

The Role Of Citizen Journalism In Development For Democratic Society: An Analysis In The Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

A vibrant online community of citizen journalists in Assam reports from remote areas. Citizen journalists regularly report for the website and are granted identity cards to help cover big events. Webmaster Babul Gogoi has been holding workshops to train people from various walks of life in citizen journalism so that they too can report news from their areas. He has particularly focused on those areas of Assam from where reports are scant in newspapers and TV channels based out of the capital city, Guwahati.

“We now have a fleet of 200 such citizen journalists registered with us and are regularly giving us news from areas, which do not usually have newspaper and TV correspondents,” says Gogoi. These reporters are directly or indirectly associated with the news they send. “If they tag any news as breaking news, I ensure it is actually so,” he says.

Citizen journalists regularly reporting for the website are granted identity cards “to help cover big events like ministers' visits to their areas.” Based on this card, he says with a laugh, “some have been made members of the Guwahati Press Club.” What was the purpose of starting this portal—Gogoi explains, people have stories, issues which they want to take up with the administration or share.. These need not be just negative stories, but give a platform for people like you and me, to deal with situations.

Thinking up newer ways to make use of technology, Gogoi had the brainwave to start assamtimes.org in 2007. “As a webmaster for another Assam-based portal, I used to receive a lot of local news besides Assam-related cultural/social news from across the world. So I thought, why not create a site only to publicise local news online.”

In future, he plans to print an annual journal with articles on new ideas to address some issues related to the Northeast. “The target readers will be policymakers, bureaucrats, ministers, academics, politicians, development workers, journalists and research students.”

This is how a citizen is using the internet to have his say and get his voice heard by authorities. These are citizen Journalists. The term 'citizen media' refers to forms of content produced by private citizens, who are otherwise not professional journalists. Citizen journalism, participatory media and democratic media are related principles.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, democratisation, development, Blogs, Citizen, Journalist, political communication.

Introduction

A quick look at the literature review, gives us the sense on how interwoven the concepts of Citizen Journalism, Political Communication and Democratic Principles are. These concept are mutually collaborative in nature. While some scholars, highlight the role of social media and other new media courses in democratisation and more active political participation, some other debate on it. Although, the new media technologies give political communication campaigns a better, cheaper and more interactive formation, it seems quite difficult to extend this “good formation” to a greater democracy. This is because of the complexity of culture, sociopolitical structure and historical dynamics of the society involved. Thus making new media channels and their active practise by the citizens to have a non-linear influence on a given society. Therefore, this article, based on an extensive literature review, aims to examine the following prominent aspects on the background of citizen journalism and In Development For Democratic Society The key topics for the examination are, (a) the role of social media and other new media courses in political communication, (b) the influence of citizen journalism on democratisation, (c) the new and traditional way of news production regarding pro people concept and (d) lastly, questioning the reality of the recently emerged “we’re all journalists now” expression. Thus helping us to understand if civic contribution, through citizen journalism, into In Development For Democratic Society breaks the taboos between politics and the society and so shortens the long way towards democratisation. (Ekmel GEÇER,2017:07)

Citizen journalism and Indian perceptive

Currently in India, there are about 60,000 registered newspaper titles; among them 7,000 newspapers are operating as regular publications. Also, there are about 100 national television channels and hundreds of additional local channels, and a number of private radio stations particularly in the larger cities. Against this, there are emerging trends in the new media environment (Internet and mobile services); several conventional players have begun by now in order to develop their own online and mobile offerings, however there remains a race to define new media rules and conventions. Besides the conventional journalism industry, there were Merinews.com, Sulekha.com and Rediff.com. Looking at the overall Indian economy Indian medias have outperformed; they had reached US\$18.6 billion by 2010. In the country literacy rate stands at around 67%, and the government policies are actively furthering it. It is not just literacy, even adoption and adaptation to technology is happening at a rapid speed. Internet (especially broadband) and mobile access is key here and blogs, news portals have become popular and even used by conventional media operators. With these developments there is a sense that conventional media has been left behind. Few decades ago, the media used to indicate and predict the nation's pulse; today, it has become clear that the conventional media has failed time and again to predict political and other trends accurately. This was witnessed as early as in 2004 general election itself. The exit and opinion polls in India have not been successful in predicting the election verdict and this had occurred primarily because it was difficult for the surveyors to discover the real sentiments of the Indian voters.

The mainstream media's professed opinions were a reflection of their political or commercial affiliations, and a number of media groups are held by newly cashed-up business groups with dubious connections. Moreover, in many of these media groups style is overshadowing the content; in particular in a few of the more recently introduced media outlets, stories are inadequately contextualized, and the necessity to serve political masters, advertisers and other business connections is overpowering the professional news practice. As a final point, there are number of self-assurances made by the media; the mainstream media styles itself as the Fourth Estate of democracy, which knows what's best for the people. Whereas in reality, they are increasingly becoming disconnected from the people. In

opposition to this, a number of citizens have begun to express their disenchantment with the quality of Indian news media.

Unbiased, positive reporting, debates and discussions are real soul of journalism, which helps to build a healthy democratic society. Citizen participation in news process has changed overall attitude of the conventional news media, which considered as the gatekeeper of information. (Kolodzy,2006:12) believed that, “participatory journalism takes the act of convergence a step further; it requires audiences to be part of the team, part of the conversation. And audiences are sometimes deciding to share among themselves, leaving traditional journalism out of the loop” (p.218). (Franklin,2009:09) stated that it is as “giving a voice to the voiceless”. Many segments of the society were unrepresented by the mainstream media. However, all the technological advancements are providing an expansion to possibilities of citizen participation in journalism. Through blogs, citizen journalists have voiced against political corruption, police violence and other local, national and international issues. Being the part of news process people feel a sense of representation and pride, they share sometime valuable and distinct contents. In the crises like 9/11 and 7/7 it was hard for professional media especially TV reporters to get the access in targeted areas with their crew and gadgets. In such circumstances, citizens perform journalist’s role with their devices like mobiles and camera. They do not angle the incident under the government or organizational policy; they just capture and portray what they see on the site. Citizens’ involvement in the news process breaks down the sense of media hegemony.

Versatility and freedom of voices is beauty of journalism as well as democracy. An interesting example of this freedom was witnessed during the Iran’s presidential election in 2009. During the course of election, journalists were banned for reporting and a micro blogging service “twitter” played a vital role for press. (Goode,2009:10) added that citizen journalism has the basic characteristic of democracy. Conventional media’s reporters play a role of ‘gatekeepers’ and comes with the madeup news stories along the political, social and advertisers’ pressures while, citizen journalists use a radical approach and without any pressure play a role of ‘watchdog’ over the ‘gatekeepers’. “Citizen Journalism” is almost free of charge journalism. It is an expression of the fundamental democratic principle of freedom of speech. More voices, a more lively democracy. In countries without freedom of expression, the World

Wide Web plays a crucial role in informing the people. The digital media is opening up the sphere to those who are unheard.

A New Trend - Platform for Citizen Journalism

The Nirbhaya news caught the attention of the entire main stream media but a new trend was witnessed and the power of Citizens through Citizen Journalism was unleashed. There was also a plethora of citizens on the ground reporting the developments as it happened and reported in Social Media and posted their videos and comments on twitter, the main stream added a section in their news bulletin and programs as “Citizen news & Views” and the comments on twitter, YouTube videos and so on. The Delhi gang rape demonstrated how citizen journalism has really come to the fore. Change.org, an online petition “Stop Rape Now” was initiated by former Journalist Namita Bhandare seeking the intervention of President Pranab Mukherjee and Chief Justice of India.

Today there are many channels having exclusive programs featuring “Citizen Journalists.” It aims at encouraging and creating a formal platform for Citizen Journalists. TV channels like ibnlive and Headlines today telecast - CJ Show and Right To be Heard (RTH) on weekly basis. In addition to TV channels we have various websites like the Citizen Media Network an open forum, platform to nurture and promote Citizen Journalism from all walks of life. Popular websites like merinews.com, ww.reportindia.com, www.indiaonline.in. cj, www.mynews.in and many more websites are giving a platform for Citizen Journalists in India and South Asia. (Kaveri Devi Mishra,2014:12)

Citizen Journalists Raise Their Voice to Bring in Change in the Law and Perception of People

India in general and Delhi specially has recorded many incidents of crimes, atrocities and violence against women. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)2 data – 572 rapes were reported in 2011, the number rose to over 800 in 2012 highest in the last 10 years making it India’s “rape capital”. But for the first time in the history of India the power of citizens through social media was seen and the impact was tremendous during the

Delhi Gang Rape - that involved a rape and murder of young 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern who was beaten and gang raped in a bus in which she was travelling with her male companion on December 16, 2012 in New Delhi. The young girl succumbed to injuries thirteen days later while undergoing treatment in Singapore. The media called the young victim as Nirbhaya - a brave heart. The incident made the general public's collective anger to explode and come out on streets. If not for collective efforts of the people, Nirbhaya incident would have been another case of violence in the capital city, a common act. The United Nations Human rights chief calls rapes in India a "national problem". It is a social stigma in India for the women to go to the Police station and report rape. The result of which is that only one in three cases are reported and ends in a conviction. It was the conscience of the people that made them come out and demand justice for Nirbhaya. For the first time in the history of India many citizens come forward to report the events as Citizen Journalists. The young technology savvy Indians spread its national outrage across the country and united together to voice their opinions against the weak law and flaws in our legal system within days it became a place for social change in India. (Kaveri Devi Mishra, 2014:12)

Citizen Journalism and User Generated Content:

The abundance and proliferation of virtual communities and collaboration environments provide the opportunity to play any role in the journalistic process. The audiences have taken on the roles of publisher, broadcaster, editor, content creator (writer, photographer, videographer, and cartoonist), commentator, documentarian, knowledge manager (librarian), journaler and advertiser (buyer and seller). Media organizations and businesses must understand how to engage their empowered audience. The most common roles the audiences now have taken are that of the citizen journalist. Bowman and Willis (2003) define, "Citizen Journalism as the act of citizens playing an active role in collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information". They said, "The intent of this participation was to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires."

Citizen Journalism Public Contribution to Development for Democratic Society

The role of journalism in the Democratic process has been a subject of public debate and a focus on policy-making struggle. Depending on the nature of the political regime in power, journalists and the government have had different kinds of relations. Sometimes they have been punished sometimes awarded. Political communication today seems to be very much taking advantage of news production process. This course in which the production of specific news stories is structured through contribution of the politicians, requires free and independent journalists capable of shaping the public opinion (Lippman, 2007:14), where newsmakers mediate between people and their representatives and help them to choose between different policies (Sparks,1997:21) Because the newspapers consider what the spokespersons of the political parties tell, politicians usually do their best to upgrade the relations with journalists as media shapes public and political agendas. (McNair, 2000:16) Nowadays and more in future, newspapers are replaced by interactive bulletins. This new media courses, particularly smartphones mediated communication may undo the damage which the old media caused. People now are actively accessing information and giving feedback and thereby they resolve the perceived crisis of participation in liberal democracies. Thus, political communication is more active, and the passive reception of the information has been replaced by active discovery. Politicians hence are supposed to respond this active participation. Otherwise, they will be replaced by more direct representation of citizens' preferences and interests (Lilleker, 2016:13) (Tambini et al, 1998:22).

Political journalism; also because of social media courses such as facebook and twitter, became more focused on the style and the performance aspects of political communication. Politics is now easier to talk about because sometimes it is covered as an entertainment event; politicians are the singer and the party colors are lights of the ambiance. Therefore, journalists invite all citizens/readers to join this showbiz. Citizens can join these parties from anywhere without any difficulty and they can comment on what they see, can report from where they are and can write stories using their linguistic abilities (McNair, 2000:16). So that, they can play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news as a normal journalist and can get feedback from what he/she has done which is called citizen journalism. On the other hand, online resources empowered 21st -century journalists and public people (Marien, 2006:15). Electronic democracy has enhanced citizen participation in the political process either as supporters or oppositions (Oates, 2008:17). The rapid

convergence of information and communication technologies has revitalized citizen-based political communication. Hence, opportunities for more direct participation in mediated politics have increased by means of citizen journalism (Campbell, 2004: 04). In point of fact, in mid-1980s several American local governments started to use communication technologies in order to increase citizen participation and to upgrade delivery of services. Since then, some other local governments did this to resuscitate declining citizen participation in political life (Tsagarousianou, 1998:23).

Schmidtke, indicated the five main aspects which can be identified regarding citizen journalism and how it contributes to political communication (Schmidtke, 1998:20)

- The new media reduce the costs for collective actors
- Reduce individuals' costs for engagement and participation
- Reduce the hierarchy and intensify the actors' sense of involvement
- It facilitate the formation of collective identity
- It is effective in suggesting the strength and prospects of a collective actor

The idea of the "informed citizen" has always been central to the functioning of democracies. People of this century are educated in order to prepare them for political participation by governments (Ross and Nightingale, 2003:19). Because the citizens must always be held account to the government and because the democracy is based on active participation by citizens in the social and political life, it is vital to inform the citizens about the decisions of the government and the affairs of society. In this regard, media, in other words, has been cliché-style, "the lifeblood of democracies" which will provide functioning of healthy democratic systems. This is also true for online participation of citizens in political debates and communications (Chinnasamy, 2017; Roeh et al, 1997:05). As the turnout of political participation in liberal democracies in recent years has declined in terms of voting, membership of political parties or civic associations, citizen journalism is expected to produce active political citizenship while educating people to meet basic political requirements for a technological democracy (Barry, 2006:03). In this context, Barlow orders the ways how citizen journalism contribute to democratic society development (2007: 133):

- Provides a free arena to discuss any subject
- Bring citizen and politicians together
- Covers the issues about the current politics
- Conducts focus groups with voters to establish their concerns
- Forms citizen panels to consult at different stages of campaign
- Seeks questions from readers and viewers for use when interviewing candidates
- Reports largely issues developed through citizen contact
- Provides information to help citizens become involved in the political process in ways other than voting.

Media organizations are supposed to assist the democratic process by means of providing a public contribution to the politics (Curran,1997:06) Altschull,1995: 01). Presently, media can do this with citizen journalism . While new media tools become vehicles of democratic discourse, a growth of an unabridged right of citizens to speak without control may be endangered (Pool, 2006:18) (Marien, 2006:15)

The close and strong relation between media professionals and the politicians, causes them to collaborate in persuading their audiences. Therefore, they carefully follow the language and the contents the other part customs. Accordingly, journalists perform an important role in the negotiable use of political communication. They are in fact among the different members of the same government. They also form a public debate which is essential for the social order (Barber, 2006:02). Hence, people try to access to the journalists to convey what they want the politicians to acknowledge or they themselves become “citizen journalists” in order to be a member of the state and to contribute to the daily politics. Therefore, Unlike the thought that political communication connects horizontally various elite groups, here political communication connects the elite and the citizen vertically (Esser et al, 2016:08) Mancini, 1997). Many citizens are more interested in political communication, they appreciate the mediated spaces online or other tools, which offered them to more actively engage in the democratic process. Thus, citizen journalism as part of new media can perform a positive role

in democratic and undemocratic societies –as censorship can be overcome through the internet- through empowering communities by democratic information and political participation.

CONCLUSIONS

Where we cannot ignore benefits of Citizen Journalism, its downsides too cannot be overlooked. There is a process of verification called gatekeeping in mainstream media that can weed out factual errors and biases. It's nearly impossible to impose gatekeeping in social media. But as far as Citizen Journalism news portals, and television and print organisations inviting Citizen Journalism content are concerned, they must implement gatekeeping for the Citizen Journalism submissions so as to do away with false or offensive content. This will help ensure the news updates by Citizen Journalists are in conformity with journalistic ethics.

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