

Citizen Journalism: Redefining journalism or cheap contents?

AMIC organized a three-day seminar in Brisbane from 26th–28th March, 2008 in collaboration with the Queensland University and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) on Citizen Journalism where Australian and Asian journalism scholars grappled to define the role of a Citizen Journalist. There seem to be much agreement among participants on the view that this is a new phenomenon which has cropped up because journalism has ceased to be the watchdog on behalf of the citizen and instead it has become a commodity to be sold to audiences in order to attract advertisers.

“It (citizen journalism) acts primarily as a watchdog and corrective for the mainstream – its participants act as gatewatchers, observing and analysing what material passes through the publication gates of the journalism industry and other “official” sources, and highlighting interesting and relevant news for their own communities”, noted Dr Alex Burns, a senior lecturer in the Creative Industries faculty of Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

“This process relies not on the abilities of a small number of staff journalists, but is instead crowd-sourced to the community of participants, each of whom may contribute only a small, ‘random act of journalism’, but in combination generate a diverse, multi-perspectival form of news coverage”, he added, especially referring to the role played by the citizen journalist in the 2007 General Election in Australia where there were a large number of young voters.

A similar phenomenon was noted by political observers in Malaysia recently, where many have argued that citizen journalism in the Internet and the large number of young voters may have tipped the scales against the ruling Barisan National (BN) government. But, Steven Gan, News Editor of Malaysiakini, a news portal which has been credited as a major player in this phenomenon and the keynote speaker at the Brisbane conference is not that certain.

“I’m not sure of the extent of the impact of Internet but definitely there was an impact”, he argued, pointing out that penetration of the Internet is only 40 per cent in Malaysia, which restricts its role to set the political agenda. “But there is also secondary access where people read of issues in the Internet and pass it on through word of mouth, SMS or by printing to friends and relatives. That has a lot of impact”, he added.

Zheng Jiawen, a postgraduate research student from China argued that the development of personal blogs has opened opportunities for ordinary people to participate in reporting and disseminating the news in China as well. The blog first appeared in China in 2002. Today there are more than 47 million blog writers, many of which cover social and political issues.

Jiawen has researched the blog of Zhou Shuguang, a vegetable vender in Hu Nan Province of central China, who caught the public’s attention with his news blog in 2007. Writing under the pen name of Zola, Zhou’s persistent efforts in investigative reporting and unique perspectives on news events and issues have made him known as “China’s first citizen reporter”. Despite popular support, Zhou has received negative comments from the traditional media, accusing him for bias, subjectivity and inaccuracy in his reports and questioning him for his personal motives.

His blog covers issues ranging from software evaluation to social events, from personal events to book critique. He also writes commentary on current social and political issues. “In addition to questioning the mainstream media, Zhou tended to antagonize the government”, observed Jiawen. “He used cameras and videos to record the public’s discontent with the authority.”

On March 31 last year, Zhou shot public posts on the walls of the construction site and uploaded two pieces of two-minute videos expressing public support for WuPing’s stand against forced eviction and the government’s illegal activities. “Zhou’s coverage of the Chongqing incident has its impact on the local media’s coverage of the same incident”, argued Jiawen. “Zhou’s newsblog began to play a more crucial role in informing the public about the event. Many journalists who came to Chongqing to cover event but left after a while continued to contact Zhou frequently to inquire about the latest development of the incident. Zhou’s blog thus became an important source to update media elsewhere on the incident.”

At the seminar, a number of such studies were presented on the impact of citizen journalism (CJ) websites on the reporting of issues by the mainstream media, which otherwise would have ignored it. Listening to presentations I was often wondering whether CJ is a new phenomena or something repackaged for the new digital media age. In the 1960s and 70s there was development journalism which was popular in Asia, and later in the 1980s and early 1990s there was the participatory communication bandwagon which lead to the proliferation of community radio across the world.

If one is a cynic you may dismiss this CJ phenomenon as something in fact promoted by the mainstream media, because they could receive news leads, news footage and voice bytes without actually having to spend for it in terms of paying journalists salaries to research and produce the stories.

In pre-independence India, the press survived on a social commitment model, pointed out Prof B.K. Kuthiala Director Institute of Mass Communication and Media Technology Kurukshetra University in India. "But, after independence market forces took over and the entire media is today nothing but a gigantic money spinning industry", he added. "Citizen journalism, which is getting lot of hype all over, is again an excuse to show that the media houses do care for the people. Citizen journalism can also be seen as a cost-free production of the content for media. In very rare cases the citizens who contribute to media are paid for their efforts."

"The intertwined relationships between journalists employed by conventional news organisations and citizen journalists have become problematic for news consumers confronted by an array of choices of accounts of events", argued Prof Alan Knight of QUT. "The dividing line between journalists and bloggers may occur at the point of application of professional practice and observance of a professional code of ethics".

Taking the case of the Britain's Prince Harry's military service in Iraq and its disclosure by the Matt Drudge report, which led to the Prince's abrupt withdrawal from the war zone, Prof Knight argues that the mainstream media in Britain has obliged to the British government's request not to disclose the Prince's deployment in Iraq due to possible Al-Queda targeting of him, while Drudge, a high school drop out has not accepted such restriction on reporting.

"If professional practice and ethics were to define who were journalists, it would seem that Matt Drudge was able to display scant knowledge of either", noted Prof Knight. "News editors from prestigious and venerable newspapers placed the Prince's interests above that of the public right to know. Foreign correspondents, the elite of the mainstream press, failed to penetrate official secrecy or were unable or unwilling to leak the story."

Whether citizen journalists need to follow the rules of the trade such as ethics and the conventional practices of the journalism trade, or whether their practice should be called journalism at all, is a debate which is set to continue to the foreseeable future, as digital technology makes it possible to circumvent or even undermine traditional media networks, as well as globalization and the trend towards political and economic liberalization force governments to open up the airwaves and cyberspace further.

For any forms of citizen journalism to prosper, as Gan pointed out, a viable economically sustainable model needs to develop. Thus, Prof Kuthiala suggested a possible model: "The argument is if a residential complex for the visitors to a holy or tourist place can be run as a social service on the bases of contributions as charity, why cannot the mass communication system be also organised on sharing basis. After all communication is a very essential activity that sustains the communities at all levels."