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COMM 2310: Writing about Communication

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MWF 12:20 Section

Citizen Journalism in the Age of the Arab Spring

One of the many consequences of digitalization of journalism is the rise of citizen reporting, which refers to the broadcast of photos, video, and information by untrained citizens at the scene of a news-worthy event. Social media have facilitated this phenomenon by means of trends such as “live-tweeting” an event or recording a Facebook Live video. These acts encompass the “witnessing” function of citizen journalism whereby people record what is occurring around them rather than the “activism” function whereby people organize themselves using social media as was common during the Arab uprisings. In 2010, just as these technologies were reaching popularity with mainstream audiences, several MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria, were in the midst of political revolutions. The results were widespread instances of citizen reporting of violent and dangerous events. With the central definition of journalism evolving every day, it is undoubtable that citizen reporting will shape how mass audiences perceive broadcast media. Specifically, citizen journalism is changing the way news is delivered by giving audiences an increased sense of participation. This paper will come to this conclusion using evidence of the successes of the Arab Spring of 2010.

The Arab Spring is one of the primary examples of citizen journalism’s effects on its viewers. Uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria achieved some measure of success in promoting democracy in part due to the high amount of reporting that occurred on social media. Scholars concur: “The success of Tunisian and Egyptian activists in using social media to organize

mass protests that forced their countries’ presidents to step down lent credence to the belief that the use of digital technologies by citizens strengthens democracy or allows it to take shape” (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), protests turned violent and journalists seeking to cover the events unfolding at the time were at risk. These circumstances paved the way for citizen journalism on social media not only flourish but also become a reference point for the Western world. Hanska Ahy describes this necessity in his writing, “At the same time, people were sharing content and stories from the ground across the MENA that would otherwise not have been seen or heard, and news organizations responded by drawing on this social media content without which reporting would have become impossible” (Hanska Ahy, 2016). Miladi expands on Ahy’s conclusion and emphasizes the greater effects of citizen journalism’s prevalence in these uprisings. “The Arab revolutions have to some extent proven that history is no longer written by the officials but by ordinary people. Anyone with a camera and access to the Internet can make a difference and can become part of this process” (Miladi, 2012).

The Western world viewed videos, tweets, and photos matriculated by Arab citizens on the ground at crucial moments in the revolutions and felt a unique sense of engagement. Audiences felt participatory in response to news from the Middle East at the time. In fact, a study performed in Sweden by Anden-Papdopoulos revealed that people experienced a level of engagement when viewing posts from the part of the Arab world in conflict that was rarely the case with traditional media recorded by professionally-trained journalists. During the research, participants viewed two clips: a professionally produced news package about Libyan Prime Minister Muammar Gaddafi’s death that included some amateur footage and a Youtube video of Libyan rebels abusing him. They noted how the differences in camera work contributed to their feelings of authenticity and engagement. In his discussion of the results, the researcher writes, “The focus groups underlined that this(amateur footage) creates a sense of ‘being there,’ on the scene of events, allowing audiences access to a seemingly more unmediated version of events” (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2013).

Some academics pose objections to the theory of increased participation through citizen reporting. They contend that traditional media still possess different, more valuable qualities that citizen journalism cannot match. They argue that audience participation can exist at higher or equal amounts when traditional media produce the content of a news broadcast.

Another potential objection is that a lack of trust in citizens to accurately report the facts of a story when they have not been exposed to journalistic values such as integrity and unbiased reporting. If a lack of trust exists, the sense of participation that comes with viewing citizen reporting may vanish.

The Arab Spring, a major political event of the 21st century, was largely covered using mobile devices by citizens participating in the uprisings themselves. Brown et al. believe, “The importance of social media was in communicating to the rest of the world what was happening on the ground during the uprisings” (Brown et al, 2012). Citizen reporting gave the Western world a chance to witness the news through untraditional means. Whether or not this style of journalism was successful in communicating facts to the general public remains to be seen but one claim is for sure. Citizen journalism is here to stay.

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