

CITIZEN JOURNALISM- THE NEW ERA OF TRANPARENCY

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Citizen journalism is the genre of journalism where the news is brought forth by the audience. Some believe that it is how the real truth is revealed whereas some say it is just a tactic to garner a fan following or to get some attention. Regardless of these opinions, the practise of citizen journalism is growing and it is growing fast. With the advent of the social media life, and the quality of technology that one has with them, citizen journalism has been able to create a strong foothold in the field of journalism.

The reason why citizen journalism began was so that people could contribute to the news. It can be something as small as a Vine video that captured the incident when it was happening, so long as it sheds some light on the truth. However, when citizen journalists publish something at the expense of another person's reputation, what does the law say about that? The answer is; nothing.

The aim of this paper is to make a comparative analysis between citizen and professional journalists, understand the laws that the latter conforms to but the former isn't obligated to, and the future of citizen journalism – legally.

INTRODUCTION

“With technology and social media and citizen journalism, every rock that used to go unturned is now being flipped, lit and put on TV.”

LZ Granderson

Citizen journalism, in the simplest manner, can be explained as a form of journalism where the people who were previously the “audience” are now the ones who are distributing the news items to the world through mediums such as social media, blog posts, etc.[1] You can say it is a way by which the ordinary people are taking control of the news.

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people who do not have any kind of professional journalism training, can use the implements of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, enhance or fact-check news on their own or in alliance with others. For example, you watch a segment in the news channel regarding a suicide that took place in a college campus. The news reporter speaks about the incident by taking an angle which shows it was the University's fault. Now, in order to check whether you received the whole truth about the matter, you go online and search for the same

thing, and come across various blog posts where quotes have been given by the friends and family members of the student who committed the suicide. Therefore, by doing so you are checking whether there has been any bias from either side who has published/spoken on that matter.

Even if citizen journalism doesn't go beyond simple surveillance at the scene of an important event, it is considered as an act of journalism nonetheless. Due to the wide dispersion of so many excellent mediums for capturing live events — from tiny digital cameras to smart phones — the average citizen can now make news as well as distribute it globally, an act that was once in the area of established journalists and media companies. There are many sites worldwide where citizens are free to upload, share and discuss any information they come across like *Blottr* which is a leading citizen journalism global news website in UK, *Littera Report*, *OpenGlobe*, *NeemBus news*, *visionOntv*, *Demotix*, *NewsPoint*, *Allvoices*, *Global Voices Online*, *The Third Report*. [2]

Although at the present time, due to the advancements in technology and the internet, citizen journalism has grown exponentially, but this concept has been in force for a long time now. The first evidence of it can be seen from the self published pamphlets written by Thomas Paine in 1776, which stoked the fires of independence in America.

The idea behind citizen journalism doesn't involve just spreading incidents as news, but it also involves voicing one's opinions without having to worry about things like political influence, TRP, and so on. In fact, there have been instances in the past when citizen journalism has helped reveal the truth to the public at large, when the mainstream media failed to do it. The RATHERGATE controversy is one such example, where a team of conservative bloggers exposed fraudulent documents, used in President George W. Bush's military service, which had been reported by CBS to be true. [3]

There is some disagreement over the term *citizen journalism*, because many professional journalists believe that only a trained journalist can appreciate the rigors and ethics involved in reporting the news. And on the other hand, 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.

One of the main hypotheses behind citizen journalism is that the audience knows more jointly than the reporter does alone. Meaning the mainstream media reporters and producers are not the elite centre of knowledge on a subject. It is because of this we are seeing many big media outlets trying to harness the knowledge of their audience either through the comments section at the end of stories they post online or by creating citizen journalist databases of contributors or sources for stories.

If you go back a few decades, you will see that although citizen journalism was in practise, there were only a

handful of people who invested their time in it. Back in the year 1963 when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, a women's clothing manufacturer by the name of Abraham Zapruder came to know about it before any news channel could.[4] The reason being, he was present at the scene and happened to be recording the entire thing on camera. His captured video became priceless after that and resulted in a bidding war amongst the news channels who were seeking to purchase it from him and broadcast it in their channels. Since then the technology has become better and accessible to more and more people, making it quite simple to capture a newsworthy moment in your smart phones and distribute it. At the present time, anybody can get their hands on the latest piece of news that is happening in the world, sometimes even before the mainstream media finds out about it.

TYPES OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

There are many sections upon which citizen journalism has been divided. It all depends on one's perception.

Broadly, citizen journalism can be divided into two types; opportunistic and planned.

Opportunistic journalism is where the person who is reporting the news event happens to be on the spot by chance, thus giving him the opportunity to record or report the event. This is an unplanned and accidental form of journalism where the citizen journalist makes the most of his presence by giving firsthand account of the event. For example, a bystander is just across the street when the whole building collapses and he takes the images of the building collapsing and posts it on social media sites. This picture would not have been possible otherwise since when the incident took place, no professional journalists were there.

The second type of citizen journalism takes place when the person capturing the information knows that it is going to happen and he sets up his equipments to capture the information at the right time so that he can let the world know about it. It is a planned journalism.[5]

Citizen journalism can also be divided on the basis of what a person shares with the world.

- There can be sharing of photos, videos and audios which contain information for and about the outside world.
- There can be sharing of expertise i.e. when a person is an expert on some topic or he has ample amount of knowledge on it then he can share it with public without the help of professional journalists.
- There can be sharing of a person's opinion. This is usually done by people who have firm and strong opinion about some thing and they want to put it forward through social media sites.
- The last type is sharing of discoveries. A person might discover something that is hidden or

which new to the public at large and he might want to share it. [6]

Further Citizen Journalism can be divided into: Independent citizen journalism and semi-independent journalism. Independent journalism is when the citizen journalist works on his own and not in collaboration with the professional journalists. He works independently and has his own blog.

Semi- independent journalism is where the citizen journalist works in collaboration with the professional news reporters. For example, the professional journalist might ask the citizen journalist to cover a story taking place near him or the professional journalist might ask for comments on a news piece from the citizen journalist. If the citizen journalist is an expert in an area, the professional journalist might seek his help on that topic.[7]

ADVANTAGES

The advantages of citizen journalism are many. Citizen journalism speeds the process of spreading information around the world since the news reporters and others cannot be everywhere when the accident or anything happens. The common people present there at the time of the incident, report the firsthand account of the incident through social media, thus speeding the process. The Indian Ocean Tsunami which occurred in December 2004 is one such example, where tourists who were out on a vacation captured the images of destruction caused by the soaring waves.[8]

Moreover, the news coming from citizen journalists also has the advantage of being true and genuine. It comes from their personal observation and it is also less stuffy and dramatic. Some news channels which are start-ups or have smaller staff rely on citizen journalists to contribute comments and blog posts about their stories in order to broaden the news they cover and make the stories more interactive. [9] The citizen journalists also aims to provide the full story of the incident, they do not omit the unnecessary or not so interesting parts of the story which professional journalists usually do. They provide filtered information whereas the citizen journalists provide true and full account of the story. When the fire occurred in California in 2007, the local and national news reporters covered the entire incident but it was the citizen journalists who captured the fire on the video which provided up-to-minute coverage of the mishap.[10] With the coming of faster internet like 4G and better technology, it has been much easier for citizen journalists to capture and upload the news on their blogs, tweet, post about it, or write articles about it. Thus, technology is one of the main factors that enable the citizen journalists to perform their work.[11] Since the information comes from citizens, the government of the country has the advantage of knowing what the thoughts of their citizens are on a particular issue, and they can

accordingly mend their rules and laws to such views and opinions of the citizens. In a democratic nation, freedom of speech becomes necessary so that citizens can better voice their opinions which will help the government to function in the right way. Also the information coming from citizen journalists poses to be more personal to other individuals and they trust it more than the information from professionals since sometimes the professional journalists make up news to increase the popularity of their channels. It so happens that certain incidents do not see the light of the day maybe because the reporters and the government hide it, due to their personal agendas, and this may harm the public. Thus, citizen journalism brings such information to light if they are privy to such information. Citizen journalists are able to report live news and spot footage at a very low cost. They just need to have a smart phone and an access to social media or the internet and they are good to go. [12] Citizen journalism promotes audience participation. People can easily take part in discussions, criticize or comment on the topic on a large scale. They are able to develop their own perspective. The concept of citizen journalism gives the citizens a feeling of belongingness. They feel free to express their opinions and views in the society. They feel satisfied and respected. Lastly, Citizen Journalism has brought a sort of online revolution and has made it a more of democratic process which seems to be helping in building a nation.

LEGAL ASPECT

Since citizen journalism is something that has recently come into the limelight, there is no law governing these citizen journalists. With high speed internet, more and more people are voicing their opinions about the controversial issues. It is high time that there should be a law in this field to regulate what these people publish, and to hold them accountable for their words. The citizen journalists, like every other citizen are guaranteed freedom of speech and expression under different laws around the world. This makes them free to publish any information or material they come across without even cross-checking the source. Many a times people put up false news to attract attention, hence one cannot rely completely on the information supplied by citizen journalists. A recent case was where a citizen journalist spread the rumour on CNN's iReport that 'Apple's Steve Jobs was taken to a hospital because of a heart attack which spread and led to division of company's shares.' [13] Citizen journalists are not even held accountable in such cases, therefore a person aggrieved by a citizen journalists' work has nowhere to turn to for justice. This becomes even more difficult if the information published is anonymous.

Professional journalists are bound by many legal liabilities like defamation, intrusion of one's privacy, accuracy of information, etc. They have to take great care before making any information public, they have to

authenticate it and only then they can proceed further. While doing the same, they should not harm or lower anyone's reputation as this would make them liable for defamation, which is an offence in various countries like under Indian Penal Code in India, [14] Defamation Act 2013 in UK and many others. This safeguard has been provided since a person's reputation is his asset which is fragile and can easily get tarnished. The law of defamation allows individuals, groups of individuals, companies or firms to sue for damage to their reputation. You can defame someone by publishing material in various forms and people can sue so long as the material can be reasonably understood to be referring to them. [15] But nevertheless many defences are available for proving that it doesn't amount to defamation. Also these professional journalists are associated to larger organisations and industries where they are required to adhere to media ethics and standards and other rules and regulations. These ethics basically call for journalists to be impartial, fair, accountable, accurate and truthful. In many organisations there are reporting restrictions on journalists. For example, In UK there is a certain limitation on what can be published. These restrictions may be applied automatically or at court's discretion, failure to abide to these restrictions results in contempt of court. There are various restrictions while reporting proceedings in magistrate's court, crown court, youth court, etc. [16] Moreover, journalists need to respect the privacy of the individuals about whom they are publishing any personal information. Every person has a right to privacy. The journalists need to see if it is in public interest since courts can punish them for invasion of privacy in some countries. Like in The United Kingdom, the law allows people to bring actions for invasion of their privacy, for which the court can award damages. The level of damages is relatively low when compared to damages in libel. The highest recent award was £60,000. [17] Private injunctions are also issued by courts in UK which prohibits the journalists to publish any personal information.

The citizen journalists are however not liable for any such thing for which a professional journalist is and this gives them much greater freedom which can be misused in many circumstances. The problem lies with the fact that once the information is made public, it spreads like fire and it cannot be taken back. In such a case, if for example, this information lowers the reputation of a public figure or any individual in the eyes of others then there is nothing one can do to fix it back to the way it was. To avoid this many countries are making an effort to train citizen journalists, *Internews* is an international non profit organisation that conducted four workshops on internet policy and digital safety to aware the journalists, bloggers and citizens. A project called '*Supporting citizen journalism in Egypt*' focuses on supporting and strengthening the citizen journalists by training them. [18] Citizen journalism is thus a field

where law is significant to address the grievances of aggrieved person. This would also make them more responsible, accountable, passionate and better at their job. Citizen journalism has now come to a stage where it needs to be put on the same pedestal as the professional journalism. Such a step will bind them by all the above laws, ethics, rules and regulations like a professional journalist.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM V. PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

There has been a lot of debate going on over how exactly is citizen journalism different than professional journalism and which seems to be better. It so appears that the citizen journalists have greater freedom in reporting any incident. They are not guided by any law, rules or code of ethics whereas professional journalism requires journalists to follow prescribed rules and regulations while covering any news or information since they work for larger industrial groups. Regulation by law is one of the most important aspect of professional journalism. Professional journalists are qualified and trained in journalistic methods and they publish an article only after cross checking and re-checking it, hence their sources are more reliable than in citizen journalism. The citizen journalists are not experienced and they might end up giving false or incorrect information. Moreover, the citizen journalists cannot be held accountable for any information they publish but the professional journalists do not enjoy this benefit. Also, People have more faith and confidence in citizen journalism than in professional journalism since it is believed to be coming from an untainted source. Some citizen journalists also prefer to keep their identity anonymous and in this way they can publish information about any ongoing controversy without any fear whereas this luxury is not at all available to a professional journalist. Usually, citizen journalists are more passionate towards their jobs rather than professional journalists since they do it because of their drive to educate people worldwide about something whereas professional journalists do it for earning their livelihood.

In January 2011, a news item from Jamaica's Constabulary Communication Network (CCN) showed that a man who attacked the police had been shot and killed. It wasn't long before a citizen of the country started circulating video footage which told another story. The footage showed the man who was accused of attacking the police, being beaten with a police baton and ultimately shot and killed while still down and defenseless. The videotape of that incident resulted in the arrest of the two policemen. The identity of the maker of the videotape was never revealed, in spite of appeals from law enforcement officials.[19]

This action by the citizen brought justice to the deceased which would otherwise be difficult. Thus, citizen journalism also helps in revealing the truth to the general

public which traditional journalism fails to do. The incident above is the perfect example of it. Citizen journalists tend to have personal biases. They usually report matters of their interest and they have their own agendas. One needs to be careful while using such information. These biases are however missing in traditional journalism which you can say is a good thing.

CONCLUSION

Given all these differences that exist between a citizen journalist and a professional journalist, how each would try to show the other is incorrect with their facts and is biased, we can agree that they both depend on one another on some level. Citizen journalists have always been a source of information for professional journalists and although the information provided by them is mostly correct, there are some instances where complete hogwash is supplied by these sources. For example, we all know how certain journalists have acquired a form of celebrity-like image. So if they open up an email where people can send them information regarding any event or incident that is currently happening and they further use that information in their news report, how can we refute the idea that there are going to be certain people who will send wrong information, which is scandalous rather than just plain incorrect, just so that are noticed by said journalist?

Citizen journalism has its perks and rawness, but at the end of the day, what people really need is the truth. This entire concept of journalism has definitely brought about a revolution in how news is distributed, but at the end of the day most of the people who are a part of this are doing it as a hobby. Citizen journalists can provide media houses with information which is inaccessible to them, or are in places where the professional journalists wouldn't go or cannot go. But regardless of this, before anything is published for the people to read or hear, it must be fact checked and its veracity must be ensured.[20]

Furthermore, a lot of the citizen journalists' work is just rewriting what the mainstream media has already published. Jack Kapica, a former reporter for Canada's *Globe and Mail*, says that citizen journalists must focus their energy on trying to create original work rather than just rewrite something that already exists.[21] People want to read something new and not something that is a different version of an existing item that they have already read, because let's be honest here, what's the fun in that?

Even though there are flaws in this area of journalism, we can agree that if done correctly, citizen journalism is quite powerful and fast. Add the unadulterated information and it is a perfect recipe for getting more readers. That being said, we also believe that the world of citizen journalism must be encouraged to hold itself with higher standards and carry out their work in

accordance to proper journalistic principles. The way mainstream media is pushed to fact check their sources and information before publishing it, the same should be done by citizen journalists because otherwise the whole idea of bringing forward the truth will be voided.

It is true that citizen journalism is the voice of the people and that many believe it to be the uncensored truth, probably the reason why so many people prefer it over mainstream media, but at the end of the day when you don't have any accountability behind what you are publishing it kind of makes you have a callous attitude towards things you write about. This is the main reason why we are in a desperate need for some laws that will govern what citizen journalists publish. At the moment, they have free reign over their choice of words and because of the fact that the law doesn't consider them as real journalists but more like citizen's with a hobby, they can write whatever they want without having to worry about things like libel. In our opinion, since citizen journalism is something that is only going to get bigger as time goes by, laws should be made in order to govern the citizen journalists because right now it feels as if they are someone with Diplomatic Immunity, so no matter what they do they are never going to be held accountable for it. On more occasions than one, citizen journalists have been held on the same platform as professional journalists, because of the quality of their work and the truth in their news. So it is only fair that they also be treated in the same manner, legally, as professional journalists are.

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