often, however, the hype about citizen journalism ignores questions about responsibilities of citizen journalists.

CONCLUSIONS

As the saying goes, information is power, but misinformation and the ability to mislead can be equally powerful and potentially disastrous. Media as a fourth estate is entrusted with providing accurate, accountable information to the public. Reporting can make and break reputations, affect social, political, economical financial balance worldwide. With so much power concentrated in the fourth estate, it's important that journalists follow rigid standards and as a matter of ethics, accuracy matters more than just reporting.

These concerns are particularly relevant in the Arab world with the prevalence of social media as a political tool, but they also apply to the rest of the world, where the definition of what exactly constitutes journalism is becoming less clear cut as a result. The lines between journalism and citizen journalism may be blurring, but there are still defining factors which provide clarity to the distinction between professionals and citizens. Just as legal definitions and legislation are being forced to recognize the importance of modern forms of media, perhaps the definition of journalism will morph in the future, and begin to account for bloggers and media activists. But for now, the separation remains and until a code of practice or effective regulation are introduced for online media platforms.

Media has an important role to play in democracy, it is vital to build a network of well-trained, ethical citizen journalists is a first step toward building a strong press. The role of citizen journalism should be preserving freedom of speech social harmony and promoting democracy as an efficient and credible institution and not a double-edged sword.

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