Citizen journalism between interactivity and professionalism

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Abstract

There has been much debate in recent years about the positive role played by citizen journalism in enabling average citizens to participate in gathering news, dissemination and analysis thereof. Traditional media now depends on social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and personal blogs to report the facts. The new media medium does not only allow for both the sender and the receiver to exchange the roles of the communicative process, but it has revolutionized the quality of the communication content which is varied in terms of texts, images, audio files and video clips. These have gone viral over the past two years such that it requires us to investigate the communicative position in terms of its dimensions and effects. The phenomenon of the new media is characterized by a high degree of interactivity and post-interactivity. In the past, the contribution of the Internet audience was limited to the echo circle of the content that is broadcast or posted through e-media sites. Despite the positive features that have accompanied the wave of citizen journalism, the idea of dispensing with the traditional media, which is characterized by professionalism in performance thanks to the ABCs adopted in conveying the news to the citizen, is still questionable.

Key words: Citizen journalism, interactivity, professionalism, traditional media, social networks, sender.

Introduction

The internet appears to be the best manifestation of information and communication technology. Once one speaks about this technology, one cannot avoid but mention the Internet as a new means communication that has produced a pattern of communication which is based on interaction between the parties to the communication process. The traditional pattern used to be based on the sender's authority and the vertical flow of information with almost a total exclusion of the audience, or recipient whose job was only to receive the message. However, with the relatively recent technological boom, the audience have become both an effective and positive element as well as a producer of the contents of media.

Consequently, the reciprocal and interactive function of media materialized. The information has been moving in a circular loop based on dialogue and interaction leading to the formation of the public cyberspace while the individual has become a global and digital citizen at the same time.

Within a few years, the Internet has become the tool to unite and bring all nations of the world together. The unity here is not an ideological or political one because the world is still witnesses a state of imbalance and dispersion. This is best evidenced by the ongoing wars and conflicts in many parts of the world. What is meant by unity is that the Internet has connected the entire global village in a single network. The Internet has reduced geographical barriers and put an end to the regional and national borders that once significantly impeded communication. With the emergence of electronic publishing through blogs and social networks, the citizen journalist has reformulated his/her relationship with the contents of the media and methods of production in light of the dynamics of the current network society. Any citizen armed with a group of small electronic communication devices (digital camera, laptop, high quality mobile phone, etc.) can become a "journalist" and participate in conveying facts which he/she has witnessed and managed to document by using a simple personal digital device. The moment that person publishes on the Internet, a new citizen journalist is born thanks to the opportunities offered by "citizen journalism" *le journalism citoyen.* This concept depends on flexibility and speed in conveying and writing news in a simple manner that contributes to achieving interaction, or interactivity. This method of news conveyance is almost an inevitable result imposed by the massive explosion of information which is made possible by means of the Internet. It has emerged as a critical approach to the classical and traditional form of media which is primarily based on the concept of "sender", on its own ABCs and standards for the media industry, and the art of editing news which seeks credibility and professionalism in the conveyance of facts and events.

What has been produced by the current events at all levels needs to be thoroughly studied and scrutinized in terms of their causes and consequences. The media field is one of these areas that deserve study and attention. Citizen journalism has had a remarkably prominent role in conveying facts and events of the Arab Spring, for instance, when major media stations were unable to reach the scene despite their huge resources. However, citizen journalism lacks professionalism in recording facts, and it is occasionally exaggerated, which results in this form of media lose its credibility although it is characterized by velocity, excellence and

interactivity between senders and recipients without any intermediary. Faced with this apparent contradiction of these two aspects, the present study raises several questions and looks for answers to these questions, namely: will the traditional media be able to maintain its position compared to so-called citizen journalism? Can citizen journalism, along with its merits and demerits, be regarded as the real alternative which is capable of substituting and compensating the traditional media arsenal? Is it possible to weave an integrative relationship between the traditional media and citizen journalism? What approaches and methods enable "citizen journalism" to increase its effectiveness and enhance its credibility among its audience? The present study seeks to shed light through such questions on "citizen journalism" in the media system on how it functions in relation to its concerns and related notions of interactivity and professionalism.

The study has adopted the resolvability approach, which is based on investigating the phenomena by making use of several concepts to analyze the data. What is apparent is that it is partially and wholly approached simultaneously. The researcher would then identify these social properties of communication technologies in terms of their relation to their social communication processes, forms, and producers within a given community (Alawi, 2006).

Readings: Concept of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism is considered an "alternative media" which has imposed itself and become a participatory and reciprocal form of media that complements and is used by the traditional media due to its different properties. Thanks to the modern technologies of information and communication, citizen journalism can shed light on an event or a story that may not be reached by traditional media. Another trend reduces "citizen journalism" to opinion journalism that entitles an active audience to deliver what he/she has seen or heard freely away from the gatekeeper. Consequently, it closes the distances in modern time (Cathelat, 1998: 14).

Media decentralization, which has been imposed by the new technologies of information and communication under the name of citizen journalism, has given a diverse and pluralistic formula to the media activity at the expense of the stereotyped media work. Based on this media, a new trend has developed, namely the new media by which the citizen, or rather the active recipient (récepteur actif), can present, modify and add details to the online published news item. Citizen journalism has transformed into a collective participatory activity, to

which people can contribute whatever ideas or opinions they have. This trend has led to the revision of the media system and the media practice to give way to citizen journalism as a pattern which is based on participation. Will this new trend drive the traditional form of media to the margin, or will it take a synthesized "hybrid formula" that combines the best characteristics of both forms (Rabih, 2010)?

A new paradigm (nouveau paradigm) has established itself in the domain of human science and society. This new paradigm is embodied in thinking, analysis and awareness of the phenomena related to the concept of the network.

The Spanish sociologist and researcher Manuel Castells explains the issue of the emerging society of networks (société en réseaux) through interaction of two phenomena:

1. The spirit of freedom to build a flexible and interactive social relation.
2. Technological revolution.

Accordingly, the term citizen journalism is both a media and communication term. At the historical level, the term is new, but it is not stable at the conceptual level. Certain experts in the field describe citizen journalism as *media journalism*.

Others describe it as *participatory*, or *interactive*, or even *mutually reinforcing media*; while others refer to it as *alternative media* or *civic journalism* (Jamelzran, 2009). From the above it can be inferred that one is confronted by a terminological explosion. It is complex to include all the labels and users of the term, or identify its literature. Moreover, from this overlap of terminology, it can be observed that there is a consensus to adopt the term "citizen journalism" which is the most popular term in the literature. It is also the most implicitly agreed upon with regard to the meaning of this new single term in the information and communication dictionary, which can be identified in terms of its dependence on:

- The Internet as a space for publication and expression.
- The emphasis on the presence of citizen in the issues of public affairs and the support of the democratic practice.
- Considering citizen journalism outputs an extension of alternative press and alternative journalism.

The Emergence of Citizen Journalism as Globalization of Communication

This form of media tends to standardize tastes, preferences and trends, which results in an new vision of information and communication, a new look to the world, to the public space and the private space characterized by instantaneity (instantaneité), interaction (intéraction), no censorship (pas de censure), and intelligence (intelligibilité).

Traditional media identifies issues in a stereotyped manner, and message recipients have to identify themselves. The mechanisms of the political decision are meant to serve the existing regimes while citizen journalism has reshaped a new communicative style that is based on opening the door to the audience to interact with the events and decisions that do not often serve the regimes. Modern technologies of information and communication has helped in this regard through TV shows and satellite channels, such as Al-Arabiya's "I See", BBC Arabic channel's "I Watch", and France 24 Arabic channel's "Observers". In addition, they have shed light on events in sensitive and critical areas and in places where it is sometimes impossible to reach by utilizing "Skype", real-time videos, etc. under the name of amateur filming.

"The recipient's ability to interact with the media message determines the role that could be played by the communication process… which derives its strength from the community, and the intellectual and cultural climate" (Banchi & Bourgeois, 1992: 57). Media blackout, or media restrictions, imposed in Arab societies, has created an opportunity for social network activists such as Facebook, Twitter, to adopt a new type of media, citizen journalism. They standardize and determine its significance.

Social Networks in the Face of Traditional Media

Thanks to social media networks, people's ability to get rid of the tyranny of TV channels and newspapers subject to the power of money and business is increasing daily.

In this communication space, the scope of freedom expands and deepens while the channels of communication become varied. Media authority has moved to advertisers and then to the social networks. In the past, journalism was, and still is referred to as *the fourth estate* due to the role it has played in various fields, especially political. Today, many researchers regard citizen journalism as a *fifth estate* due to its growing influence on various fields in various countries. It creates an opportunity for journalists to not only publish what is forbidden and

what might annoy the existing authority or regime, but also ordinary individuals and citizens—including those representing marginalized segments which are not represented in society—to freely express their concerns (Buaziz, 2012). An appropriate example is the video entitled "I decide" (je decide) which was taken by an amateur and posted on various social networks. It led to the dismissal of an employee in the Algerian Airline at Es Senia Airport in Oran after it had triggered a nationwide outrage. Similarly, the Algerian Health Minister dismissed the head of Health Directorate of Constantine Province after a group of Facebook activists posted on their personal accounts what is known as the scandal of Constantine Hospital's Maternity Unit. The impact of citizen journalism on changing the course of events and decisions was also demonstrated during the campaign waged by Facebook activists against the singer, Sean Paul, of Jewish origin before he came to Algeria to perform at a concert. Eventually, the organizers succumbed to public opinion and cancelled the concert.

Nonetheless, citizen journalism cannot be controlled and monitored as traditional journalism. Even if a website or a blog was blocked in a particular country browser, it is still possible, with the help of new technology to publish using another country browser or another electronic website.

Citizen Journalism and Audience Behavior

The significant changes in the behavior of the audience, or recipient, emphasizes the need for radical reshaping of the information system. This can be achieved through keeping pace with the rapid development in this field and accepting new practices that can contribute to changing the classic forms of communication. The purpose is to preserve the audience who has become more demanding in the global village that is changing rapidly, with the emergence of a new communicative circular model, i.e. the concept of the circular motion of information (Bourdieu, 1996: 22).

Citizen Journalism: Preoccupations and Functions

Social practices in the field of personal publishing and e-communication have produced a set of rules to which interactants should adhere when they communicate through chat rooms or discussion forums. In addition, personal pages or blogs have generally accepted rules which are imposed by a higher authority and drafted by users leading to the formation of a kind of an e-user culture.

One the most important concepts observed in the present study, which is based on interactivity in cyberspace of citizen journalism, is the concept of face (la face) (Goffman, 1973: 35). It is "the majority of behaviors observed by the interactants. According to his [Goffman's] definition, this is a positive social value having a certain objective. "Another (Close inverted comma at the end of this quotation) applicable concept from Goffman's theory (Goffman, 1973) is the notion *les signes du lien*, which involves the relationship or the desire to surf Facebook pages, taking into consideration interest, custom, space, identity, and common opinion in attempting to provide a true picture of the issue to be delivered, while the official media or press, cannot broadcast such news due to media work constraints. Citizen journalism is more precise, more credible, faster, easier to understand as it uses the language of the people. This is evident from the large number of the interactants and resultant changes to any issue. The duplication of titles or names is an appropriate example. The traditional media, for instance, has used the acronym "Daesh" (ISIS) to dysphemistically refer to the terrorist organization which has been referred to in citizen journalism as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Similarly, the State of Palestine is referred to in the official media as Palestinian Authority instead of "the State of Palestinian" which have been used by citizen journalism to polarize public opinion. This is in addition to what is embodied in the solidarity campaigns with the State of Palestinian under the slogan "All Palestine" and the flag of Palestine in the profile photos and on the cover pages of Facebook.

The confirmatory exchange (échange confirmatifs) is one of the notions of symbolic interactionism that can be applied to citizen journalism because audience interaction is considered a fertile space. Various forms of interaction serve to confirm and encourage this category of journalism, with the participation of the audience through posting comments, publishing photos taken with the mobile cameras and sharing local news. An appropriate example is Mosta News (news of Mostaganem Province) on the Facebook page by Qwaider Oheeb. Another example is the personal radio sites and TV channels on YouTube, such as channel of the artist "Lotfi Duble Kano".

The interaction in the default system is controlled by rules on the basis of which there will or will not be interaction, according to the following criteria:

1. Number of the Facebook users.
2. Number of "likes" or "j'aime" for a publication on a social network site.
3. Number of clip downloads, especially on YouTube videos.

Conclusion

Citizen journalism has produced a number of characteristics related to the audience, or the recipient, namely:

1. The audience no longer read what is meant by the journalist. In light of the media and communication technologies, however, active audience have surpassed the journalist in the process of searching for news and information; they select the contents of what they read and control Web surfing and navigation.

2. The audience are not only recipients, but they are also both senders and receivers at the same time.

3. Despite the modern technologies of information and communication benefits, there are still questions about their impact on the foundations and principles of media ethics (not necessarily the professional ones). These questions concern the behavior which emerged through extreme practices of certain propaganda videos posted by extremist organizations (such as Jabhat al-Nusrah *Victory Front*, Daesh *ISIS*, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). They have tarnished the image of the true resistance movements which citizen journalism has almost always sought to serve.

4. Citizen journalism has replaced the procedures of the traditional media with a new vision which keeps pace with the era of rapid development, surpassing all restrictions (censorship and ethical constraints), and showing that meanings are social bricks based on reality.

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