

Citizen Journalism: A primer on the definition, risks and benefits and main debates in media communications research.

Summary

Mainstream media like television, radio and newspapers used to be the primary sources of news in the pre-Internet era. That situation is changing. News websites, most of which are hosted by the major media companies are now competing sources of news.

Alternative news sources on the Internet, like websites featuring user-generated content (USG), blogs, social networking sites and wikis are also gaining momentum. Like mainstream media, these sites offer a wide variety of news. Some of the news articles on these sites are original reporting of local events and disasters, contributed by audiences or users and some of it is commentary on entertainment and news stories appearing in mainstream media elsewhere.

Contribution of user generated content (USG) by the wider public or ‘citizen journalism’ as it is commonly known is a growing phenomenon. In theory, its benefits are that audiences witnessing incidents can post eyewitness accounts on the Internet as soon as they happen or send reports and photos to the media.

Citizen journalism is also a growing voice comprised of blogs and social media that analyse and debate issues and stories appearing in mainstream media. Such commentary and debate generally keeps stories alive much longer than the original publishers. Some debates say this is emerging to be one of the most important functions of citizen journalism.

With no ethics and media laws to worry about, unlike journalists in the mainstream media, citizen journalists can offer unmediated and anonymous debate and analysis of issues. According to some debates, this is the fundamental problem of citizen journalism ; the ability to hide behind anonymity and potentially feed opinion or false information as fact into the media.

1 The phenomenon of citizen journalism: benefits, risks and debates in communications and media research.

The potential benefits of citizen journalism as a source of up-to date news are widely acknowledged by media professionals and debates in media research. However, some debates say the disadvantages and risks outweigh the benefits by far. They say that given the instantaneous nature of the Internet and its potential global reach, anyone with a hidden agenda can potentially hide behind the anonymity of the Internet and post a false

story or opinion story hidden as fact and potentially spread it globally in minutes. Others say such risks can be mitigated by strengthening existing editorial checks and approaches.

1.1 The beginnings of citizen journalism

The growth of citizen journalism is tied to the growth of interactivity on the Internet. When physicist Tim Berners-Lee launched the world's first website <http://info.cern.ch/> back in 1991, his site offered audiences very limited interactivity. Internet technology was limited in this regard. Over the coming years, a variety of new features and functions on the Internet made it easy for audiences to interact with other audiences or with website publishers.

Real change did not come until 2004 when Web 2.0 features started appearing on websites. Web 2.0 features enabled consumers or ordinary people to publish their own websites or weblogs, or feed content into the mainstream media among many other features. WordPress and BlogSpot are examples of such platforms.

“Some of the characteristics often noted as descriptive of Web 2.0 include blogging, RSS-generated syndication, social networking sites like *YouTube*, *Facebook*, mash-ups, wikis like Wikipaedia and other collaborative applications and interactive encyclopedias and dictionaries....”¹

Before the Internet, the main participation in the media by the wider public had been writing “letters to the editor” and offering news tips, among other things. The combination of Web 2.0 features and digital technologies, like digital cameras or video camcorders and camera enabled mobile phones made it easy to gather and capture video and photographs and post them online.

In some ways, this slowly marked the beginnings of audience participation in online media. Commonly referred to as ‘citizen journalism’, the phenomenon is also known by other terms such as ‘amateur journalism’ or ‘accidental journalists’ and the content is simply referred to as ‘user generated content’, or USG.

1.2 The growth of citizen journalism

Audiences are increasingly creating content and publishing it themselves or contributing it to the media rather than just consuming it, as has almost always been the case. Debates on the impact of this trend on mainstream media are widely contested. Some see these audiences playing a larger role in providing news content to the media. They say the wider public could be the eyes and ears of the media and do “hard news reporting” and provide instant accounts and photographs and videos of incidents as and when events

happen. The Korean site [OhMyNews](#) which publishes content mostly from citizen journalists is often cited as an example of one model that has worked well.

Hard news reporting requires an on-the-ground presence. The 2004 Indonesian Boxing Day Tsunami, the July 2005 London Bombing and the 2007 Virginia Tech disasters are cited in many research studies as examples where audiences on the ground took photographs, text and voice messages and eye witness accounts which told the ‘story’ in ways that almost eclipsed the traditional way of reporting news.²

Detractors however criticize citizen journalism and say there are many risks, particularly the potential of false news being published online

Increasingly, citizen journalism is focusing a great deal opinion. There are now many forums and blogs in different parts of the world where audiences discuss, analyze and do ‘post mortems’ of stories appearing in the media. The discussions are wide ranging and include politics, the ins-and-outs of government or economic policy or sometimes expressions of raw personal opinions. Some of these discussions are random, but others are consistent and well synthesized and articulated.

1.3 Definitions of citizen journalists

The term citizen journalist did not exist before the advent of the Internet. Citizen journalism grew in tandem with the growth of the interactive functions on the Internet. Although it encompasses many aspects and comes in different forms, including blogs, forums, uploading photographs or videos to the media, citizen journalism has one fundamental basis. In “*Writing for a convergent media*”, author Thom Lieb says this one thing is “contributing journalistic content to the news process” and gives blogging as an example of one component of citizen journalism.³

This description is echoed by the *Source Watch- a project of the Centre for Media and Democracy* which describes citizen journalism as individuals “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” and adds that “citizen journalism is slowly being looked upon as a form of rightful democratic ways of giving honest news, articles, etc, directly by citizens of the world from anywhere.”⁴

New York University Journalism Professor and citizen journalism advocate Jay Rosen defines citizen journalism by explaining why it is happening in the first place:

“Citizen journalists are ‘the people formerly known as the audience’, are those who *were* on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another— and who *today* are not in a situation like that *at all*”

“Think of passengers on your ship who got a boat of their own. The writing readers. The viewers who picked up a camera. The formerly atomized listeners

who with modest effort can connect with each other and gain the means to speak— to the world, as it were”⁵

1.4 Benefits of citizen journalism

The sheer magnitude of the impact of a number of natural disasters (such as the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunamis in Southeast Asia) that occurred in the last few years would have been very challenging for any media organization to cover, no matter how deep their pockets are. Coverage of disasters is mostly a race against time. It is a fact that journalists are not always present when incidents or disasters strike. Their job is to piece together the occurrences using images, videos and eyewitness accounts. As Dan Gillmor says citizen journalists can help “capture the moment, not the aftermath”⁶

Some of the people who witnessed or survived the earthquake and tsunami which hit the Indonesian coast on December 26, 2004 used cam-coders, digital cameras and mobile phones to capture the unfolding event and damage and sent them in to media organisations like the BBC, MSNBC and CNN and many other news outlets and also published them on blogs.

Similarly, during the London Bombing and Virginia Tech shooting, eyewitnesses captured images on their cellphones and cameras and sent them in to the media or published them together with personal accounts on blogs and websites. It is highly unlikely if conventional news coverage using reporters would have brought to light the full scale of the damage. In all these instances, the imagery and material from these people added a new dimension to the coverage of the disasters.

Commenting on www.poynter.org, journalist Steve Outing said that the earthquake and tsunamis in South Asia and their aftermath represented “a tipping point in so-called ‘citizen journalism’ ”, a fact which is now common knowledge and alluded to by many in the media and in communication research.

“Digital technologies -- the Web, e-mail, blogs, digital cameras, camera phones -- have evolved to the point where people on the scene share with professional journalists the ability to reach a wide audience, to tell and show the world what they saw and experienced. Where once disaster eyewitness photographs and videos turned up for widespread viewing only on news programs and in newspapers, today through e-mail, blogs, and a blogging infrastructure that spreads amateur news quickly and efficiently, they often find large audiences without the help or need of mainstream news outlets”⁷

The most notable success story in citizen journalism is South Korea’s online news OhMyNews which was founded in 2000 with the motto "Every Citizen is a Reporter". The newspaper’s open source business model is to accept, edit and publish articles from

its readers. Whilst the *OhMyNews* model is doing well in South Korea, *OhMyNews* Japan failed to take off and was forced to close down in 2007.

1.5 Is citizen journalism a threat to professional journalism?

Given that audiences now have the Internet access and hardware, in other words the means to do some journalism, can citizen journalism be a threat to traditional journalism? Early predictions that emerged from the beginning of the millennium, which were utopian predicted the demise of mainstream media at the hands of citizen journalism. This however is a highly contested debate as on the other side there are those who dismiss the potential for citizen journalism.

“The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. And it’s doing just that on the Internet”⁸

The question is, does having the enabling means to do something automatically make it easy, possible or attractive to do? Those expectations from the first few years of the millennium, which were filled with enthusiasm and hype are now being countered by reviews and verdicts expressing doubt or limitations of the success of citizen journalism.

Writing in the *Washington Times*, 17 March 2008, staff writer Jennifer Harper says that the “prospects for user-created content appear limited and less valuable”, adding that “the much-ballyhooed world of citizen blogs, meanwhile, may have “limitations.”⁹

Deuze et al support this view in their investigation of the emergence of citizen journalism in Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States and note how mainstream media is using citizen journalism content.

“For all its success, citizen journalism remains dependent to a significant extent on mainstream news organizations, whose output it debates, critiques, recombines, and debunks by harnessing large and distributed communities of users. At the same time, increasingly mainstream news is taking note of what the citizen journalists are saying, and uses content generated by users as an alternative to vox-pops, opinion polls, or in some cases indeed as a partial replacement of editorial work.”¹⁰

The [Project for Excellence in Journalism](#) offers the greatest indictment on the phenomenon of citizen journalism in the United States. In their 2008 annual report The [Project for Excellence in Journalism](#) concluded that while a lot of communications researchers and scholars have been “scripting the demise of the profession at the hands of

citizen journalists or the contributors”, some research suggests that “citizen journalism is an overrated phenomenon”

“The prospects for user-created content once thought possibly central to the next era of journalism, now appear more limited. News people report that the most promising parts of citizen input are new ideas, sources, comments, pictures, and video. But citizens posting news content has proved less valuable, with too little that is new or verifiable” they conclude.¹¹

In *Online Journalism*, Francois Nel concludes that unless the citizen activity is directly enhancing the journalist’s offering (for example, by offering news pictures from their mobile phones), “all citizens publishing is competing for time and attention, altering the control mutuality balance...”¹²

Debates say what could be limiting citizen journalism is the lack of rewards or incentives. *New Zealand Herald Online* publisher Jeremy Rees agrees that remuneration could expand citizen journalism:

“Yes I do. Are the economics there to be able to do it? I don’t know. Under economic restraints at the moment, you’re having to really make a leap of faith for a lot of the mainstream media who tend to say ‘oh I’ll send our staff to do it’...”¹³

Journalist and author Dan Gillmor sees incentives as a good way of attracting citizen journalists;

‘Incentives generally have an effect. But the current procedure that I’ve seen generally is to say ‘please send us things, if we use them, thank you very much. That seems to be kind of an unfair system’

Dan Gillmor adds that the way the media could get more participants is to “solicit video and information from people and pay for it instead of assuming that it’s free”¹⁴

1.6 Risks of citizen journalism

In the short history of the Internet, millions of stories have been written and published online. A few of these stories written and submitted by citizen journalists have risen to prominence for the wrong reasons and are always used to serve as a reminder of the dangers of publishing stories from anonymous, untrained sources or without verifying the information. In a typical case of “one bad apple spoiling the barrel”, a story headlined ‘Steve Jobs rushed to ER following severe heart attack’ posted on CNN’s [iReport](#) on 3 October 2008 illustrates the dangers of citizen journalism. The Steve Jobs in question is Apple’s CEO.

The story turned out to be false, but not before it affected Apple's share price, according to *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist Reyhan Harmanci whose story [Citizen Journalism carries unique pitfalls](#), published on October 2008, explained what unfolded¹⁵

This incident “sparked debate about the accuracy of reports from these web sites and showing how it takes only a few minutes for a scurrilous rumour, placed on a site without sufficient editorial checks, to inflict damage” concluded Reyhan Harmanci.¹⁵

There are many more examples in different parts of the world where unverified report or images have been submitted and used in mainstream media only to turn out to be false or manipulated.¹⁶

Potential false news reports are just one of the many possible ramifications of sourcing news from anonymous sources. The news could be factually correct, but have flaws like blatant disregard of ethics, lack of objectivity, impartiality and balance. It could also be a hidden agenda or opinion sugarcoated as fact or a libelous or defamatory statement that puts subjects in the story in bad light. In mainstream media, a process of verification and checks called gatekeeping can weed out any such inaccuracies and biases. Gate keeping, so it's called, is done by experienced and trained journalists and editors, using tools and skills like knowledge of the law and in house or commercial stylebooks such as the *Associated Press Stylebook*.

2 Where to for citizen journalists?

There is increased recognition and acknowledgement of citizen journalism by established media and audiences alike. Some professional media have taken the initiative to help would be journalists or citizen journalists with tools, skills and tips of the journalism trade. Websites like <http://jtoolkit.com> offer training for multimedia and online journalists in gathering audio, editing, ethics, interview, research. There are many initiatives being undertaken by different media in different parts of the world.

Most websites that run citizen journalists content now offer prescriptive guidelines on not only how to submit or upload content, but also on how to compile a report. CNN's iReport has a [“Community Guideline”](#) a page write-up on what is news and what's not acceptable on their site. NowPublic has a guide [“I want to write something”](#) and OhMyNews has a comprehensive [FAQ section](#)

Other forms of help for citizen journalists include legal aid. [The Citizen Media Law Project](#) is a guide that acknowledges the need for legal advice for citizen bloggers or media creators with or without formal training. The guide offers some generic information that is helpful even for those outside America where it is published.

“Knowing legal rights and responsibilities is important for anyone who publishes online. The CMLP's legal guide addresses the legal issues you may encounter as

you gather information and publish your work. The guide is intended for use by citizen media creators with or without formal legal training, as well as others with an interest in these issues.”¹⁷

3 Conclusion

The risks and dangers of using copy from citizen journalists are real; the interconnectedness of the Internet means that unchecked false reports can be fed into the media, on a blog for instance and be picked up by many more websites and within minutes circulate throughout the world.

The overall benefit however is that citizen journalism can help keep news current by publishing news as it happens. This can enrich mainstream media. With time, most citizen journalism will be clued on the do’s and don’ts of journalism and this can reduce the potential risk of citizen journalism to both the citizen journalist and the publisher.

Some of those who dismiss citizen journalism as irrelevant seem to ignore the fact that citizen journalism is a developing phenomenon that only started way after the Internet started commercially in the 1990s. Web 2.0, the interactive features that enable blogs and social networking has been in existence for less than ten years. Mainstream journalism on the other hand has existed for more than 500 years. As such, it’s fair to say any conclusions dismissing citizen journalism or audience participation in the media are still too early. At the same time, glorifying citizen journalism as a replacement of traditional journalism is premature. Predicting the future of the media is impossible.

¹ Web 2.0 http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0.,sid9_gci1169528.00.html

² Steve Outing, Poynter Online

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=76520
Fry, Katherine G. (2008), “News as subject: What is it? Where is it? Whose is it?” In *Journalism Studies, Vol. 9, No 4, 2008*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616700802114258> downloaded on 6 November 2008

³ Lieb, T. (2009). *All the news: writing and reporting for convergent media*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon

⁴ Citizen Journalism http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Citizen_journalism

⁵ Jay Rosen

http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html

⁶ Dan Gillmor in interview with BBC's Roy Greenslade
Press For Freedom Part 4 Wed 2 Jan 2008

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/docarchive/all>

⁷ Steve Outing, Poynter Online

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=76520

⁸ Bowman, Shayne., Willis, Chris., *We Media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*, The Media Center at the American Press Institute 2003

⁹Jennifer Harper, Journalism troubled, not lost

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/mar/17/journalism-troubled-not-lost-report-suggests/print/>

¹⁰Mark Deuze, Axel Bruns, and Christoph Neuberger., *Preparing for an Age of Participatory News*, In *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 1, No 3, 2007

¹¹Citizen Journalism- www.stateofthenewsmedia.org.

¹² Nel, Francois., Ward, Mike., Rawlinson, Alan., *Online Journalism.*, In *The future of journalism in the advanced democracies* , Anderson, Peter J., Ward, (Eds) Aldershot, Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT., Ashgate 2007 pp 121-122

¹³ Jeremy Rees, New Zealand Herald online Publisher in an interview with Vincent Murwira 27 February 2009

¹⁴ Dan Gillmor, Journalist & author, in an interview with Vincent Murwira 30 May 2009

¹⁵ Reyhan Harmanci, Citizen Journalism carries unique pitfalls, San Francisco Chronicle, 05/10/2008, pA7, 0p <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/05/MNIV13B9E4.DTL>

¹⁶ See *Research Findings* in the Exegesis under Research Articles on the home page at www.theopennewsroom.com

¹⁷ Citizen Media Law Project Legal Guide <http://www.citmedialaw.org/legal-guide>

