

Citizen Journalism - Challenges for Albanian Media

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Abstract

Citizen journalism, participatory journalism or user generated content journalism are the terms we use about a phenomenon that emerged through the years with the evolution of internet and technology and it came through different forms such as social media, bloggers, wikis. It implies the involvement of citizens in news collection, production, sharing, analyzing, discussing and commenting by using different platforms. The definition commonly accepted is that citizen journalism refers to news produced by amateurs, random people willing to share different information for different situations. Whether some sees these terms used to describe this phenomenon ambiguous others do not prefer to call it journalism and describe these people more as seasonal or circumstantial news gathers. However, this type of journalism is changing the mainstream media, the conception of news production and consumption even though opinions in about the impact it has on mainstream media are contradict. Observations has shown that revenues and audience for printed newspapers and advertisements have declined through the years forcing many newspapers to close their activity and making very difficult for others to survive. Answering these questions is extremely difficult but what we can say is that citizen journalism and professional journalism do differ in somehow and professionals like to draw a line between two types of journalism. Citizen journalism has both its negative and positive aspects and different scholars and professionals have different opinions regarding it.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Professional Journalism, Social Media, News, Participatory Journalism

1. Research Objectives and Methodology

Technological developments and rise of social media usage has brought a new phenomenon, the involvement of citizens in news collection. In of this paper will focus on the citizens contribution on journalism process. First of all by referring to different authors we will explain the definition of Citizen Journalism, than we will bring different opinions regarding the citizen journalism and professional journalism.

By outlining different opinions and reflecting on this type of journalism we will try to give answer to the questions: Is this new form of journalism putting into risk professional journalism? , Is this the future of journalism and in the first place did citizen journalism emerged because citizens where unsatisfied of professional journalists not doing properly their job by not being the voice of audience as they claim to be?

Data is collected from several secondary sources like journal articles, research papers, websites and online social media portals. Regarding Albania situation there is given attention to the primary research as

- Direct Interviews with professional journalist and News Rooms directors.
- Observation of the Albanian News media market.

2. Literature review

It is obvious that the way of producing and consuming news nowadays has significantly changed due to internet and new technologies. Easily access to Internet and new technologies has given the opportunity to citizens to be part of news productions. Mostly affected by the new innovations in technology is the traditional way of consuming news. Printed newspapers and TV news operators have seen a decline in revenue and audience. In 2011, 151 daily newspapers were closed which means 10 percent of the printed newspapers in USA. Revenue from advertising from \$45 billion in 2003 decline to 23 billion dollars in 2010 and the online advertising revenue increased from 1.2 billion in 2003 to more than 3

billion in 2010 which means it climbed by 300 percent. By seeing these numbers we can say that the conventional media industry is having a hard time in the digital age and moreover reflecting on these figures we can clearly see the impact of participatory media on mainstream media. However, according to Pavlik, "To insure long-term success, innovation in news media should be guided by four principles: intelligence or research, a commitment to freedom of speech, a dedication to the pursuit of truth and accuracy in reporting, and ethics. Evidence is presented that early innovation by news media leaders that adhere to the principles outlined here are finding success in both building audience and generating digital revenue." (Pavlik 2013, 181)

New technologies and innovation have assured new ways for citizens to participate in news production through social media platforms such as Twitter, Live Blogging, Facebook, etc by posting eyewitness accounts, commentary and fact checking information. Eyewitness reports were a great contribution especially in reporting events in countries where news organizations were banned or journalists were not present. For instance videos and images on the events of The Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004 and the London bombings in July 2005 gave to the UK news organizations irreplaceable material.

BBC Richard Sambrook, the former head of Global news in BBC considered people contribution in London bombing as massive, something they had never seen before these events in BBC. The day after the events they were able to transmit their evening news editions only with information received by citizens. The content they received was about 1000 photographs, 20 amateur videos, 4000 text messages and 20000 e-mails. Therefore, this is considered to be a pure example of what citizen journalism resembles to. (Sambrook 2005)

Participation of citizen in news production has created a new relationship between journalists and their audience. On the other hand internet has also changed forms of news sourcing and storytelling. For instance Andy Carvin used Twitter to report on the events of Arab Spring. According to Carvin (2011) when he was monitoring the situation through social media he was able to have a better picture of what was going on the ground different from where he was by himself on the ground.

It's a form of situational awareness, something I noticed in late June when I was in Tahrir Square in Cairo and hundreds of people were injured when the police attacked. I could only tell what was going on immediately in front of me. I could smell it, see it, feel it, hear it, but I didn't know what was truly going on, whereas when I was using social media I felt I had a better sense of what was happening on the ground. (Carvin 2011)

By using different sources he could even debunk false images, therefore his Twitter account became one of the best Twitter accounts. His profile was viewed by several news organizations and many journalists used it as newsgathering source.

2.1 What is citizen journalism, definition?

Since the invention of printed press till the early years of web producing news was done by professionals and journalists and it was unthinkable to share news before being broadcasted by news organizations. Nevertheless non-professionals have always contributed in sharing information and this form of journalism is not completely new. (Thorsen 2013)

Citizen journalism has its roots back to the 7th and 8th century. But the first website launched on 6 August 1991 was made by Tim Berners-Lee had information about the World Wide Web. This and did not offer the chance of interactivity to the audience. But, as the years passed and the internet grew, the Web 2.0 platform was launched and it gave the random people the opportunity to interact with other users, share stories, photos and videos. Therefore the term of citizen journalism became international during the events of the attack in New York City on 11 September 2001 and during the Asian Tsunami in 2004 where people searched in the internet for eyewitness content. (The open newsroom 2008)

The term of citizen journalism if it is expressed in the simplest way according to Ornebring (2013) as news produced by amateur as opposed to professionals and this is a term generally accepted. However, this phenomena, is quickly growing and websites with user generated content, wikis, bloggers and social media are widely used nowadays.

2.2 Citizen journalism and professional journalism

Even though nowadays journalists have seen citizen journalism as a part of their profession more than they did before, the tension between professionals and non-professionals is still there and will always be. Some editors disapprove the participation of citizen journalist in news production process by stating that news production is a task that should be performed by professionals. However, these editors welcome comments done by citizens on online newspapers articles or

the ideas given by them to the editors regarding news production but they are against citizen writing articles. (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010, 165)

And so on other editors, reporters believe that because they have the experience and the required education and this is a task that should be carried by them and not the citizens. Journalists spend four to five years in university to become professionals. While in internet people with different educational background, sometimes inappropriate, can be part of news production via social media. Being a professional requires a lot of efforts and also a work culture is formed during these years of education and work. Ethics is also another value to consider. Journalism is a profession build on trust and people need to know that the content they are listening or reading is true and accurate. Hence honesty is a very important ethical value but citizens are not always loyal to the ethics of journalism. According to Armoogum "Media is one of the most powerful and influential industries in the world. There is no place for amateurism in this sector." Therefore, he calls them not citizen journalists but "seasonal or circumstantial news gatherers", "Information Brokers", or "News Footage Collectors". Artan Fuga an well-known scholar in the media and communication field, highlights a main problem of social media and the communication done through them. According to him the social media is virtual or it is a second reality and brings the problem of an isolated communication from the reality. However he estimates the interactivity that this platforms has brought to the communication and to the information industry (Fuga 2013, 575).

Others criticize it by looking from the practical point of view. They are concerned that this type of journalism can interpret non facts as facts and it brings more personal opinions, anger, and slander than real news. Sometimes scandals and conflicts which have reached to the grade of becoming state affairs are caused because people are just expressing their personal anger. Newspapers that have experimented with citizen journalism are afraid of anonymity because they can be accused of defamation. Moreover people by hiding behind the anonymity that internet allows you to have, can publish every type of content. (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010)

While they criticize it by looking at the drawbacks of citizen journalism they also draw a line to distinguish professional journalism form citizen journalism. According to Ornebring (2013) there are three fields where it can be seen clearly the difference between professional work and amateur work. Three fields where journalists express their authority and legitimacy are: expertise, duty and autonomy. By expertise it means the knowledge and skills of the professional obtained from the education, training and experience. According to Ornebring (2013) it refers more to technical knowledge and in journalism to determine this is difficult because journalism is not similar to professions such as medicine. Most important element of expertise is filtering the information. Journalist chose what type or information should be published, they summarize it, write with a language that the public will understand, analyze, raise question and presented to the public what is really important by letting out unnecessary information. Duty is the second field and it refers to the obligation that journalists have to server to society by informing the public with news produced consistent to the ethical values of journalism, by being honest and accurate and writing facts rather than personal opinions. The code of ethics that exist in journalism which citizen journalist sometimes lack. Lastly, the third domain is the autonomy. Autonomy in one of the main characteristics of the profession and means freedom to create journalistic work without being controlled or influenced by external or internal parties. However, autonomy is very difficult to be known and also is very difficult to determine whether citizen journalist are autonomous or not. (Ornebring 2013, 38)

Although they considered citizen journalism to have many drawbacks, they do not underestimate the values and the contribution it has made to journalism. Citizen journalism is a very important source of information for many news organizations. Many journalists seek for social media to source their news and nowadays content published form citizens on social media have reached to the point that cannot be ignored. "It is often said that "if the news is important enough it will find me" this aphorism illustrates the power of social networking, where breaking news often makes its way to the status updates of Facebook users and has crashed the severer at the microblogging site Twitter on many occasions" (Briggs 2010, 330)

There are several positive aspects to mention about citizen journalism and a lot of editors and journalists sees it a normal expansion of journalism derived by innovations in technology. Citizen journalism for the small news organizations which have low staff and budget is a useful way to source their news. By using blog sites and social networks these newspapers receive information that they will not be able to get it by sending their reporters. They also see it as way to communicate with the community and to better represent their ideas and opinions. Small local newspapers tend to use more interactive journalism comparing large national newspapers because reporters at these big news organizations are more sensitive regarding their reputation. They also have their own blog sites and encourage people to share their stories, photos, videos, ideas and comment by giving their opinions. (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010, 166)

2.3 Impact of citizen journalism in mainstream media

In his study about the impact of citizen journalism in mainstream media in China Xin (2011) finds that citizen journalism is helping citizen receiving information they cannot get through mainstream media because of government has control on the media. Moreover this type of journalism has also an impact in offline activism. In USA as it was mentioned in the beginning of this paper the decline in the revenues of printed newspapers, audience and revenues from advertisement clearly shows that citizen journalism has its own impact on mainstream media. (Xin 2010, 338) Conventional journalism is in a time of crisis and news blogs such as The Daily Show in United States and Oh MyNews etc are examples that existing gatekeeping theory, especially the industrial age when there were a few news organization which had the authority to gather information, filter it, and present to audience is fading. (Burns 2006) However, in Malaysia the situation is still controllable for mainstream media and even though citizen journalism is present and gradually growing alongside with the facilities that internet and innovations in technology. Although the circulation of printed newspapers have declined as it has happened in other countries the newspapers still make profit.

Beside citizen journalism and internet there are other reasons for this decline such as the credibility these newspapers have in community, economical crisis and the inability of mainstream media to adapt in this environment properly. However Salman et al (2011) points out that eventually new media is not going to replace the mainstream media such did not TV replaced radio. Moreover mainstream media nowadays is making serious efforts to adapt. Consequently, TV channels and many newspapers have their own online platforms where audience can read and comment over the news. These online platforms are also attracting advertisement and bringing revenues to mainstream media. (Salman, et al. 2011)

3. Presence of citizen journalism in Albania

Nowadays citizens are becoming an active part in production and sharing of news even in the reality of Albanian media. Content produced form users UGC (user generated content) is increasingly taking place in the news environment. Although discussions regarding positive and negative effects of citizen journalists among academics and scholars round the world continues, spreading of such content seems to be inevitable. The ongoing technological evolution, the opportunities that new technologies of communications offers seems to be the main reasons leading to this unstoppable expansion of citizen journalistic practices. In Albania we can say that citizen journalism is present both in positive and negative aspects. A good example of how citizen journalist has functioned is the event of Gërdec in 2008 where the explosion was filmed by a citizen and given to TV channel Top Channel. It is happening and it is obvious that is stimulated by media institutions. Televisions like Top-Channel and News 24 after every news edition publish a contact number where citizen can report any news, event occurring.

3.1 How citizen journalism is seen by media professionals!

Leaders and journalists of traditional Albanian media have different opinions regarding impacts these journalistic practices have on media product and journalism as a profession. However, they admit that in their daily work they accept content offered from citizens that are not professional journalists. Chief Editor of news in one of the biggest televisions channels in Albania, Top Channel Mentor Kikia says that the newsroom he runs receives approximately 20 to 25 reports daily from citizens. He divides content received from citizens into two categories. One part of content is about denouncements for administration which are mostly related with acts of violation of their rights and abuse or corruption. While in the second category take part events learned indirectly from citizens or eyewitness content, such accidents. (Kikia 2015)

“Denouncements firstly are verified and then we decide whether to publish or not them, because these denouncements need an investigatory work to be done. While in cases when citizens report for events they have seen or heard by themselves are more easily verified and almost all of them are taken into consideration.

While the phenomenon of citizen journalism, content produced by citizen is more present in televisions focused in news production. (24 Hour News). News director of News 24 Enton Abilekaj states that they as television receive approximately 30 to 35 reports daily from citizens and almost 60 % of them are considered as news content. He says that reports generally come via email and phone calls, however in the last years content generated form users is arriving mostly from social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. (Abilekaj 2015)

The growing usage of social media in Albania has brought a bigger democratization of information landscape. Journalists and traditional media professionals almost all accept that citizen journalism has helped to cover larger spaces and larger range of events happening in one day, which before for many reasons was impossible to be transmitted to audience.

Chef editor of online version of largest newspaper in Albania, Panorama newspaper Adi Shkëmbi mentions a concrete case where the newspaper had the chance to report the news more detailed and accurate thanks to information received from a citizen. "It happened in Tirana, it was a double murder case and the information we received from comments in our pages done by the citizen enabled us to give more detailed news. The reader informed us that one of the victims was son of a deputy, information which helped us to contact with the deputy. (Shkëmbi 2015)

TV channels and journalists are able to receive reports form citizens for special events even in regions where they do not have possibility to send their journalists or local correspondent. Chief editor of news in Vizion Plus channels! Roland Zili says that nowadays citizens have bigger technological opportunities for news almost as professional journalist and serve it for audience through traditional channels such as radio and newspaper. He also points out that the number of comments and information which have news value has increased in television's official facebook page. (Zili 2015)

3.2 Citizen journalism restrictions

New media platforms such as blogs, social media, virtual channels which produce online news have democratize news environment and have made it possible for every citizen to consume and be part of news production. However a considerable number of scholars and journalists have their concerns regarding participatory journalism. Citizen journalism is been produced from amateurs who lack professional skills and content produced by them might not be clear and accurate. Therefore, citizen journalism is facing some restrictions. He accepts that new media platforms have facilitated work of professional journalist but on the other hand have made it more superficial. Journalists are increasingly abandoning their former investigative and research practices. (Kikia 2015)

While media researcher Artan Fuga see citizen media restrictions connected to the virtual nature of platforms where these medias run their activity. Fuga says that these medias are part of another reality, virtual reality and therefore there exist a risk for these medias to detach from real world. He states that citizen journalism is incapable of dealing with matters that require time and expertise. Meanwhile, the second limitation citizen journalism have is related to the fact that it is more personalized. According to Fuga not all society is involved in virtual communication and the internet communicator has a certain profile of social identity that does not represent the interest of the whole society. (Fuga 2013)

These and other restrictions concerning citizen journalism emerged throughout the interviews with traditional media leaders in Albania were realized to serve this study. Albanian journalists accept the rapid spread of citizen journalism practices but they see it just as an opportunity to improve traditional practices of doing journalism.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

The inclusion of citizen contribute in the process of news is already a phenomenon that can be found all over the world. Due to the development of information technology and increase of social media usage, it is possible for each of us to be a media himself. Anyone who owns a smartphone can produce content and publish it, becoming the first source of information for his friends virtual, why not a part of traditional media.

Media Professionals and scholars have their opinions in favor and against citizen journalism phenomenon, based on their point of view. There is some skepticism in the community of media professionals, who though accept the contribution of common people in the process of news, don't want to lose their controlling position in this industry. The situation does not change in the Albanian context. The interviewed journalists from the mainstream media admit that the contribution of citizens in the news production is important and inevitable. While most of them own the opinion that this contribution should remain only in the phase of collecting preliminary information. According to them, media professionals shall continue to play the role of gatekeeper in the information production process.

The study showed that traditional media in Albania and especially the active journalists in it, needs to develop clear strategies in order to orient the facing of the challenges citizen journalism represents and involvement of citizens in the processes of production and distribution of information

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