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Citizen Journalism vs. Traditional Journalism

A Case for Collaboration

CORINNE BARNES

IN JANUARY 2011, A NEWS RELEASE from Jamaica's Constabulary Communication Network (CCN) indicated that a man who attacked the police had been shot and killed. It was not long after, however, that a citizen of the country began circulating video footage which told a different story. The footage showed the man who was said to have attacked the police seemingly writhing in pain, being beaten with a police baton and finally shot and killed while still down, subdued and unarmed.

The identity of that citizen who videotaped those images resulting in the arrest of the two policemen was never revealed, despite appeals from law enforcement officials. The action by that Jamaican citizen brought into sharp focus the fact that information and communication tools, such as mobile telephones and the Internet, are bringing about a level of access to information that is unprecedented. Blogs, forums, uploading of photographs or videos to the Internet, are now being labelled 'citizen journalism' as distinct from traditional, mainstream or professional journalism.

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional or formal training in journalism have an opportunity to use the tools of modern technology and the almost limitless reach of the Internet in order to create content that would otherwise not be revealed, as this kind of journalism goes far beyond the reach of professional journalism.¹

Citizen journalism, or participatory journalism as it is alternately labelled, is the act of a citizen or group of citizens involved in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and other forms of information.² The objective of this type of exercise is to provide independent, wide-ranging and relevant information that is crucial to democratic societies.

Peter Dooley suggests that “traditional journalism is the outside looking in. Citizen journalism is the inside looking out. In order to get the complete story, it helps to have both points of view.”³ Dooley's argument suggests that there is a place for this emerging phenomenon called citizen journalism, as well as for the profession that has been practised for decades called mainstream or traditional journalism.

Citizen journalism, as we know it now, was popularised in the late 1990s as more and more people, in both the developed and developing worlds, became connected to the Internet. The term is viewed as an umbrella concept that covers blogging as well as other institutional practices – such as the opportunity provided by one of Jamaica's three free-to-air television stations, CVM Television, through its I-Watch Report segment that allows viewers to send in reports of events or activities in their location. Other definitions include any form of user-generated content or contribution to the debate that is taking place in the public sphere. These would include postings on personal websites and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. Radio stations in Jamaica, such as Nationwide News Network, have made these sites a regular part of their commentary as they solicit views from listeners and incorporate these in their current affairs programmes.

While many researchers are in agreement that the term citizen journalism did not exist before the age of the Internet and that this phenomenon grew in tandem with the growth of the Internet, others posit a different view. According to Dan Gilmor, “Citizen journalism has existed in the form of independent community papers and newsletters since the eighteenth century.”⁴ It is only now, with the advent of the Internet, that more ordinary people have access to media and communication tools and facilities to make their opinions known and their voices heard, hence the focus is on citizen journalism.

Gilmor further traces the roots of citizen journalism to the founding of the United States in the eighteenth century when pamphleteers such as Thomas Paine, who printed his own publications, became known. The development of the postal system, the telegraph and the telephone later helped people to distribute news more quickly. Gilmor classifies opinion columns in the newspapers as well as letters to the editor as citizen journalism, as these forms of information dissemination give ordinary citizens an avenue to voice their opinions and to participate in public debates.

Gilmor further argues that the advent of desktop publishing in the late 1980s allowed a wider cross-section of people to design and print their own publications, but this format was still limited, as only those who had access to computers and the necessary software could participate in this sharing of information.

So clearly, new technology has made the concept of citizen journalism more of a reality, as the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s gave an even wider cross-section of people the opportunity to participate in the dissemination of information. People have been able to set up their own home pages and share their information with the world in a way that they certainly could not in the 1980s; and prior to this, only a small number of people had access to media. People in the developing world were at a disadvantage; many rural areas in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and other countries of the Caribbean, for example, were not connected by telephone, and in some communities, the only means of communication were the telegram or what has become known as 'snail mail' through an unreliable postal service. The Internet has made the postal service less important in the Caribbean and in many countries throughout the world.

The debate as to what exactly constitutes citizen journalism and when this phenomenon emerged is not going away; and as technology evolves, it is likely to become more intense, with academics, media practitioners and others with an interest in the technology continuing to study the underpinnings of this concept.

Those who posit the view that the term citizen journalism is hard to define are not wrong, as this concept has been variously labelled grassroots journalism, networked journalism, open source journalism, citizen media, participatory journalism, hyperlocal journalism and bottom-up journalism.⁵ A close look at these terms reveals that they all have one thing in common: they indicate an inclusiveness that is not to be found in traditional journalism – if traditional journalism is defined as the collection and editing of news for presentation through the mainstream electronic and print media. The terms used to describe citizen journalism carry with them an original and unfiltered aspect that is not found in traditional journalism where the issue of the editor as gatekeeper is critical to the process.

Those who take the time to do any kind of analysis of blogs and websites about citizen journalism will concur that the major difference between the

two concepts under discussion is interactivity. Traditional news media are viewed by many as a monologue where there is constant interruption, although most people have learned to block out this interruption. So on a television or radio newscast, for example, there are commercial breaks, while in newspapers, news content is interrupted by advertising content. Citizen journalism is a dialogue that often takes on a life of its own.⁶

With traditional media the message can be controlled, while with social media it is a free-for-all. There is no accountability. But while this may be viewed by some scholars as a positive characteristic, there are also drawbacks. Untrained writers may not understand concepts such as off-the-record material, attribution, balance, fairness and objectivity. They write from their own experiences, their own lives, rather than seeing themselves as conduits of information in the public interest. They are not able to stand back from an issue and report the facts objectively, leaving the reader, listener or viewer to come to his or her own conclusions. These ordinary citizens can do more harm than good to society if they are allowed to publish their thoughts, opinions and ideas and these are passed off as journalism in the traditional sense of the word.

Issues of objectivity, balance and fairness are of fundamental importance in traditional journalism. Only a trained journalist understands the level of fact-checking that is required before a news article can be published as factual. Journalists are required to be professional and meticulous in their information-gathering process to ensure the veracity of their information. Confirmation and re-confirmation of information is the hallmark of professional journalism. Some media entities insist on the confirmation of information by several sources prior to publishing. No media entity wants to print an apology for revealing erroneous information. No media entity wants to have its credibility put on the line by being sued for libel, particularly in some Caribbean countries where the libel law puts the onus on the journalist to prove that a story was not published out of malice.

Professional journalists are usually trained and are aware of the guidelines governing their product. The definition of a traditional journalist, coined by University of the West Indies lecturer Patrick Prendergast, underscores the importance of training in journalism: "A journalist is defined as a trained professional who, in the defence, protection and advancement of the public's interest, uses media and communication platforms to pursue and report what

is true with fairness, balance and accuracy and always in recognition of the principles, values and ethics of the profession of journalism.”⁷

When it comes to issues of ethics, those who are untrained are unable to understand that there must be certain guidelines to which news dissemination must adhere and certain principles that must not be compromised. The lines between mainstream journalism and citizen journalism should therefore not be blurred, and the distinction is important. Traditional journalists take pride in the fact that their products – whether it is the news or feature stories – embody values such as objectivity, accuracy, fact-checking and editorial oversight.⁸

On the other hand, user-generated content is inherently biased, so the notion of objectivity is far-fetched, and as far as accuracy is concerned, this is a concept that is very difficult to maintain in these kinds of writings, where there is really no accountability. Blogs, for example, are one-person shows.⁹ There is no corroboration. In traditional journalism, corroboration is the essence of the craft. In December 2009 when five people were killed in a traffic accident in St Vincent and the Grenadines, within five minutes of that accident the report, accompanied by graphic pictures, was circulating on different social media sites. The traditional media entities, however, had to wait for confirmation before they took to the airwaves to make official reports. In October 2011 when a small aircraft experienced some difficulty at the George Charles (formerly Vigie) airport in St Lucia and had to land in an emergency situation, the citizen journalists took to the social network sites calling the incident a “plane crash” which had an entirely different meaning. Had the traditional media organisations gone with this description, they would have had to issue apologies.

Another difference between citizen journalism and traditional journalism is that of transparency. In mainstream journalism, even if a media organisation has to protect its reporter by giving him or her a pseudonym, as has been seen in newspapers around the Caribbean, the editor and other media managers would know the identity of the reporter. If the information that is published is called into question, someone can be held accountable. In user-generated content posted online, the person behind the post is often anonymous, and the anonymous person cannot be held responsible.

Citizen journalism and traditional journalism can then be viewed as operating on a continuum, as Christopher Sterling has suggested.¹⁰ The first axis

is information gathering. Traditional journalists collect information through mainly primary sources – that is, interviews. This kind of journalist synthesises the information and produces news content for the public. Citizen journalism has more to do with crowd-sourcing.¹¹ It is the crowd that collects, analyses and synthesises, and publishes this information. The major difference here is that the crowd is anonymous: it is difficult to identify the individual in the crowd in much the same way as it is almost impossible to identify the person who gave the fatal blow in a situation involving mob killing. The mainstream journalist stands out from the crowd. The journalist must take responsibility, while it is difficult to hold ‘the crowd’ accountable. The journalist has an identity. The traditional media practitioner has a byline even if the editor chooses to withhold that byline. The traditional journalist cannot hide behind the crowd.

Sterling sees the second axis as distributed information, as against fully crafted narrative. In citizen journalism the information is disseminated in bits and pieces as is seen by the people who are witnessing the event. Different people will have different perspectives, so there is no coherence in the final product. The information emerges as a kind of hyperlinked story. In traditional journalism, through interviews and documents the professional journalist must collect all the information, analyse, synthesise and produce it as a whole, rather than in incoherent parts. In fact, one of the pivotal points in mainstream journalism is structure – organisation of the material so that the article flows smoothly.

The third axis on this continuum is the difference between formal training and no training at all, as has been discussed above. Although some citizen journalists may be exposed to some level of training, it is not the same. Herein lies a major difference between the two. Mainstream journalists, based on their training, are aware of what constitutes libel as opposed to what is publishable, and have been trained to identify when they need to hold on to information until they are able to verify it. So a clear understanding of what constitutes the practice of journalism is the fourth axis. Citizen journalists often blur the distinction between fact and fiction. For traditional journalists, journalism is based on fact, never on fiction. There is a distinct difference that can never be ignored. Journalists who cross that line are usually regarded as committing professional suicide. When the mainstream journalist’s credibility is lost it is very hard to regain, and it takes only one careless mistake for this to happen.

The case for collaboration

Nevertheless, the distinction between a citizen journalist and a professional journalist may not be as stark as some suggest. Journalists such as Dionne Jackson Miller of the RJR Group in Jamaica, owners of Television Jamaica (TVJ) and RJR radio station, practise what might be considered citizen journalism, by writing their own blogs and commenting online outside of their traditional journalism roles. In these cases, the journalists maintain that they make the clear differentiation between their own thoughts and opinions and the kind of objectivity and balance that they need to bring to professional journalistic articles, which the untrained person who is blogging and posting to other social sites may not be able to understand.

In comparing these two concepts, it is important to acknowledge that one of the foremost drivers of citizen journalism is the ability to disseminate information as soon as it happens. On 11 September 2001, when the World Trade Center in New York was bombed, within minutes, before traditional media entities could get to the scene, photographs which ordinary citizens were taking on their mobile devices were being used by traditional media organisations to paint a picture of those horrific events, until mainstream media were able to dispatch reporters to the area. Traditional media relied heavily on citizen media to piece together the story as it unfolded.

In 2004 when many countries in Southeast Asia were devastated by a tsunami which left thousands of people dead, in the early days before mainstream media could get their reporters there on the ground, they relied almost exclusively on the pictures taken by people carrying mobile phones, to sketch a picture of the developments for their audiences.

In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated areas of the east coast of the United States, it was the social media that brought some of the graphic photographs and the situation existing on the ground to the attention of the world before mainstream journalists such as Anderson Cooper of CNN could fly to these areas to bring reports to the attention of the world.

During the 2009 upheavals in Iran over the election of a president, when traditional media were blocked from entering and recording the events, some writers began referring to this as the Twitter revolution, when traditional media entities like CNN, MSNBC, BBC, CBS and other networks had to rely on information from the social media such as Twitter for their information.

In January 2010 when a magnitude 7.0 earthquake devastated Haiti, social media played a significant role in beaming the images around the world.

The upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, Sudan and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 became known as the Facebook revolution. This was one of the most interesting uses of citizen journalism to disseminate information. People were using their mobile telephones to record events, to take photographs, to videotape activities and release them to the world in a way that traditional media could not, because they had no access. The same is true of the devastating earthquake in Japan in March 2011. Traditional media became dependent on citizen media. The two seemed to work together to bring to the world the untenable situation on the ground. Citizen media gave ideas to traditional media and traditional media were also able to develop those ideas to inform and to educate, which are two of the main objectives of traditional journalism.

The magnitude of the impact of natural and man-made disasters that have occurred in the past five years would have been challenging for any media organisation to cover regardless of the size of their resources. In covering disasters, journalists are racing against time, and it is a fact that journalists are not always present when these incidents occur. Their job, in these situations, is to piece together the stories as they occur. In their effort to get the information to the public as quickly as possible they can use images and videos uploaded by citizens to complement other forms of information that they would have been able to verify. Citizen journalists can help to capture the moment in the aftermath of these disasters.¹²

Citizen journalism has put back democracy into the hands of individuals, as anyone with a mobile phone or a camera can be a citizen journalist.¹³ There can hardly be a discussion about citizen journalism or social media without mention of On-the-Ground News (ONGR), a website that was established in 2010 by a group that has refrained from disclosing the identity of its members. It markets itself as a revolutionary social media news source that invites reports from all over the world. Ordinary citizens can upload photographs, videos and news reports as they see events unfold. More and more people are navigating their way to this site to get their news even before it appears in the traditional media. This entity on Facebook now has some twenty-five thousand followers.

There is also the *Huffington Post*, which is now a respectable online news-

paper, blending high-quality reporting and opinion. This is a classic example of the development of citizen journalism into a more mainstream entity. The *Huffington Post* began as an outlet for commentary by Arianna Huffington and some friends. The website was called Ariannaonline.com. Today, readers post over one million comments each month and the Internet newspaper carries news on politics, entertainment, health, media, the environment, the economy, sports and business.

Citizen journalism, to a large extent, depends on the output of traditional journalism. In many instances, it is the output of traditional journalism that forms the basis of blogs and other commentaries. At the same time, traditional journalism is benefiting from citizen journalism as it uses content generated by users. There is, in fact, a case for harmonious coexistence, as long as each recognises the limitations of the other. The most valuable components of citizen journalism are the ideas, comments, pictures and videos which are generated by people on the ground and which mainstream or traditional journalists can use as they shape the final product.¹⁴

Does traditional journalism plus citizen journalism equal the complete picture?¹⁵ The response is a resounding yes. Both can coexist. The times have changed. Technological advancement has caused traditional journalists to take a second look at the way their craft is practised and to make a determination of the adjustments that must be made, if they are to take full advantage of the new technology.

Citizen journalism is making many inroads into traditional journalism.¹⁶ Some traditional media entities, rather than resisting the change that technological advancement has brought about, have an avenue available for comments to be posted or a space where readers can send their opinions on a story that was published, or even their story ideas. With new media technology, Breanna Chillingworth argues, texting the editor or sending mobile phone and camera footage is now a simple process. This, she maintains, is not necessarily having an adverse effect on traditional journalism, but is merely assisting in the dissemination of news. Readers, viewers and listeners are getting their usual balanced news from traditional media entities, but are also receiving on-the-ground and personal accounts from people in the middle of the action.¹⁷

This sums up the case for the successful cohabitation or co-existence of the two genres. Dionne Jackson Miller made a clear case for collaboration between

citizen journalism and traditional journalism when she stated on her blog that there is a convergence between the traditional and the new approach to journalism, and implored journalists not to dread this evolution but to embrace it.¹⁸

Helen Boaden, director of news at BBC, has suggested that user-generated content provides audiences with a wider diversity of voices than the station could otherwise deliver. She has asserted that news organisations do not have a monopoly on what stories are covered.¹⁹ Citizen journalism is a way for mainstream journalism to improve. This is clearly an argument for coexistence of the two forms of media.


Conclusion

Mainstream media – television, radio and newspapers – were once considered the primary source of news. But this was long before the age of the Internet. News websites, some of which are hosted by media entities, have become sources of alternative news. Prior to the advent of the Internet, alternative sources of news were restricted to community or alternative newspapers and to some extent, community radio. Today, user-generated content as news is clearly a growing phenomenon as original reporting of local events contributed by ordinary citizens continues to increase. Eyewitness accounts are, at times, fuelling the reportage in mainstream media.

With the rise of the Internet, some writers predicted the demise of mainstream media at the hands of citizen journalism. That has not happened. Some media entities have been forced to scale down their operations or to close, but certainly mainstream media are still expanding and continue to play the role of watchdog on behalf of the public. However, with the change in the way news is presented, mainstream journalism has had to move with the times and adapt to the changes.

It is becoming increasingly clear that, armed with easy-to-use new tools and mobile devices that make publishing so much easier, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. This is a strong argument for mainstream and citizen journalism to collaborate in order to meet the needs of their audiences. In this argument for collaboration, traditional media must recognise the risks

of using copy from citizen journalists without verification. One false story or erroneous report, one blog that is filled with inaccuracies, can be picked up by many more websites and media entities and be circulated around the world in minutes. In Jamaica, and in some other Caribbean countries, traditional media entities have begun to embrace citizen journalists, but are ensuring that the necessary checks and balances are in place for the verification of information before it is disseminated.

Mainstream journalism has been around for five hundred years. Citizen journalism is a fairly new concept that can add value to the older entity. Both can coexist as they seek to achieve similar goals. As Clyde Bentley states, in an online article, "Citizen journalism is the refreshing bouquet that traditional newspapers can give to readers who increasingly say the fire has gone from our romance with them. It's a way to say, 'We're sorry,' but also a promise to do better."²⁰ 

NOTES

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