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Role of Citizen Journalism in Democratization of Media

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of a passive audience into an active one is the basis of citizen journalism. The rise of internet and swift escalation in new communication technologies over the years has driven a radical change in the field of journalism. From printing press to digitalized era, journalism has undergone significant transformations with several mediums converging to a single source. The introduction and utilization of new media had not only resulted in the faster dissemination of the information but has also modified the route of the flow of information. The flow of information is no longer unidirectional, i.e. from media persons and media houses to passive audience. The concept of citizen journalism has now involved the passive audience too now in journalistic activities. The capability of today's audience to gather, report and circulate the information themselves has established citizen journalism as a significant and indivisible part of modern journalism. The present study briefly reviews the origination of citizen journalism and its valuable contribution and utilization in modern journalism. The study also highlights the stipulated ethical obligations associated with the notion of citizen journalism to assure the authenticity, quality, and impartiality of the audience's generated information.

Keywords: *Citizen Journalism, Traditional Journalism, Democratization of Media, Active Audience, Journalistic Ethics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement in communication technologies has not only changed the lives of the people around the entire globe but has also revolutionized the ways of dissemination of information. The exponential growth of internet and its services has made it feasible for faster distribution of information via various mediums. In earlier times, the direction of flow of information was strictly unidirectional; from media persons to passive audience. Such passive audience was only at the receiving end of the media system and the responsibility of distribution of news was fulfilled solely by trained and skilled media personnel. The existence of social networking sites, media-streaming websites, personal blogs, and discussion forums has led to the rise of a new form of journalism, called as Participatory Journalism or Citizen Journalism.

The notion of citizen journalism is based upon the participation of public individuals in the process of gathering, reporting, evaluating, and distributing news, and information through various means of their capacity. The emergence of internet and the facilities provided by it has made it more accessible for the people to collect as well distribute user generated content. Citizen journalism is appreciably different from community or civic journalism as it functions outside of the mainstream media institutions. It not only facilitates general public without any professional training to generate and distribute information but also offers them the ability to transmit it globally. Through citizen journalism, it is viable for local news to be broadcasted on a global platform.

A root and integrated element of citizen journalism is modern technology. The technological advancements in communication devices in last few years have assisted the escalation in the rise of citizen journalism. With the use of modern Smartphone, a user can not only produce information but can also distribute it worldwide without any hassle. Hence, for the obvious reasons, citizen journalism is mostly found online through blogs, podcasts, video-streaming sites etc. and in form of text, pictures, audio, and video. The accessibility of internet makes it convenient for the general public to report local breaking news more swiftly then conventional media. At some instances, information broadcasted by the conventional media outlets can be person-opinioned and filtered. But since the information through citizen journalism tends to be generated first-hand by the members of general public, it is generally free from conventional media bias.

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Citizen journalism can be considered to still be in its beginning stages. Even though citizen journalism empowers the general masses, there are still numerous aspects associated with it that need to be evaluated, reformed, or redefined. Conventional news-reporting institutions may raise a point regarding the lack of exactness and ethical obligations associated with this new form of journalism. Owing to the fact that such user-generated content does not award any financial benefits in most of the situations, the lack of commitment, quality and content is inevitable. But the fact that citizen journalism facilitates democratization of media cannot be simply overlooked. With realization of that, convention media has opened the gateways for citizen journalism to co-exist with mainstream media. Now-a-days, both electronic and print media is effectively engaging general public in order to broaden its precincts.

Though citizen journalism has initiated to spread its roots, there are both advantageous as well as disadvantageous aspects coupled with it. It is vital to completely understand such distinct fragments in order to utilize citizen journalism to its maximum capacity while minimizing its detrimental segments. The present study aims on understanding citizen journalism, its origination, utilization, and the necessary ethical obligations associated with it.

II. ORIGIN & GROWTH

In one way or another, citizen journalism has been into existence since the start of mainstream journalism. It is virtually impractical to pinpoint the origin but it would be more befitting to argue about the occasions that led to the rise of citizen journalism. Different people have defined citizen journalism differently as per their perspective and understanding of it and its associated aspects.

Kolodzy specified the definition of citizen journalism as "A citizen or citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information"[1]. People without proper journalistic experience can utilize the modern technology like computer, software, and internet to share their creations, arguments, criticism and disseminate on available media outlets. According to Allan, "Anyone with something to say and access to the right software can be publisher, a pundit, and an observer of events, great or small"[2].

Flew described the initial inauguration of the citizen journalism in 1999 after the development of open publishing architecture by Matthew Arnison and other involved in the 'Active Sydney group' and in the same year their adoption of open source models like Independent Media Centers (*Indymedia*), was a milestone to enable the new forms of news production[3].

The history of Citizen Journalism expands over two segments; origin and continuation. As per Quinn and Lamble, citizen journalism can occur in two forms; first is when citizens contribute content to traditional media and second is when they assume the role of journalists using blogs and websites[4].

The recognition of being the first journalism school is held by the University of Missouri, United States which was established in 1908, but the variants of newspapers had been utilized for centuries before that. The first newspaper, that was published and circulated in America, Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick, can be classified as a citizen journalist[5]. The last page of the newspaper which used to be blank was intentionally left unprinted so as to facilitate the citizens to add news items and notes by hand, when sharing the paper to friends[6].

The world's first journalism school Ecole Superieure de Journalisme in Paris, France, was founded in 1899. Before that, there was lack of any defined and standard ways of becoming a journalist. Technically, due to the non-requirement of any kind of formal education or degree, it can be said that every journalist before that time acted as a citizen journalist[7].

A quick glance at journalism history confirms that the concept of citizen journalism is not new and had been in existence for centuries. However, with the beginning of formal journalism education, citizen reporting was largely substituted by a pool of professional journalists. Traditional media started dominating the news. But in recent years, citizen journalism has recurred owing to a number of societal factors like technological advancements and revolutions and media alliances[8].

Since 2000s, there has been a reappearance of studies concerned with the role and promise of citizen media in determining social authenticities and political mobilization. Building on news production and journalism studies, these works struggle that news collecting is more disordered and networked than it used to be prior to the appearance of the internet and Web 2.0. These works propose that digital technologies such as computers, mobile phones, and the internet give control to citizens to form institutions such as nongovernmental organizations, governments, think-tanks, and businesses[9].

From a worldwide viewpoint, there are studies claiming that citizen journalism and social mobilization are undergoing revitalization through digital media–text messaging, email, photo sharing, social networking, and the like–and substitute forms of expression. This is said to have occurred partially in reaction to authoritarian political regimes–e.g., the Arab Spring of 2011 in Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt. Since 2000s, citizens have reported events in the Middle East, such as the rebellion against then-President Hosni Mubarak. During the uprising in Egypt, citizen journalism grew and technologies were often seen as the instruments of social alteration and the expansion of the public sphere. From this viewpoint, digital technologies are assumed to have delivered the tools for citizens to contribute in the globalization, mobilization, and democratization of information[10].

III. AS AN AID: BRIEF CASE STUDIES

Citizen journalism has been in function for a long time before it achieved a distinctive and separate platform. But few yet noteworthy global incidents not only proved the importance and potential of citizen journalism but also indicated the necessity for it to be integrated with mainstream media.

The "Tsunami flood disaster" of 26th December, 2004, is considered to be as the tipping point for citizen journalism. Before the mainstream media could cover and broadcast, citizens with phones and cameras covered and broadcasted instantaneous footages of events via web- based media. Such vast coverage inspired the people all over the globe to share their experience firsthand and by themselves in their own demeanor[11].

Citizen journalism prevailed in "London Bombings" of July 2005, when within the hours of blasts, masses were providing the images they had captured by their cellphones and cameras. Conventional media appreciated and broadcasted the mobile phones footages and live pictures sent in by the members of the public[12].

On 18th December, 2010 began a revolutionary wave of demonstrations, protests, and riots named as "Arab Spring", throughout the countries of Arab league and surroundings[13]. The masses used social media, personal blogs, forums etc. to communicate, raise awareness, and organize the rallies, strikes, and protests[9]. All sorts of media such as videos, images etc. were being uploaded and broadcasted by the people affected by the situation with the use of such internet based technologies. Media-streaming site "YouTube" was utilized as the main platform by the people to broadcast videos related to the Arab Spring. Continuous and global reporting of the incident by not only assisted the situation in gaining momentum but also transformed it into an internationally recognized incident[14].

A similar incident in which citizen journalism played an important role is "2010 Haiti earthquake". It was evident from that catastrophe that it was ordinary people who covered the aftermath of the earthquake. Since professional can't be everywhere, it was general public with phones and cameras who broadcasted the early information on damage and relief efforts. Images and videos of the incident and its effects were largely circulated over the internet and social media which greatly intensified the global intervention for humanitarian aid[15].

Another protest by the name of "Occupy Wall Street" that began on 17th September, 2011 is a fine example of the potential of citizen journalism. This protest also showed a reliance on social media and internet. Within five days, Keith Olbermann, a political commentator and formerly of CurrentTV outspokenly reproved the incompetency of mainstream media in successfully covering the initial Wall Street protest and demonstrations[16].

These are very few of the many but very significant incidents where citizen journalism not only assisted the conventional media in serving its purpose but also emerged with a separate, significant, and unavoidable segment of journalism. On some incidents, citizen journalism happened to be the first mode of information broadcast. The use

of modern day technologies and web-based media has given the ordinary members of the public the required means and methods for the citizen journalism to thrive.

IV.   ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS

Being a new form of journalism and despite its many advantageous aspects, citizen journalism is, indeed, not free from its coherent drawbacks. The concept on which citizen journalism is based, in itself pose some questions related to the authenticity and legitimacy of the information[17].

It is vital for the people associated with citizen journalism, to be exposed to some basic journalistic rules. A citizen journalist should realize that journalism is not just about broadcasting information or capturing an event. It is important to realize and know to differentiate between 'a story' and 'a true story'. Misrepresented information is as damaging and deceiving as false information. As per such sense, it would be suitable to state that citizen journalism can only be beneficial and befitting only if and when done with a clear and unbiased approach.

The credibility of citizen journalists is also an aspect which needs intense considerations. The framework of broadcasted information is directly related to the consumer's interpretation of that information. Lack of professional skills and domain training is bound to raise a concern regarding the accuracy, context, and credibility of the information. Freedom to express and freedom to press, indeed, bring transparency to the system but it is vital for citizen journalism to meet the same standards as professional journalism.

Citizen journalism, indeed, provides democratization of media by altering the flow of information but this flow of information should continuously be examined under the various constraints of ethical obligations. A citizen journalist should first check and understand the correlated facts before publishing any information. Difference between fact and opinion should clearly be comprehended as well as practiced. Transparency and honesty are two requirements that can assure the necessary development and extension of citizen journalism.

Not only is the authenticity of information of concern, the principles for searching and receiving information are also of severe significance. Any information should not only be collected from all possible sources but the methods of collection should certainly be legal and ethical. The consent, privacy, lawful interests, and rights of third parties should be appreciated and respected under all given circumstances.

A citizen journalist bears the responsibility before the society, law as well as the profession. It is not only expected but required of citizen journalists to follow a few of the basic ethical obligations. A strict code of ethics will not only raises the standard and credibility of the citizen journalism but will also defend the professional dignity and prestige of the profession.

V.   LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Access to internet and new media differs profoundly in different countries. In South Africa, for example, a large portion of the population has internet access. But according to estimates by the International Telecommunication Union, the state of affairs is very dissimilar in Sub-Saharan Africa. About 55% of the rural population still does not have access to any telecommunication media[18].

Another example: a basic internet connection costs about 30 Euros per month in Germany. A similar connection costs about 600 Euros in Nigeria, which seems to be nearly 900% of the per capita income. Thus, the underprivileged of the global populace have to pay additional for the internet than the richer. This establishes an obstacle for the freedom of the world-wide-web and for the freedom of internet access. Thus, the digital revolution discloses further forms of prohibitions. The majority of the global populace is not yet able to contribute in the global political deliberations by means of new media owing to their monetary situation, social status, or geographic position[19].

The populaces who consider that citizen journalism is a danger or challenge to the traditional media claim that with the passage of time citizen journalism may take over the place of traditional media. Because of a variety of opinions and impartial reportage, the citizen journalism will be more influential than the newspapers, etc. Especially in countries deprived of freedom of expression, the world-wide-web plays a vital role in informing general public. These individuals are concerned about the future of the traditional media.

Conversely, many media intellectuals and journalists believe that citizen journalism is not a rival of the traditional media rather it accompaniments them and extends a big support to them. This is a fact that conventional media reporters are not present on each and every place but citizens are available everywhere. Solana Larsen, the Editor of the Global Voices specified that citizen journalists and conventional media reporters can work together to yield high-quality content. She says that her organization 'Global Voices' was able to supplement what the BBC was doing when they were fast and when they were different. She stated that they were dissimilar, for instance, from a conventional news story about a women's bill in India. The BBC story made the impression as though if you were for women's rights you should be for this bill, because it would bring more women into parliament. 'Global Voices' added deepness of perspective through blogger voices that showed why even some feminists were in contradiction of the idea. Because, that was one of the many opinions that were received, the bill was not making the representation more diverse. It was promoting women from certain families, wives of former politicians."[20]

A market economy depends on professional business journalists. Individual statements by shareholders and various stakeholders are no substitute for company profiles delivered by independent professional journalists. Healthcare reform is another example. It is such a complex issue. Citizens who make the effort to express themselves might be angry about the costs they must bear, be it in form of insurance premiums, taxes or other healthcare costs. Only professional journalists can perform their duties with a sense of responsibility and credibility[21].

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Citizen Journalism has attained a definitive shape in last few decades owing to the vast use of internet and modern technologies. In spite of related limitations and drawbacks, citizen journalism proves to be valuable to the society as well as to traditional media. The relationship of citizen journalism and traditional media is intriguing and the collaboration between both has already been proven to be successful. It would not be wrong to conclude that future of journalism is one where both citizen journalism and traditional journalism can work together and can benefit from each other.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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