

## CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND WEBLOGS

by

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**Abstract:** *In earlier times, news as depicted in print and broadcast media would be from the perspective of newsworthiness, proximity, dominant norms etc, but with the arrival of digital technologies and globalisation of media, there has been a greater shift to how audience perceive news. Earlier the journalists set the agenda for the audience to think about and were the gatekeepers for all types of news. Now they do not set the agenda but have become guides and mentors for their audience. Participatory communication has always been an integral part of communication system. However active participation by receivers of information did not happen very much in the earlier times. With the coming of age of online journalism through digital media this has changed to some extent. People are using digital technologies and user friendly interfaces to make their presence felt online especially in social media which include weblogs or blogs, social networking and micro-blogging sites and becoming citizen journalist per se. Weblogs or blogs especially seems to be empowering people in diverse ways. Media persons now, have to assess differently, how they will have to function in this changing media scenario brought about by Web2.0 and increase in citizens' involvement in the production of media content for the web.*

**Key Words:** *Participatory Communication; Online Journalism; Citizen Journalist:*

*Weblog/Blog*

### **Introduction**

Walter Lippman defined news in his seminal work, Public Opinion, as the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself from social life. According to him, news had gone much beyond public realm. In earlier times, news as depicted in print and broadcast media would be from the perspective of newsworthiness, proximity, dominant norms etc, but with the advent and consolidation of globalised media worldwide, news has become a product and audience are consumers. Hence like any other product or service, news is expected to be consumer driven. This results in giving such news that is thought to be of interest to the audience. In the

last decade or so, with the arrival of digital technologies, there has been a greater shift in how audience perceive news. Now mass media have been compelled to change the business of news making and content production even further. Trench and Quinn(2003), 'the information ecology within which news is produced and consumed online is substantially different from print and broadcasting and it continues to change within new media.' Flew and Wilson (2010), said the Internet and new media are not simply as convergent communications technologies, but as social technologies having a wider impact upon communication practices and societal institutions.'

Earlier the journalists set the agenda for the audience to think about and were the gatekeepers for all types of news. They could to a good extent decide what people would think about, on a particular day. It is well known fact that journalists give issues to the audience which they think is relevant and omit those events which they feel may be redundant for the audience. Now they do not set the agenda in most cases and have become more of guides and mentors for their audience. Yelvington (1999), criticises journalists for failing to see that they are no longer gatekeepers. Hall (2001), the web itself has taken the role of mediating those primary news sources for audiences. As a result, journalist as cartographer to the role of news worker but in the universal library that is the web, they also become authenticators and designers for those who follow the map they draw.' Bruns (2005) identified a transition pushed forward by digital media technologies from traditional 'gatekeeping' models of journalism, where the process of newsgathering is highly centralised and controlled, authority is exclusively held by credentialed professional journalists, and public input is restricted to token measures such as the Letters to the Editor page, towards more open, collaborative and fluid models where the number of published authors increases exponentially and where users increasingly become participants in news-making processes, challenging the two-tier dichotomy between 'mainstream' and alternative' news and journalism. Couldry (2003), the rise of user-generated media challenged the bases of media power inherent in monopoly control over resources and infrastructure, generating alternative sources of influence, different ways of producing and distributing stories, and 'new hybrid forms of media consumption-production...[that] would challenge precisely the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories versus consumers of stories) that is the essence of media power' .Hartley (2008) proposes that the combination of new media technologies and globalisation is generating 'a society in which "everyone is a journalist" or can be', as the right of everyone 'not just to express but also to circulate information and opinions that they actually hold' is an affordance that is increasingly enabled in this new socio-technical environment.

There is also a greater empowerment of the user, demassification of the media content markets and potential to be more personal. (Flew, 2009).The consumers never had it so good; they are now spoilt for choices. They can now choose from print, electronic and digital mediums with variety of options being offered by each medium. News content is striving towards giving exclusivity to each consumer and in the near future, specially catered news content is a distinct possibility. Negroponte (1995), instead of reading what other people think is news and what other people justify as worthy of the space it takes, being digital will change the economic model of newsselections, make your interests play a bigger role ...

Imagine a future in which your interface agent can read every newswire and newspaper and catch every TV and radio broadcast on the planet, and then construct a personalized summary. This kind of newspaper is printed in an edition of one.'

### **Citizen Journalism**

Despite the news consumer being the king even in the pre-digital era, yet there has not been much scope for active participation of the audience in mass media as most communication has been vertical in character. Traditional news media caters often for the elite or powerful, in this scenario, journalists may fall prey to this elitism. Entman and Herbst (2001) holds, democracy will be negatively affected if the press tailors information solely for elite or niche users because it will encourage citizens to be ignorant and divided.' Participation in journalism by citizens/audience has been limited, in most cases, to the letters to the editor column. Bhattacharyya & Nasker (2014), in fact, 'conscious citizens' writing 'letters to the editor' from the very beginning of the print journalism might be considered as the 'source of inspiration' for the 'citizen journalists'.

Participatory communication has always been an integral part of communication system. However active participation by receivers of information did not happen very much in the earlier times. With the coming of age of online journalism through digital media this has changed to some extent. Bhattacharyya & Nasker (2014), 'Digital Media has given huge popularity to the concept of citizen journalism. With the use of modern technology and global distribution of the internet, anyone even without any background of journalism with computer connectivity along with camera, and transfer cable can contribute as a citizen journalist. Digital Media technology such as social networking and media sharing websites in addition to the increasing prevalence of cellular telephones has made citizen journalism more accessible to people worldwide. Due to availability of the technology, citizens often can report breaking news more quickly than traditional media.'

Citizen journalism has been defined by experts in various ways .Rosen (2008) 'when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another'. Bowman and Willis (2003) 'the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information'

Citizen journalism has been an emerging phenomenon of the 21st century that has arisen at the intersection of the Internet and digital media technologies, a perceived crisis in news values and professional journalism, and the demand for online participation, social networking, self-expression and interaction characteristic of the era of 'Web 2.0' or the 'participative Web' (Benkler, 2006; Musser and O'Reilly, 2007; OECD, 2007). Online citizen journalism publication content may be similar to content found in smaller publications. Smaller community publications have been found to focus their coverage on athletics, human interest and social events, while larger publications tend to concentrate on crime and

government topics. (Janowitz, 1952; Tichenor et al., 1980). Dutta & Mondal (2012), 'this development is always healthy and encouraging participatory communication.' People are using digital technologies and user friendly interfaces to make their presence felt online especially in social media which include weblogs or blogs, social networking and micro-blogging sites.

### **Weblogs and citizen journalists**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines weblog as a frequently updated website consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc; typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary. (Rettberg, 2008). Dutta & Mondal (2012), 'blogs or weblogs are an exciting new platform for articulating one's view point. The World Wide Web has opened up this new platform. One of the advantages of blogs, being a part of new media, is its high scope of interactivity and less gate keeping.' According to J.D. Lasica, senior editor of Online Journalism Review, weblog is a grassroots phenomenon that may sow the seeds for new forms of journalism, public discourse, interactivity and online community (Stovall, 2011).

Weblogs or blogs especially seems to be empowering people from all walks of life in diverse ways. Blogs are accessible in various online facilities where any blog may be uploaded free of any charges. People are forming different kinds of blogs from political and social to very personal daily diaries. Each blog has a dedicated group of followers who form the audience and share similar interests. The size of the audience may be big or small depending on the content. This may be comparable to the niche readership or viewership of speciality magazines or television channels. Matheson (2004), 'but online news forms such as weblogs, which are characterized by a heavy use of hyperlinks, point towards a model of knowledge in which the truth of what is happening in the world cannot be channelled exclusively through one news text. Instead, the weblog can be thought of as claiming a more contingent authority in its use of these multiple links.' Blogs have been used as a tool by citizen journalists to further their interest of being able to bring some specific information on to the public domain and sometimes to make their point of view heard in the blogosphere. Rettberg (2008), 'whether or not individual blogs can thought as journalism, blogs and other participatory media are changing the way journalism works.'

There are many reasons for having a blog which may be from telling a news story to monitoring other news stories. Rettberg (2008), 'some bloggers set out to tell stories that might just as well have been told by traditional journalists-but where mainstream media have either failed to investigate an issue critically or where the story is not deemed fitting or of sufficient interest to be publicised. Many bloggers follow mainstream media or other blogs and filter stories according to their interests or they carefully monitor every news item about a particular person or issue.' Matheson (2004), 'the news weblog engages in a different communicative endeavour to the dominant news practice, making less of a claim to know what readers want or to know what an event means.' Dutta&Mondal (2012), 'in the present

world order where there is a raging debate on the shrinking space for alternative viewpoints in the mainstream monopolistic media, blogs are perceived to be more democratic providing the option for marginalised voices to be heard.’ From the point of view of the audience of such blogs, it gives them the freedom from traditional top down information instead helps them understand yet another point of view. Matheson (2004),’one way of characterizing such emergent practices is as a journalism of linking rather than pinning things down, that is situated within a model of knowledge-as-process rather than knowledge-as-product. Readers of the news weblog are set along paths of exploration rather than given nuggets of information, and the status of that information therefore changes.’

Different types of information are provided by blogs which are valuable to people who are interested to get different aspects of the same news story. Hence online citizen journalism is benefitting audience in a more direct way. Dutta & Mandal (2012), new blogs have widened the opportunity for many voices to be heard. While traditional communication models envisage form one to many, blogs are driven by a participative model which is driven by interactivity. Web2.0 is different in its effect and its impact. Powered by internet, there are fewer barriers to entry based on distribution. It also provides scope to individuals and small groups to be producers, editors and distributors of media content.’ It has to be kept in mind that even though information is valuable and blogs along with mainstream media are trying to provide just that, yet providing correct information is imperative. Carpenter (2010),’ providing credible information is a necessary component of society;.’ Also it has to be kept in mind that audience want plausible information and here the established news media have a better chance of winning the trust of audience than others.

Flew and Wilson (2010), ‘the rise of citizen journalism and networked journalism more generally, has many implications for the future of journalism as a professional practice, and how journalism education and training should be developing. .... Learning from citizen journalism initiatives will be an important part of what will define journalism as a professional practice in the 21st century. The mainstream media can help citizen journalism services survive and prosper, and it can be argued that rather than viewing them with suspicion, it is incumbent on the managers of citizen journalism sites to make and cultivate contacts among professional journalists.’

Finally, there is a need to give some tangibility to the concept of media citizenship and some evaluative criteria through which its achievement can be determined or obstacles recognised and addressed. Too often, citizenship is simply presented as a ‘good thing’, countered as a bad other, that is consumerism, the market or neo-liberalism, with little attention to its institutional specifics, or a default setting that associates it with state-run or non-commercial media (Jacka 2004; Flew & Cunningham ,2010).

### **Concluding Remarks**

News media industry has to have reliability and trustworthiness amongst its users and it has been the case that audience tend to believe the news from established sources, so as such

well-known media houses with both digital and non digital news platforms are the ones to be more acceptable. Singer (2006), the credibility of the e-paper is associated with its brand image which is not built in a day. Users tend to trust online versions of established media organizations more than some which are relatively new.’ The brand value of any established media house is its guarantee for its objectivity and truthfulness but the same cannot be said about a blog. Lovnik(2007), there is a quest for truth in blogging. But it is a truth with a question mark. Truth here has become an amateur project, not absolute value, sanctioned by higher authorities.’ Retteberg (2008),Blogs rely on personal authenticity, whereas traditional journalism relies on institutional credibility.’

Flew (2009),Internet and the new forms of media associated with it, have developed across the market/state and commercial/non-commercial continuums, there is a need to develop ways of evaluating the significance of such trends that do not simply replay dichotomies of the broadcast era that were in part the product of a limited-channel media environment.... Much of the talk about new participatory opportunities in twenty first century digital media has been based around the rise of blogging, citizen journalism and other forms of alternative media.... consider the conditions for sustaining such media, and in particular the extent to which this rests upon the development of successful commercial business models.’

Journalist now has to look at a citizen journalist blogger not as amateur but as another person who would be playing a complementary role in bringing information and news to a target group of audience. Media persons now, have to assess differently, how they will have to function in this changing media scenario brought about by Web2.0 and increase in citizens’ involvement in the production of media content due to the internet. However one thing has to be understood that traditional mass media and online media should not be seen as going on a collision course or being totally antagonistic to each other. Free and fair distribution of news would be the only casualty in this scenario here. Hence, maintaining at least a symbiotic relationship seems to be the only way forward.

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