

# The No-Nonsense guide to Citizen journalism and freedom of expression



*Increasingly the norm in almost every country of the world – in urban and rural settings – is the sight of ordinary people using digital technology to report what is going on around them. Even the most basic phone has a camera and it has become simple to post images, video and text to social media sites at the click of a button. As a result, “citizen journalists” – ordinary people doing the job of reporters – are everywhere.*

A journalist working for a media corporation, a major television network or a leading publication is part of a team trained to make sure that stories are accurate and ethical. National newspapers, magazines, and television news networks all have well organized and equipped newsrooms. Each day assignment editors go through a range of possible stories for that day and assign reporters whose task is to develop a story in time to have a well-edited version ready by a certain deadline. And in the age of digital technologies, deadlines get shorter and shorter!

The situation is different for the citizen journalist. There is no newsroom. There is no assignment editor. There is no copy editor to check and perfect the final version of the story. Citizen journalists are on their own. And, once they stumble across a story, they face the challenge of how to get the widest possible audience.

Today, the Internet is home to hundreds of recognized independent news organizations and blogs as well as traditional news organizations. And, ironically, while traditional news websites are trying to be more like blogs, blogs are trying to be more like traditional news websites. Both

are looking to break a good story, especially one that is tailor-made and ready to go. And if a story is published on a top online source, there is more chance an editor or producer at a traditional outlet will pick it up.

So how does citizen journalism differ from traditional journalism?

## **What is citizen journalism?**

A former senior program manager for the Global Freedom of Expression Campaign, American journalist Courtney C. Radsch, is credited with providing a definition of citizen journalism in the context of the Arab Spring. Her doctoral dissertation and likely book titled *The Revolution Will be Blogged: Cyberactivism in Egypt* described it as:

“An alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a response to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism.”

Professional journalists cannot be everywhere at once and in many cases they often arrive after the news event has taken place. Nor can journalists be experts on every subject or attuned to the political, social and cultural nuances of a particular situation. Often they are banned or censored by regimes that do not want stories reported. Citizen journalists with camera phones can be the only source of first-hand information, much of which feeds into traditional media.

In many towns and cities the closure of local newspapers, and the absence of public service media, have spurred community activists to launch alternative media sites. At that level many of them hold local councils and elected representatives to account, using Freedom of Information to obtain information about decision-making and governance.

However, not everything that citizen journalists produce can be taken at face value and there are at least three reasons to be wary about what citizen journalists write, publish and upload.

*Bias:* Professional journalists are trained to delve into different sides of a story and (as far as possible) to be objective about what they are saying. Citizen journalists do not always have these skills and may well be biased – making their reporting unreliable.

*Libel:* The laws of libel apply equally to public media and to user-generated content on the Internet. When an unsubstantiated tweet can be front page news in seconds, there is a problem of potentially malicious or unthinking reports quickly making it into mainstream news.

*Copyright:* Many news sites actively encourage the upload of photos, video and text to give an added perspective to news and features. Content is vetted before being posted, and stories and videos are made available to journalists for developing into bigger pieces. However, it is the media site that gets an unconditional and worldwide licence to use and exploit the material as it sees fit.

However, there is a more fundamental issue that also affects citizen journalism: control over



how news is reported and disseminated. There is a historically long-running power struggle between the State and a free press. At different times, dictators, democratically elected leaders, and owners of multinational corporations have taken it in turns to control or censor freedom of expression, freedom of information, and freedom of the press.

In this respect, the new technologies of communication have offered ways for journalists and ordinary people to challenge the status quo and to subvert the system. No surprise that some governments have retaliated with an obstacle course of restrictions and censorship.

Technological advances have provided the tools that allow people to contribute and participate.

- \* Apple released the first iPad in April of 2010 and sold 3 million within 80 days. By the end of 2013 it was estimated that some 190,000 million tablets had been sold worldwide. Many people increasingly consume news on their

tablets and many news publications have created a tablet app.

- \* Digital cameras (including cinema cameras) are shrinking in size yet their capability is improving. What would have taken a small crew to do lighting and sound, as well as post-production and editing, can now be done on a smart phone and a laptop.
- \* Digital telephony, including Internet Protocol (IP) telephony involving the application of digital networking technology to create, transmit, and receive telecommunications sessions over computer networks, encompasses phone communication, Internet calling, mobile communication, faxing, voicemail and video conferencing.

Citizen journalism and social media seem to

fulfil people's desire for independent sources of information and knowledge that are untainted by government or corporate control. They respond to people's need for freedom of opinion and to participate in decision-making and to make informed choices about their lives. In particular, they have enormous potential when it comes to advancing gender equality.

A study by the [Association for Progressive Communications](#) (ACP) called "Going Visible: Women's Rights on the Internet" (October 2012) argued that the internet has become an increasingly critical public sphere for the claiming of citizenship rights and civil liberties, especially women's rights. It offers a space for those who have little access to other kinds of "publics" due to discrimination – based on gender, age, economic status and sexual identity – to negotiate and

*Citizen journalism has an important role to play in participatory communication for development, where it can raise the voices of those most affected by policy-makers who are remote from local contexts.*



claim their rights. ACP's study made a series of recommendations:

To governments and international organisations:

- \* Promote respect for human rights online and offline. Freedom of expression and opinion must be protected online, the same way they are protected offline.
- \* Promote women's and girls' communication rights in ICT use and online spaces, encouraging their participation, content creation and freedom of expression.
- \* Engage in the political discussion about the promotion of internet development and internet governance with a vision of gender inclusion, gender justice and respect for human rights.
- \* Promote and encourage women's participation in decision-making processes in ICT policies to secure that women's and girls' needs are properly considered, included and safeguarded. Protection and promotion of women's human rights cannot be left to private corporations, ISPs or individuals.

To the private sector:

- \* Internet and telecommunications businesses such as social networking platforms, web hosting companies and mobile phone operators should develop corporate user policies and practices that respect women's rights. This includes the adequate representation of women in policy-making and standards-setting processes, and ensuring that policies and standards consider the safety and security of users.

To civil society organisations:

- \* Women's organisations are called on to take action and use ICTs for activism to combat violence against women, promote equality and build solidarity. Women should take actions to control technology and change power relations in the ICT field.
- \* Women's organizations must actively participate

in movements for communication rights on the internet and affirm women's achievements and full participation in society, both online and offline.

[ARTICLE 19](#), a non-governmental organization dedicated to freedom of expression, says that "people everywhere must be able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information. Without these rights, democracy, good governance and development cannot happen." In March 2013 it published a special report on Brazil that looked at "Women on the Internet".

The report pointed out that while information and communication technologies have revolutionized the way women communicate and express their ideas, new forms of censorship are threatening the free flow of online information. Also the infrastructure to access the Internet and the skills required to maximize the potential of user-generated content can lead to the exclusion of women:

"For women, the Internet represents new opportunities and also new challenges to claim and fulfil their rights. It is also an important space for women's empowerment. The Internet grants access to information, enables their mobilisation and visibility, and helps them create new forms of expression and participation in public life."

[World Pulse](#) is one of a growing number of media action networks harnessing the power of digital technologies. Its aim is to lift up and unite women's voices to accelerate their impact on the world. Its web site claims:

"By connecting women through digital technology, we bring women's voices out of the shadows and on to the world stage. We equip grassroots women to become empowered leaders and vocal agents of change through our annual online citizen journalism and digital empowerment training program called 'Voices of Our Future'."





In 2014 World Pulse launched its “Women Weave the Web Campaign!” in support women who are using the Internet to transform the world. Three phases of the campaign aim to find out about challenges women have accessing the Internet and the solutions they and their communities are developing. The focus will then turn to Digital Literacy and then to Digital Empowerment in order to gather ideas about the tools women need to fully espouse the web. World Pulse intends to analyze the findings and present them to important international forums, policy leaders, media outlets, and technology companies.

Greater gender justice is not the only benefit offered by new information and communication technologies. In January 2014, ARTICLE 19

launched a social media project to facilitate discussion about issues surrounding religious intolerance in Malaysia, in partnership with the website [Projek Dialog](#). By supporting the website, ARTICLE 19 hoped to promote greater interfaith and intercultural understanding in the country.

Because religion plays a significant role in Malaysian politics, culture and identity, the Internet has created new spaces for people to discuss interfaith issues, with a great many people interacting through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. However, the online space for free expression has been under attack. Back in November 2013, Friday Muslim sermons, scripted officially by the Malaysian Department for Islamic Development (JAKIM), preached nationwide about

the threat that social media posed to Islam, and urged for more Internet control and for online censorship. These demands followed a series of arrests for online content that was deemed to be offensive to Islam.

Thomas Hughes, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19, observed:

“Malaysia is a very diverse country, with a multitude of languages, traditions and religions. It is vital that the authorities protect freedom of expression and promote dialogue, so that communities living together understand one another. Censorship, including restricting free speech online, breeds intolerance and damages society.” He added that, “The internet is a tool that can and should be used to build bridges between different religious communities.”

[Projek Dialog](#) specialises in publishing articles from a wide range of perspectives from different parts of Malaysian society, and promotes social media interaction as a platform for discussion about themes and specific issues relating to religion in Malaysia.

### **The future for journalism and social media**

Many people have made bold proclamations about the demise of professional journalism and the potential impact of social media. However, the reality is that these are still relatively uncharted

waters, with much yet to be discovered. While the need to keep their audiences updated on an increasingly regular basis is proving to be a challenge, the opportunities afforded by social media and the ability to reach a much wider readership are weighing heavily in their favour.

What is clear is that journalists have to embrace social media and online platforms if they are to maintain relevance and to engage with an information-savvy audience. At the same time, it would be detrimental to their profession if journalists were to become overly reliant on citizen journalism. They need to remain ethically vigilant as well to abide by time-honoured professional codes of conduct and practice.

As Clyde H. Bentley, currently Associate Professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, wrote in the introduction to his book [Citizen Journalism: Back to the Future?](#), commissioned by the Carnegie-Knight Task Force on the Future of Journalism Education:

“Citizen journalism is no more a replacement for professional journalism than teabags are a replacement for water. Both can stand comfortably alone, but when combined they produce something quite wonderful.”

*This No-Nonsense Guide (2014) is compiled from a variety of resources in the interests of freedom of expression and the right to communicate.*



WACC is a member of the  
**actalliance**

The [World Association for Christian Communication](#) is an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people’s dignity and community.

WACC is responsible for the [Centre for Communication Rights portal](#) – a source of documents and materials about all aspects of communication rights.

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