Blurring Boundaries: Comparing Professional Journalism and Citizen Journalism in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

The advent of the new media facilitated the creation, modifying and sharing of information among citizens. It is as a result of these that a participatory brand of journalism called citizen journalism came into existence. This paper interrogates the question of what is new about the new media, the influence of new media on conventional media, the internet as a global new media, new media, social media and online journalism, the concept of citizen journalism, perspectives on the practice of citizen journalism, and criticisms of citizen journalism. Based on the secondary data that was generated from the existing literature, the paper argues that the rise of social media has significantly transformed the landscape of journalism, leading to a growing convergence between professional journalism and citizen journalism. This paper explores how the boundaries between these two forms of journalism have become increasingly porous in the digital age. The paper points that the age of social media necessitates a redefinition of journalistic authority, suggesting a more hybrid model where collaboration and coexistence between professional and citizen journalists may shape the future of news production. The paper concludes that the rise of social media has significantly reshaped the landscape of journalism, eroding the once-clear distinctions between professional and citizen journalism. As citizens gain access to tools and platforms for immediate content creation and distribution, they increasingly participate in news production, especially during breaking events or crises. This shift challenges the monopoly of traditional media institutions on information dissemination and redefines the role of journalists in society.

I. Introduction

In the digital age, the boundaries between professional journalism and citizen journalism have become increasingly blurred, driven primarily by the rise of social media platforms. Traditional journalism, long defined by established ethical standards, editorial oversight, and institutional affiliations, is now being challenged by the immediacy and accessibility of citizen-generated content (Allan, 2013). The proliferation of smartphones and social networking sites has empowered ordinary individuals to report events in real time, often outpacing mainstream media in breaking news coverage. This phenomenon has raised critical questions about the credibility, accuracy, and accountability of information disseminated by non-professional sources (Hermida, 2010). Gillmor (2006) observed that while professional journalism is anchored in normative frameworks and journalistic objectivity, citizen journalism thrives on participatory culture and subjective engagement with events, often offering alternative narratives and perspectives underrepresented in mainstream coverage. The convergence of these two forms of journalism necessitates a

comparative exploration of their roles, practices, and implications in the contemporary media ecosystem, especially as audiences increasingly consume and trust information shared on social media platforms (Bruns, 2008). Allan (2013) remarks that technological advancement has expanded the frontier of communication and information dissemination in contemporary society. The story of the increasingly dominance of technology-driven communication channels was reflected in the coverage of various issues ranging from politics, economy, sport, crime, religion, science and technology among others (Nwabueze, 2009). A good example is the coverage of post-election developments in the 2009 presidential election in Iran. Prior to that election, the Iranian Government exercised heavy censorship of the media through various means. They control the content of these media. The government had a way of making sure that what the traditional mass media disseminated to the world did not have perceived anti-Iranian flavour.

But the 2009 presidential election woke up the anti-free press government of president Ahmadinejad to the reality of an emerging media environment where the media are almost impossible to censor; where everyone around you including your spouse that you eat and sleep with every day, is a potential reporter, where censorship, incarceration of journalists and clamping down on media houses are fast becoming ineffective ways of preventing certain kinds of information from getting out to the public, where the best way to prevent bad news about you is to avoid bad things happening around you.

After the supreme council on election had upheld the widely disputed victory of Ahmadenajad, series of country-wide protest began in Iran. Before then, some international media such as Cable News Network (CNN) fox news, and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had been banned from operating in Iran. But the word hardly missed any post-election action, especially graphic details of the violence that heralded the protest. Why? Virtually every Iranian who has a handset became a reporter, posting pictures and messages to popular websites such as You Tub, Twitter, CNN. Com, Face Book, Yahoo, BBC, website, among others. The Iranian government failed in her attempt to block internet signals and prevent information from filtering out from the streets, including the remotest part of Tehran. These messages were published and broadcasted in the traditional mass media. The world through the coverage of the Iranian presidential election woke up the emergence of an all-powerful category of communication channels referred to as "the new media."

Nwabueze (2009) and Jurrat (2011) observed that information and Communication Technology (ICTs), particularly the World Wide Web and the internet have impacted greatly on journalism practice thereby increasing media space, creating fresh challenges for reporters, expanding the ideological spectrum for audiences, filling a void in region where mainstream media do not or cannot fully cover the news and opening new angle in journalism known as "citizen journalism."

II. Review of Literature

2.1 New Media, Social Media and Online Journalism

Social media is a consumer generated media. It a is media that is designed to be shared; where sharing means that it is easy to comment on, that it is easy to send, there are no costs associated with viewing the media and last but not least, it is always available. Social media enables people to share information with friends and colleagues using the Internet. Moreover, to understand the topic of discussion it is important to know some key terms, i.e social network, blogging, E-Commerce (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Vitalis et al., 2023).

Social Network: A social network is a set of people or groups of people with some pattern of contacts or interactions between them. Social network analysis focuses on the relations among people, and not individual people and their attributes. The social network is a group of people which we call nodes, and connections between them are called edges (or ties).

Blogging: Individuals broadcast ideas to like-minded people. Businesses also broadcast latest information to stakeholders. Citizen journalist receives comments photos, videos, podcasts from readers. E-Commerce connect seller and buyer; adds value by providing service e.g Konga, Jumia, Ebay, Amazon, Marktplaats Kayak, hotels.com, Funda, among others. If we are talking about new media and citizen journalism, it is very important to also talk about online journalism. They are both using the internet largely as against the traditional Media. Online journalism is a brand of journalism practiced online (Glaser, 2006). Journalism is any non-fiction or documentary narrative that reports or analyzes facts and events firmly rooted in time (either topical or historical) which are selected and arranged by reporters, writers, and editors to tell a story from a particular point of view. Journalism has traditionally been published in print, presented on film, and broadcast on television and radio.

Online journalist is a professional journalist reporting online due to the acceptability of the online news sourcing across the world. It is in two forms: One is the Wire Services or News Agencies like Reuters, AFP, AP, Bloomberg etc. while the other form emanated from the Traditional Media Source to reach more audiences. In another word, Traditional Media do have online version on its website i.e. BBC, CNN, Channels TV among others. The online journalist lets readers become participants, as they click their way through a hyperlinked set of pages. Narrative momentum and a strong editorial voice pull a reader through a linear narrative with interactivity. The online journalist can pre-determine, to a certain extent, the reader or participant's progress through the material, but manifold navigation pathways, branching options, and hyperlinks encourage the reader or participant to continue to explore various narrative threads assembled by the reporter, writer and the editor. Reader or participants can respond instantly to material presented by the online journalist (Bowman & Wllis, 2003; Vitalis et al., 2024).

2.2 Understanding the Concept of Citizen Journalism

The concept of citizen journalism has been variously called "public", "participatory", "democratic", "guerrilla' or street journalism." Bowman and Willis (cited in Okoro et al., 2003) define this brand of journalism as the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information, noting that the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires. Radsch (cited in Okoro et al, 2013) captures the spirit and essence of citizen journalism in his definition of the concept as an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a repose 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.

Citizen journalism is the reverse of the straight-jacket, near unilateral top-down communication system of the mainstream media. Bowman and Willis (cited in Okoro et al, 2003) state that, participatory journalism is a bottom-up, emergent phenomenon in which there is little or no editorial oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictating the decisions of a staff. Instead, it is the result of many simultaneous, distributed conversations that either blossom or quickly atrophy in the Web's social network. They observe that the fluidity of this approach puts more emphasis on the publishing of information rather than the filtering. Conversations happen in the community for all to see. In contrast, traditional news

organizations are set up to filter information before they publish it. In its true nature, citizen journalism allows no room for gate keeping. In this brand of journalism, information gets to the members of public, who are directly involved in content creation, raw, 'naked' and undiluted.

Over the years, there seems to be some confusion regarding the meaning and nature of citizen journalism. This is evident in the numerous names it has been called, as enumerated above. Pondering on this, Meyer (1995) observes that one measure of the discomfort that journalists feel over the concept of public journalism is the great variety of names given to it, e.g. civic journalism, citizen journalism, community journalism, or communitarian journalism. He further asserts that:

> Part of the blame for the confusion must go to the early promoters of public journalism who have steadfastly refused to give it a definition or anything more than a vague theoretical structure. Because it is an idea in development, they say, a definition would needlessly limit it. May be so. But one consequence is that debating public journalism is like arguing over a Rorschach test. Each sees in it the manifestation of his or her fondest hopes or worst fears (p. 7).

The confusion is apparently fuelled by uncertainties about what constitutes citizen journalism and who citizen journalists are. This explains why Glaser (2006) notes that there is some controversy over the term citizen journalism, because many professional journalists believe that only a trained journalist can understand the rigors and ethics involved in reporting the news. And conversely, there are many trained journalists who practice what might be considered citizen journalism by writing their own blogs or commentary online outside of the traditional journalism hierarchy.

The seaming confusion and misconception notwithstanding, citizen journalism is simply the emerging brand of journalism in which the content is user-generated, unedited, uncensored and comes real-time. The definition by Rosen in Okoro et al, (2013) gives an insight into the nature of citizen journalism concept: citizen journalism is when people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools, they have in their possession to inform one another. With this, it is obvious that a person does not necessarily need a former training in journalism to be a citizen journalist, especially in this era of astounding ubiquity of the social media. What one needs to participate in the growing citizen journalism spectrum is just a fair knowledge of the operations and manipulations of the social media. Mark Glaser (2006), a freelance journalist, explains that:

> The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube. All these might be considered acts of journalism, even if they don't go beyond simple observation at the scene of an important event.

Therefore, 'citizen journalism' refers to a range of web-based practices whereby 'ordinary' users engage in journalistic practices. Citizen journalism includes practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events. Sometimes the term is used quite broadly to include activities such as re-posting, linking, 'tagging' (labeling with keywords), rating, modifying or commenting upon news materials posted by other users or by professional news outlets, whereby citizens participate in the news process without necessarily acting as 'content creators.' In other

words, the definition of citizen journalism does not have completely settled boundaries (Lasica, 2003). However, in order for citizen journalism to flourish, technological as well as cultural changes are needed. The formerly passive audience needs to contribute actively to the news; on the other side, mass media have to accept the value of user generated content and learn to incorporate it in an effective way.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Perspectives on the Practice of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism's practices differ markedly from those of the mainstream news industry. For the most part, its proponents have realised that, as Bardoel and Deuze (2001, p. 94) put it, "with the explosive increase of information on a worldwide scale, the necessity of offering information about information has become a crucial addition to journalism's skills and tasks …. This redefines the journalist's role as orientational one, a shift from the watchdog to the 'guidedog." Further, citizen journalism places 'average' citizens rather than salaried journalists in that 'guidedog' role, writing and submitting stories which are less frequently the outcome of direct investigative reporting, and more often collect and collate available information on certain newsworthy topics. The practice here is similar most of all to that of industry journalists compiling stories from a variety of news agency feeds and combining it with further evaluation and commentary.

Rather than as a perpetuation of traditional gate keeping practices, then, which are no longer effective in a world where source information is directly available to journalists and news users alike (that is, where the 'gates' to keep have multiplied beyond all control), the underlying principle of citizen journalism is one of gate *watching*: citizen journalists engage in the continued observation of the output gates of key institutions and organisations as well as of news outlets, and the gathering and compilation of those items of information which are relevant to the story at hand (Bruns, 2005). In his reports, citizen journalists – as gate watchers and information 'guidedogs', focus more on publicising the availability of important information than on publishing new stories, in other words, and rely on their readers to draw their own conclusions from such reports as well as the source information they link to.

Editorial oversight of this process remains limited (or indeed is absent altogether, in some cases), for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, the gate watching or publicising process could be seen as requiring less policing as it builds on information available elsewhere; 'bad' stories are thus easily identified by editors and readers as they often quite obviously misrepresent the sources they use (this is not the case in traditional, industrial journalism, where the veracity of a journalist's appropriation of news agency reports in developing their story is difficult to confirm for readers unless they have direct access to the source reports). On the other hand, and more importantly, citizen journalism usually relies on its users as participants in the process at the output (story publication) and response (commentary) stages as much as it does at the input (story submission) stage – rather than installing site owners and editors as the final arbiters of story quality, in other words, citizen journalism usually relies on its users to evaluate submitted stories (Bruns, 2005).

This takes place differently in different citizen journalism sites. While some sites (such as *Slashdot* or *OhmyNews*) retain the role of traditional content editors, if in a strictly limited fashion, some (such as *Kuro5hin* or *Plastic*) allow all registered users to comment and or vote on submitted stories before they are 'officially' published, while others (such as most *Indymedia* sites) publish all submitted stories automatically, leaving it to their users to debate and evaluate the quality and veracity of news stories through commentary and discussion functions attached to each story.

Such post-publication filtering and editing is by necessity a collaborative effort, and today takes place predominantly through comments and discussion, users may provide further information and references which extend, support, or contradict details of the original story, they may comment on the summary of information provided in the article, or they may provide alternative points of view to those espoused in the story itself. Frequently, such discussion and debate is significantly more detailed than the story which sparked it, showing that in citizen journalism the primary focus is on such discursive engagement more than on the mere provision of facts; as Chan describes it in her study of *Slashdot*, "highlighting the expertise of users and the value of their participation, news reading shifts from an act centered on the reports and analyses of news professionals and designated experts, to one often equally focused on the assessment and opinions of fellow users on the network."

News production in such environments, in other words, is community-based; it "proceeds from a logic of engagement founded upon notions of production and involvement rather than consumption and spectacle" (Gibson and Kelly, 2000, p. 11) and therefore deserves the description as participatory, citizen journalism. Users in such environments are always also invited to be producers of content; indeed, the boundaries between the two roles are increasingly blurred and irrelevant. It becomes more useful to describe their role as that of a hybrid user-producer, or producer (Bruns, 2008).

3.2 Criticisms of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism has been criticized by its opponents in several ways. Some of the critics believe that citizen journalism lacks veracity (Dare, 2011). This according to him shows that most people do not believe stories from citizen journalists. It is believed in some quarters that they spread false hood. Other critics argue that citizen journalism fuels civil unrest, political instability and ethno-religious crisis. This angle of criticism peaked during the nationwide protests that greeted the removal of fuel subsidy in January 2012 in Nigeria. It was believed in some quarters that citizen journalists misinformed the activists, making them to gang up against the government. However, that was perceived, the aim of the protest was partially achieved as there was a huge reduction in the pump price of fuel (Dare, 2011).

Again, citizen journalism has also been criticized for trivializing issues of national interest, including national calamities. There was an outcry; especially by national leaders against the conduct of citizen journalists during the Dana Airline crash of June 03, 2012 in Nigeria. It was said that while rescue operators were sweating profusely to see if there could be any survivors, citizen journalists were busy taking and uploading gory pictures to their friends. It is suggested that during emergencies, citizen journalists should not spread the news or pictures that may hamper rescue operations (Dare, 2011).

Criticisms have been made against citizen journalism, especially from among professionals in the field. Citizen journalists are often portrayed as unreliable, biased and untrained – as opposed to professionals who have recognition, paid work, unionized labour and behaviour that is often politically neutral and unaffiliated, at least in the claim if not in the actuality. Citizen journalists gather material by being on the streets. Their tools can be narrowed down to a camera, social media and an instinct to start recording whenever something seems newsworthy or out of order. Much of their knowledge regarding the issues that are raised is obtained through their experience as a part of the community (Lasica, 2003).

IV. Conclusion

The rise of social media has significantly reshaped the landscape of journalism, eroding the once-clear distinctions between professional and citizen journalism. As citizens gain

access to tools and platforms for immediate content creation and distribution, they increasingly participate in news production, especially during breaking events or crises. This shift challenges the monopoly of traditional media institutions on information dissemination and redefines the role of journalists in society. While professional journalism remains vital for its adherence to ethical standards, fact-checking, and institutional credibility, citizen journalism offers speed, diversity of perspectives, and grassroots engagement. Rather than viewing the two as mutually exclusive, the future of journalism may lie in a hybrid model, one that values professional rigor while embracing participatory input from an informed public. However, it is worth noting that without the new media which facilitate interaction among citizens and the act of creating, modifying and sharing contents between internet users, the practice of citizen journalism will be nearly impossible. This is because no citizen journalist can be active or effective in collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information to other citizens or users.

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