

Citizen Media and Journalism

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Historical Developments

While the term “citizen media” is relatively new, citizen journalism practices have historical antecedents. Citizens have participated in news production since the start of modern journalism, long before the emergence of the internet and Web 2.0. The popular radical press in England in the late eighteenth century and mid-nineteenth century included elements of citizen media through its activist stances and use of audience reporters. Likewise, in the United States in the 1740s, citizen journalism existed as citizen distributed political pamphlets in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. This practice was magnified by Thomas Paine’s publication of *Common Sense* in 1776, with approximately 150,000 copies distributed. Citizens demonstrated that audiences could produce and become part of news production. In the 1920s, free radio stations or pirate radio involved unauthorized community activists and political and cultural dissidents who broadcasted offshore in parts of continental Europe or the United Kingdom. On November 22, 1963, Abraham Zapruder documented the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy with his Bell & Howell camera, selling the rights for US \$200,000 to *Life* magazine. And in 1991, from the balcony of his apartment, George Holliday chronicled Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles Police Department officers by filming it with his Sony-Handycam. After filming an eight-minute clip, Holliday contacted a local LA television station, KTLA. The station gave him \$500 in exchange for the video that was first aired

on the local channel and then on CNN as part of an affiliate agreement with the station.

The emergence of citizen content and social media in the news organization is associated with several factors that are discernible from previous citizen media examples. The rapid growth of the internet and Web 2.0 throughout the 1990s conflated citizen media with traditional journalism. With the ability of citizens to use internet technologies and the World Wide Web to replicate and distribute their work online, a formerly passive audience became both producer and consumer of content, or, as communication scholar Axel Bruns (2005) referred to them, “producers.” Though there was never a consensus on use of the term “citizen media,” in the 1990s, terms such as “participatory media,” “journalism 2.0,” and “network journalism” started emerging.

Computer mediated citizen media (2000–04)

Networked environments (such as markets, distribution, production) and many-to-many communication flows replaced the hierarchical and centralized structures of traditional journalism. In this computer mediated communication context, and with the rise of the World Wide Web, citizen media moved from a sporadic to a much more common activity. This shift raises questions about the relevance of traditional media by enhancing new practices in new spaces of communication, such as with the emergence of citizen journalism and media organizations – for example, South Korea’s OhMyNews International founded in 2000 by Oh Yeon-ho. OhMyNews was founded in the civic media tradition in South Korea. The news organization played a key role in the 2002 election of reform President Roh Moo-hyun and protected the South Korean president in 2004 when the conservative party tried to impeach him.

The terms “citizen media” and “citizen journalism” emerged by the end of the 1990s and early

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2000s as a type of news production outside traditional journalism that shapes the public debate; it is in contrast to participatory journalism, which involves audiences interacting with journalistic content on a wiki, an online comment page with a journalist's story, or a collaborative open-source production. By participating in citizen media and journalism, citizens are involved in the production, selection, dissemination, and consumption of news. The practice of citizen media was intensified by the rise of computer mediated communication, the internet and Web 2.0, as well as by the ability of citizens to participate in such practices at "key moments." The production of citizen journalism included various types that all came under the umbrella of citizen media and journalism: audience participation, independent news and information websites, full-fledged participatory news sites, collaborative and contributory media sites, and personal broadcasting sites such as video broadcasting. For example, in 1999 in Seattle in the United States, the anti-World Trade Organization protests marked one of the first times activists organized themselves through computer mediated communication. Citizens began disseminating their news, shaping and controlling how their protests would be portrayed in the media.

Postindustrial journalism (post-2004)

Rather than being a completely independent source for information, citizen media quickly began to converge with traditional media, blurring the boundaries historically claimed by the latter. Post-2004, an international shift in traditional journalism occurred when citizen media became integrated into mainstream reporting. Scholars such as Dan Gilmour (2004), an advocate of citizen journalism, claimed that citizen media entered the lexicon of journalism immediately in the aftermath of the December 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in South Asia. The tsunami is a particular instance of the increasing ability of news organizations to gather eyewitness accounts from audience material and user generated content, for example via email. Another important milestone came during the 2004 US Democratic political convention when, for the first time, the Democratic National Committee gave press

credentials to a select group of bloggers to cover the four-day event.

This shift from computer mediated media to postindustrial journalism is illustrated by the definition of citizen journalism given by Jay Rosen, media critic and professor at New York University, whereby, "the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another" (2006, n.p.). The boundaries between citizen media and traditional journalism are blurred. Post-2004, citizen journalism moved from being a contested to a mainstream medium, although in many cases citizen media itself is contested.

In breaking news stories, citizen media often is the first source of information for traditional journalists. Some of the best citizen journalism following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 came from the blog of Salam Pax, a 29-year-old architect living in the suburbs of Baghdad, who documented events before and after the invasion. His blog is a good example of an alternative source of reporting, providing a first-hand account of the daily life and viewpoints of Iraqis. In 2005, citizen media also had an impact on the coverage of Hurricane Katrina. According to the Online News Association (ONA), some of the most compelling journalistic coverage came from citizen journalism. Citizens used websites on the internet to post pictures or search for missing relatives. In the United Kingdom, earlier that same year, some of the first pictures during the London bombing attacks also came from citizen journalists. Alexander Chadwick, a survivor, snapped a mobile phone camera photograph of the evacuation of King's Cross Station. Traditional news organizations such as the BBC, *The Times*, and *The New York Times* used that picture in their news reports and also online. Chadwick emailed the picture to yourpics@bbc.co.uk. At around 11:30 a.m., the picture landed on the desks of BBC editors. It became the iconic image of the day for the news organization.

The 2007 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar is another example of the changing nature of the relationship between citizen journalism and traditional journalism. The self-publishing nature of Twitter, Flickr and Facebook allows news organizations to seek citizen journalism online rather than wait for it to arrive by email. During

the Iranian election of 2009, citizens also used video sharing platforms and Twitter to disseminate news content and organize the protests. The same can be said about the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, first disseminated on Twitter by Sohaib Athar (@ReallyVirtual), an IT consultant in Abbotabad, Pakistan. In 2011, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements saw citizen journalism blending with traditional media. Social media have given mobilizing power to people formerly known as audiences. Social media and mobile communication are essential in supporting citizen media and in the blurring of the boundaries between this new form of communication and traditional journalism.

Conceptualizing Citizen Media

The questions imbricating “citizen media” – what these media are, why they are important, what makes them different from any other type of media – are complex for several reasons. The first stems from the legacy of “mass media” scholarship. This research tradition sees the history of most media as the product of large institutions, directed at, and eventually consumed by, large masses of people. Any media that do not immediately fit this paradigm may be intellectually interesting, but have not been considered worthy of serious mainstream study.

The second reason is related to the first one and is more methodological than disciplinary. For most of human history, the media forms that have been most accessible to scholars are those that have been the product of large institutions. Most media products are, by their nature, ephemeral – they leave traces, but these traces are scattered and need to be collected, preserved, and collated in order to be analyzed. An activist may broadcast a “pirate” radio show from a small ship off the coast of a major urban seaport, violating all sorts of regulatory and spectrum governance laws, but such broadcast material is rarely analyzed insofar as it is rarely preserved and certainly not in a form that makes it easily studied.

The third reason has to do with questions about professionals and professionalization. As is widely documented in the sociology of the

professions literature of the 1970s, the histories and ethnographies of journalism from the late 1970s and 1980s, and the fusion of occupational sociology and journalism studies which has flowered in the 2010s (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010), journalism as an occupation, as well as the occupations of media more generally, are considered the domain of a privileged class of professional producers. A concept like “citizen media” only makes sense if a sharp line is drawn between professionally produced content and media content produced by “everyone else.” While this is partly attributable to occupational ideology, it is also scholarly doxa, at least until the digital media explosion of the late 1990s.

It is this change in media production, distribution, and consumption, brought about by the mainstreaming of digital and internet based media, that has led to the explosion of interest in citizen media. Citizen media is more easily captured, archived, and analyzed than ever before. The line between professionals and citizens is breaking down conceptually, although not necessarily in terms of journalism as practice. For all of these reasons, “citizen media” is in need of rigorous synthetic and conceptual work.

Central to the definition of citizen media are processes of deinstitutionalization and self-definition. Institutions can be conceived in Weberian fashion as positions, roles, norms, and values embedded in social structures and patterns of work. We also define citizen media in line with the way that the producers define themselves rather than by the way that others define them. These different approaches raise questions about the boundaries between different kinds of journalistic practice and about what the professional journalism project entails. The processes of deinstitutionalization and the constitution of a nonprofessional self-identify enable the operation of a variety of forms of “networked journalism” – “professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives” (Jarvis, 2006, n.p.). These collaborative cross-platform practices are in many ways more indicative of the state of news production in the early twenty-first century than is a focus on differences between citizen and professional media.

Theorizing Citizen Media Production

Citizen media is theorized through a variety of lenses derived from sociology and other social science disciplines and most empirical research embraces one or more of the approaches discussed below.

Citizen media can be considered in political terms, particularly in relation to examples of political unrest in 2011 such as Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring. It could even be seen as the causal agent behind these uprisings. In its simplest form, the political context of newsmaking can be used to study the production of news on a macro or state level, particularly insofar as different political systems co-produce different systems and styles of journalism.

Second, a critical economic perspective on citizen media may be taken. This media could be analyzed as an example of the proletarianization of a formerly professionalized labor or another example of the precarity of work introduced by neoliberalism. There are other options possible for economic analysis. Rather than focusing on the manner in which large economic systems intersect with various forms of journalistic production, scholars may critically interrogate the way that different institutionally specific resources constrain the options available to news outlets in different industry segments and the possible economic motivations for utilizing citizen media.

Third, citizen media can be understood through the institutional relationships between media companies and citizen media producers, how they work together, how they compete with each other, and so on. This analysis of citizen journalism from a perspective informed by Bourdieu's work on fields or a new institutionalist perspective begins from the premise that a new field of citizen media making is emerging alongside traditional fields such as professional journalism or public relations. Social, economic, and cultural power struggles occur within these fields and these shape practices of newswork and journalistic products. Here, the dynamics of these fields are not seen as operating in isolation from nearby fields. Of course, not all new institutional arguments stem from Bourdieu; the key idea here

is that there exist ways of thinking about journalism that go beyond the study of organizational operation (Sparrow, 1999).

A fourth perspective examines the manner in which the work routines and organizational hierarchies of professional journalists have changed since the emergence of citizen media making; alternatively some research examines the manner by which citizen journalists are establishing their own hierarchies and creating their own routines. This is an important corrective to the perspectives discussed so far. Despite the utility of political, economic, and field approaches to the study of citizen media, each of these perspectives abstracts (to a greater or lesser degree) from the day-to-day organizational processes through which citizen generated practices embed themselves in journalism work. From this perspective, "the social organization of newswork" (Schudson, 2005) brings us down to earth to ground-level newsroom dynamics. The majority of the final sections of this entry deal with these sorts of questions.

The intersection of technological change and newsroom practice is most often analyzed on the level of organizational routines; nevertheless, the growth of citizen media production can be expected to affect journalistic culture as much as journalistic work. Michael Schudson argues that cultural aspects of society, "while they may be uncovered by detailed historical analysis, cannot be extrapolated from features of social organization at the moment of study. They are part of culture – a given symbolic system within which and in relation to which reporters and officials go about their duties" (2005, p. 187). This cultural perspective can generate questions concerned with how the growth of citizen media affects traditional media producers' image of themselves and their profession, and about the cultural and symbolic lenses through which citizen media makers theorize their own work.

A final lens might focus more on the technology used in the production of citizen media and the history of these technologies as artifacts. For most sociologists, an overemphasis on the role played by technology in the construction of news constitutes the primary sin, one to be assiduously avoided. But is there a way to talk about technology and the news on its own terms, without reducing said technology to either a

political, economic, cultural, or social construction? We could argue that there is, and that any conceptualization of citizen media that does not include a technological perspective is lacking.

We might consider these *political, economic, organizational, cultural, technological, and institutional* perspectives to be the “classic” perspectives within the sociology of news (Schudson, 2005). These are not the only scholarly perspectives on citizen media, but they are compact, flexible, and schematic enough to serve as a starting point for analysis of citizen journalism in a rapidly expanding and heterogeneous field of research. If these are helpful, but not the only, perspectives on citizen journalism and media, what are some alternatives? One additional, less categorical lens is Deuze’s (2008) notion of “liquid journalism”:

For journalists, all of this not only means that value attributed to media content will be increasingly determined by the interactions between users and producers rather than the product (*news*) itself. The real significance of the argument outlined here is that we have to acknowledge that the key characteristics of current social trends – uncertainty, flux, change, unpredictability, or perhaps “kludginess” (to paraphrase Jenkins) – has come to structurally define or even determine the way people, media, and society interact. This defines the current and future state of affairs in how people make and use journalism all around the world. (p. 860)

Deuze discounts the theorization of citizen media and journalism as filtered through Schudson’s categories in favor of a more far-reaching analysis that attributes to media such “liquid” characteristics as persistently shifting forms, contexts, institutional forms, and audience relationships. These changes stem from society-wide changes in which life itself becomes liquid. This type of analysis concerns itself less with sociological perspectives and more with phenomenology and grand theorization.

Empirical Scholarship

Given the important place in society of citizen media and journalism, its role has been a central issue in journalism and new media studies.

Contemporary studies in citizen media draw boundaries around a diverse body of research efforts primarily in the social sciences: sociology, political and media studies. Most of this research is concerned with the role of citizen media and journalism, the process, and its impact on the media. Normative in nature, this research analyzes what takes place and conceives how citizen media could and should become. This body of literature is thus closely related to discussions on the future of journalism among citizens, activists, media professionals, politicians, and policymakers. Research on citizen media ranges from eyewitness reporting and gate watching to social challenges of citizen journalism.

Eyewitness reporting and gate watching

This approach emerges from interests ranging from politics, mobilization, dissent in political regimes, and emergence of new information technologies, to education and literacy. Researchers argue that several factors led to the opening of the communication system from gate keeping to gate watching. The media scholar Axel Bruns (2005) shows how citizen media works as a gate watcher. He describes the communication process of citizen media in contrast to the traditional journalism model. According to Bruns, the communication process shifts from input (news gathering) to output (closed editorial hierarchy), to response (editorial selection of letters, calls made public). Yet, gate watching (open to all users) moves to input (submission of gate watch open to all users), to output (instant publishing or collaborative editing of stories), and to respond (discussion and commentary open to all users). In the past, the amount of news available was limited and there was a hierarchical structure because of gate keeping. This approach demonstrates the crumbling of the gates at the input point where the news becomes newsworthy and at the output point where the news is disseminated to the public.

Herbert J. Gans (2011) describes this process as “multiperspectival news reporting.” Multiperspectival news encompasses facts and opinions that reflect all perspectives. In reality, this means that news can be produced for the underrepresented and reported to part of the population.

For many researchers, this process has become evident in newsworthy events such as the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle and blogger Salam Pax dispatching information from Baghdad during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In both of these cases, those who would not otherwise be heard were able to take part in the gathering and dissemination of news.

As journalists take on new roles, more voices can presumably be heard. Although new forms of reporting, such as network journalism, promote a greater dialogue and a better way of telling stories that would otherwise not be available to farflung areas, journalists still encounter challenges in shifting completely from a gate keeping to a gate watching role. There has been a surge in research looking at the blurry distinction between citizen media and traditional journalism. For example, studies claim that to understand journalism it must be examined in various contexts to see how it was influenced by studies of the sociology of news production from the 1960s to the early 1980s. This scholarship produced useful participant observation studies on the influence of routines, institutional forces, ideological positions, and workers' socialization and attitudes, examining news production from inputs to outputs. Based on this sociological tradition, a second wave of ethnographic studies emerged in the early 2000s, focusing on citizen media and traditional journalism. However, the process is more complex because of the interplay of factors such as structures, journalistic culture, and accustomed practices. This work tends to be informed by the particular interest of researchers in technological innovation, television, radio, or print.

Looking at one citizen media organization, Indymedia, Sarah Platon and Mark Deuze (2003) write about the assumption that open publishing assumes a nonhierarchical relationship between readers and content. Readers and users would be able to tell their story of an event. However, although organizations such as Indymedia differ from traditional newsrooms, their structures and values are not substantially different. These new forms of organization face the same kinds of daily problems, issues, and editorial discussions that traditional journalism does. But social media has enabled new forms of journalism outside traditional journalism spaces provided by mainstream news organizations, suggesting that there

is "conflict" between traditional media and social media. For example, from the perspective of citizens, Thomas Poell and Erik Borra (2012) claim that during the G20 summit protests that took place in Toronto in 2010, social media provided a form of public communication that empowered alternative forms of journalism. However, use of social media was found not to facilitate alternative reporting or citizen journalism, with the possible exception of Twitter and a handful of users who dominated the coverage of events. As a result, reporting practices seemed to mirror the event oriented focus of mainstream broadcasting of protests that is often criticized by citizens.

Some studies analyze journalism as a network involving citizen journalism as part of the global practice and conversation of news production, including the analysis of local and global media ecologies. Like the other empirical studies, however, most of this research demonstrates that many organizations do not integrate citizen participation into their networked news routines.

Finally, while the phenomenon of "big data" and its use in the media is often analyzed separately from citizen media production, much work on big data is informed by the exploding technological traces left by citizens as they consume and produce digital media. To the extent that these traces are treated as data and integrated into media outputs, big data is developing its own citizen media practices, though of a dramatically different kind.

Research from these various perspectives indicates that the communication system is moving, perhaps sluggishly, from the role of watchdog to that of guidedog. Research from the perspective of technological innovation, television, radio, or print suggests that factors such as political regimes, dissent, the emergence of digital technologies, education, and literacy are either hindering or enhancing the role of citizen media and journalism. There is also a resurgence of work emphasizing methodological approaches which examine media systems at the traditional and citizen journalism levels, suggesting that citizen media is affecting modes of communication and the picture of society that is presented in the media and raising normative questions about the role of citizen journalism in society.

Global Perspectives of Citizen Media and Social Changes

From the 2000s, there has been a resurgence of studies concerned with the role and promise of citizen media in shaping social realities and political mobilization. Building on news production and journalism studies, these works contend that news gathering is more chaotic and networked than it used to be prior to the emergence of the internet and Web 2.0. These works suggest that digital technologies such as computers, mobile phones, and the internet give power to citizens to shape institutions such as nongovernmental organizations, governments, think-tanks, and businesses.

From a global perspective, there are studies claiming that citizen journalism and social mobilization are experiencing a revival through digital media – text messaging, email, photo sharing, social networking, and the like – and alternative forms of expression. This is said to have happened partly in response to authoritarian political regimes – for example, the Arab Spring of 2011 in Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt. Since the early 2000s, citizens have chronicled events in the Middle East, such as the uprising against then-President Hosni Mubarak. During the revolution in Egypt, citizen journalism boomed and technologies were often seen as the conductors of social change and the enlargement of the public sphere. From this perspective, digital technologies are understood to have provided the tools for citizens to participate in the globalization, mobilization, and democratization of information (Howard, 2010).

Studies also reveal how citizen journalists were among the first to report breaking news stories to international audiences by providing eyewitness reports. Citizen media can have an effect on nations with authoritarian rule and censorship. A compelling example is the case of the 2008 Chinese earthquake, when citizens were able to investigate and critique the government's actions. However, some researchers argue that citizen journalism can be challenged by the changing structure of traditional news organizations, legal issues, political regimes, or the design of new technologies. Research suggests that in several major cases – such as the earthquake in China in 2008 and the election in

Iran in 2009 – governments developed tactics to limit dissent and manage citizen journalism. These tactics include the Chinese government's infiltration of online content by paying people to post content to support the government or by limiting the airwaves or social media platforms. Lee Salter (2009) has observed that private and public corporations have attempted to shut down citizen media by enforcing the rule of laws related to, for example, libel, privacy, and security legislation. Accordingly, not all technology delivers the promise of greater integration of citizens in news production. These global perspectives on citizen media sit at the crossroad between the global impact of citizen journalism and its challenges with research examining similarities, differences, and interactions across the emerging communities of journalism.

SEE ALSO: Blogging; Freedom of Expression; Freedom of Expression and Professional Status; Microblogs; Mobile Social Networks; Participatory Video; Social Media; Social Media and Activism; Social Media and Apps; Social Networks; Transmedia; Web 2.0 – and Beyond; Wikis

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