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## **CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN SOCIAL MEDIA: EXPLORING ITS IMPACT ON JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Unfettered access to information, including politics, social problems, corruption, and any other sensitive issues that have a significant influence on people's lives, is considered a central pillar of democracy and human development. However, the role of media in civil society becomes more problematic when it serves commercial interests and the state.

The urgent need for social change has empowered the role of citizen journalism in many societies, mainly during the Arab uprising. The aim of this paper is to examine the effects of the internet and new media activists on the public sphere and on the phenomenon of "redefining what counts as 'mainstream' in a post-mass media age" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 15). It emphasises how audience participation contributes in giving visibility and addressing social problems, and thus surpass the mainstream media role.

**Key Words:** Citizen Journalism, Social Change, Public Sphere

### **INTRODUCTION**

The rise of the internet and its related communication tools, ranging from websites and chat-rooms to Facebook and Twitter, facilitates the availability of unfiltered and unrestricted factual and political information to almost everyone. This study emphasises how audience participation contributes in giving visibility and addressing social problems, thus surpassing the mainstream media in its role as 1) a watchdog, witnessing events missed by journalists; 2) agenda setters, calling attention to social problems; and 3) gatekeepers. Each role is vital to the quality of democratic deliberation in the public sphere.

To exemplify or substantiate these expectations, this paper will draw attention to the Arab Spring to illustrate how the urgent need for social change has empowered the role of citizen journalism. The state-run media involvement in the events raises pivotal questions about their role in ignoring and marginalising frustrations of Arab populations (Spielhaus, 2012).

### **CITIZEN JOURNALISM: HISTORICAL ROOTS**

One of the common misunderstandings about citizen journalism among the general public today is the belief that it is a comparatively new phenomenon introduced in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century because of technological innovations. Citizen journalism dates back longer than the profession of journalism itself (Hughes, 2011). Hughes (2011) argues that the world's first journalism school was established in the University of Missouri in 1908, but newspapers existed for centuries before that. Noting that the First Amendment in the United States contains a clause for prohibiting infringement of the freedom of the press (Legal Information Institute, n.d.), Hughes asked:

“[i]f the country had no professional journalists (since the profession had not been created, yet), then what were the framers of the Constitution protecting? The answer is citizen journalists – those with different backgrounds who practiced journalism on the side, despite having no ‘formal’ journalistic background. The early American press laid the foundation for modern citizen journalists practicing in the United States” (p. 6).

The first colonial newspaper in America was called ‘Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick’ and it was published by a bookseller Benjamin Harris. Although freedom of press

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did not yet exist in the colonies, the lack of a license led to shut down of the newspaper a few days after its publication (Hughes, 2011). Also, despite its failure, “it still laid the framework for news reporting done by the public” (Hughes, p. 7). Fourteen years later, another newspaper emerged, *The News-Letter*, which was published by John Campbell, a bookseller and the postmaster of Boston (Mott, 1962). The *Boston News-Letter and its competitor the Boston Gazette experienced more success compared with the Harris’s Publick Occurrences*. The Gazette was examined carefully by five postmaster-editors before printing (ibid). Postmaster-editors in Boston were in charge of obtaining news from professional resources, like incoming letters and ship crews while at the same time running other affairs besides their newspaper (Mott, 1962). This inclination of postmaster-editors in Boston during the 18<sup>th</sup> century resembles the citizen journalism orientation in providing the public with news using different resources, without having any professional background in journalism. Hughes mentioned that American history shows that citizen journalism is not new phenomenon, but it was replaced with professional journalism due to the advent of journalism education.

### **CONTEMPORARY CITIZEN JOURNALISM**

The concept of citizen journalism has proliferated due to the expansion of new technology media that has facilitated accessibility to information for the general public. The internet offers opportunities to upload content and share information, which therefore enables anyone to become a citizen journalist (Goode, 2009). Hughes points out: “Because of this re-emergence, the number of voices in the media is once again growing and beginning to look a lot like the early American press” (p. 18). The term “citizen journalism” was associated with the beginning of blogs in the late 1990s (Quinn and Lamble, 2008). In 2004, citizen journalism became an outstanding feature on the mainstream media during the aftermath of the South Asian tsunami. Ordinary citizens actively contributed in feeding the news rooms with stories and video footage. In an interview carried out by the independent newspaper, Whitney, a news editor of BBC News, said:

“Never before have I worked on a story where the news was coming more from the public than the agencies. When you take 10 calls from all over the country at five o’clock on Boxing Day morning, you know it’s a big story. ... From the British point of view we had a new agency: the public” (Burrell, 2005).

Since the tsunami, citizen journalism is widely seen in crisis reporting. Citizen journalism is sometimes referred to as open source journalism, participatory journalism, hyperlocal journalism, distributed journalism, user-generated content, and user-centred news production (Kaufhold, Valenzuela and de Zuniga, 2010; Allan, 2009). Citizen journalism is also known as grassroots journalism, as described by Gillmor: “When people can express themselves, they will. When they can do so with powerful yet inexpensive tools, they take to the new-media realm quickly. When they can reach a potentially global audience, they literally can change the world” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 15).

### **CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

Unlike citizen journalism, social change cannot be defined concisely (Waisbord, 2014). As a concept, social change is “the transformation of culture and social institutions over time”, as defined by Macionis (2006, p. 451). Social change is used to describe transformations in culture, policies, social institutions, socioeconomic structures, power, and behaviours. As cited in (Jaim, Khanna and Grover, 2007), Jones argues that “Social change is a term used to describe variations in, or modifications of, any aspect of social processes, social patterns, social interaction or social organisation” (Jaim, Khanna and Grover, 2007, p. 4). It is commonly accompanied with addressing a variety of social problems, like corruption, discrimination, economic inequalities, and gender inequality. Each country may have experienced different problems depending on its economic and political circumstances. For example, in less

economically developed countries, access to education, immunisation and sanitation are among the most significant problems compared with the West. Despite the North–South divide, collective actions could take place to identify social problems.

The urgent need for social change has empowered the role of citizen journalism in many societies. It is argued that citizen journalism has been a manifestation of social change. This probably indicates that citizen journalism is driven by a sense of social responsibility. Thus, the debate about the role of citizen journalism and social media in facilitating such events and making social change has received worldwide attention since the 2011 Arab uprising, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the 2009 green revolution in Iran, and the 2008 attacks in Mumbai. Social Media, according to Mikolaj Jan Piskorski, is a solution to “un-met social needs or social failures”, as cited in (Lallana, 2015, p. 23). Social failure happens when societies fail to address social, political, cultural and economic matters, which therefore would force changes in every society. One can reasonably argue that digital citizen journalism enables citizens to be heard and get more actively involved in public issues and political activities. It helps ordinary citizens to make demands in the public sphere by giving them opportunities to discuss societal problems.

### **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING**

Social media served as effective catalyst and accelerator for change during the uprising. Social unrest began in Tunisia at the end of 2010. Within weeks, social unrest spread to countries across the MENA region, most noticeably in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Yemen. Although social media may have played a significant role in facilitating the protests, it should be mentioned that the widespread social unrest was rooted in a broader set of social, economic and political factors. The global economic crisis that began in 2008 resulted in high inflation and rising unemployment in the MENA region (Dewey et al., 2012). After the global financial meltdown, several MENA countries experienced a rapid decline in GDP growth, which led to a rise food prices, a decline of tourism, the fall of oil prices and an increase in the cost of living. Additionally, it is argued that, although the Arab region had experienced an educational expansion, it failed to provide skills that were relevant to the countries’ needs (Campante and Chor, 2012; Barro and Lee, 2013; Dewey et al., 2012). The rapid population growth resulted in an expanding unemployment rate, especially among the educated young people. It is estimated that around 60% of the MENA population is under the age of 30 and the governments have done little to address youth unemployment, which ranges between 15–30% across the region (Campante and Chor, 2012; Dewey et al., 2012). Furthermore, the Arab countries that witnessed the protests were governed by authoritarian governments which lacked transparency and fair elections. Equally important, cronyism and corruption were major factors fuelling protest in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen (Levey, 2011).

The role of new media, mainly in Egypt and Tunisia, can be summarised in three intertwined ways: enabling cyberactivism, which paved the road for change and street activism; encouraging civic engagement, which helped in leading the mobilisation and organising protests; and promoting citizen journalism, which provided an arena for ordinary citizen to voice their opinion, challenge media censorship and compete with mainstream media coverage.

Howard (2011) defines cyberactivism as “the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline,” adding that “the goal of such activism is often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes” (p. 145). Despite the difference between Cyberactivism and mobilisation, they are interrelated. Mobilisation focuses on planning and organising protests, while cyberactivism can foster civic engagement and street mobilisation.

Some scholars believe that the internet and online activism play an important role in advancing the civil society and strengthen the offline activism (Harlow, 2012; Hara, 2008; Nip, 2004). Lime (2003) argues that any counter-hegemonic and alternative information online is useless unless it translates offline: “information that circulates only among the members of a small ‘elite’ loses its power to mobilise people to challenge the cordons of hegemonic power. No revolution can happen without involving society on a wider scale” (p. 274). An important part of civil society in the Arab region is the embodiment of “new social movements”, when online activists inspire offline activists to take to the streets. During the Arab uprising, online activists used the internet to alleviate obstacles to the dissemination of information (Frangonikolopoulos, 2012) and offered potentiality for political mobilisation and social change (Howard and Hussain, 2013). However, the resentment among the Arab population emanated from social and economic circumstances and cannot alone explain the real formation of social movement. As Wright (2001) concisely explains: “Individuals only participate in collective action when they recognise their membership in the relevant collective” (as cited in Youssef, 2012, p. 2). People were unified under their desire to acquire decent life, respect and fundamental principle of human rights and security. None of this could happen if “there were no people willing to be physically present in the streets, ready to put their own life at risk, in order to fulfil their demands and achieve their goals” (Khoury, 2011, p. 85).

The death of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in protest against the confiscation of his wares, is considered a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and Arab Spring. He had been humiliated and beaten by security officials. Tunisian activists played a significant role in mobilising Tunisian educated youth via Facebook and YouTube. Videos of Bouazizi’s suicide and police clashes with protesters quickly appeared online and triggered the country’s anger. The Tunisia regime’s attempt to block social media sites was unsuccessful. The government took a more repressive approach by arresting prominent bloggers and online activists. As social media played an important role in mobilising protesters in Tunisia, civil society groups, including human right groups, opposition groups and education unions, played key roles in organising their members for demanding reforms and protesting against the regime (Honwana, 2011). Egypt is among the largest internet using population in the region, along with Tunisia, with an active online sphere. As in Tunisia, the murder of a young blogger, who had been beaten to death by police for revealing their corruption, generated a wave of anger among the Egyptian’s online activists. A famous online campaign, “We Are All Khaled Said”, was created by 30-year-old Google executive Wael Ghonim in June, 2010 through a Facebook page to memorialise the blogger (Youmans and York, 2012). The group page continued to cover government abuse and corruption and police torture. By 2011, the “We Are All Khaled Said” page had attracted more than 400,000 members and became a central platform for debate and mobilisation during the Egyptian uprising (Dewey et al., 2012).

However, despite the significant opportunities offered by social media in the Arab transition, these mediated platforms, as Khamis (2013) contends, “were simply a reflection of the overall sentiment of unity and solidarity that prevailed in these Arab societies in their struggle to oust dictators from office and to overthrow corrupt regimes” (p. 58). In some countries, the demonstrations succeed in overthrowing the autocratic governments. Protests in Tunisia led to the fall of President Zine Al-Abidine’s 23-year regime, and demonstrations in Egypt led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. The Yemeni President Ali Abdullah stepped down after 33 years in power. In other countries, protests were repressed by the government and softened by promises of democratic reforms, as in Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In some countries like Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, social media failed to bring the expected results or desired outcomes due to conflicts of interest, absence of trust among protesters and government control over the internet (Dewey et al., 2012).

## TRADITIONAL MEDIA VS CITIZEN JOURNALISM: COMPARING NEWS AND INFORMATION COVERAGE DURING THE ARAB UPRISING

The public grievances over economic and political failures in the Arab region fostered the emergence of “citizen journalism” over the ongoing critics of “media representation of citizen articulation of participation in social change, or rather the lack of it, as a condition within the broader political and hegemonic power structure for sustaining and enhancing democracy” (Spyridou, 2015, p. 73). In an unprecedented way, the 2011 aftermath in the Arab region enabled ordinary citizens to challenge and bypass the media ecology and the mainstream citizens to generate content of vital events and turn these news media coverages. The significance of citizen journalism during the Arab uprising derived from the fact that it

“defies boundaries, challenges governmental media censorship, and provides an alternative voice to traditional media outlets, which echo official, governmental policies and views. In other words, it enables the in-flow and out-flow of information simultaneously through a “virtually defined ...emerging cyberworld that knows no physical boundaries” (Salmon, Fernandez and Post, 2010, p. 159).

The news of Bouaziz’s death received worldwide attention and sympathy because of the Tunisian online activists who came to realise that they shared a common sense of grievances (what McAdam has called a “cognitive liberation”: McAdam, 1982). YouTube, Twitter and Facebook played important roles as information providers, and “protesters took to the street with a rock in one hand, a cell phone in the other” (Ryan, 2011). Twitter hash-tags evolved from #Bouazizi to #sidibouزيد to #tunisia to feed Tunisians with the latest news about the unrest (ibid). Al Jazeera’s team broadcast Bouazizi’s death after it picked up the footage via Facebook, whereas the state-owned media did not cover his death (Howard and Hussain, 2013). Long before this incident, one of the most direct accusations of Tunisian government corruption came from a blogger (Jurkiewicz, 2010). Tunisian citizens challenged the media watchdog role through the uncontrolled communication networks after Bouazizi’s death to criticise Ben Ali, president of Tunisia, and protest against social and political issues in the country. News about the protest spread on social media networks through ordinary people like Shamseddine Abidi, a 29-year-old interior designer who posted videos and updates on Facebook, and Al-Jazeera carried the news abroad by using Abidi’s content to report the protests (Howard and Hussain, 2013). In 2011, the popular Tunisian blog Nawaat.org received the 2011 Netizen Prize and the 11th Annual Index on Censorship Media Award (Dewey et al., 2012). As the anger and violence became intense, President Ben Ali fled Tunisia with his family to Saudi Arabia. The success of the Tunisian demonstrations inspired protests in other Arab countries, like Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Jordan.

News of Ben Ali’s departure was extensively covered by social media networks, while the state-run media were reluctant to cover the early protests and Ben Ali’s flight (ibid). While Egypt was ablaze, state run media ignored the protesters’ presence on social media and in the street and continued to act as a sphere of “confirmed” intellectuals, who, according to Zvi Bar’el, “successfully re-constitute a hegemonic discourse that dictates the consensus, according to the ruling power’s parameters” (Spielhaus, 2012, p. 8). The media continued to exercise hegemonic control over content and maintained their grip as shapers of public opinion. In *A critical analysis of media coverage of the Egyptian revolution*, Youssef (2012) found that the national newspapers, Al-Ahram and Al-Masry Al-Youm, disregarded and neglected the social movements. Al-Ahram covered the event of 26 January, the “day of rage”, with the headline “Thousands Participate in Peaceful Demonstrations in Cairo, Governorates”. Simultaneously, state-run TV denied any sort of protests and was characterised by partial coverage to service certain groups, agendas and ideologies; journalists who report on the events were detained or killed. To combat the discrediting and misrepresenting of protests in the traditional media, activists shifted to social media networks to produce their own media. User-generated content

was labelled as a new democratic force for changing the Arab regime and keeping pace with events, illustrating how the internet has become an alternative medium for activism (Kenix, 2009; Raghavan, 2009).

Despite the communication struggle between the government and activists, protesters were both resilient and creative in circumventing the internet and mobile phone blockade. After the Egyptian government's failure to block certain sites, like Twitter and Facebook, on 28 January 2011, the Egyptian government shut off internet and mobile phone services for about a week (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). The internet blackout forced protesters to find more innovative solutions to share information and mobilise protesters, such as setting up FTPs (file transfer protocols) to upload updates about the protests to international news organisations (Ishani 2011). Another technique was using landlines to link to internet services in neighbouring countries (Sigal, 2011; Seibt, 2011). Also, an activist group called *We Rebuild* had recourse to Morse code, fax machines, and ham radio to provide minute by minute unedited stories about events on the ground and get messages out of the country (Seibt, 2011; Daily Mail, 2011). Khamis and Vaughn (2011) say protesters "smuggled satellite phones and satellite modems into Egypt, which did not depend on Egypt's infrastructure to function". Despite the high cost of international calls, users found it was good enough, especially in case of urgent communication and reach satellite modems. The Egyptian blog Manalaa was used extensively for sharing advices about how to get an internet access to your mobile phones and laptops through the international dial-up internet providers. Noor was the only ISP (internet service provider) which was working due to the Egyptian stock exchange and Western companies, and many who subscribed to Noor removed their passwords from their wi-fi routers to allow others to connect to the internet (Daily Mail, 2011). Moreover, upon the closure of Aljazeera office in Cairo, Egyptians had recourse to watching Aljazeera through Hotbird and Arabsat transmission. Furthermore, due to international support, protesters were able to post and hear Twitter messages without internet (BBC, 2011). It is evident that the Egyptian government's ineffective communication strategy not only failed in halting the activists, but also helped fuel them further.

Although the Egyptian and Tunisian governments censored traditional media, many independent groups and citizen journalists enjoyed a vibrant presence online. Idle and Nunns (2011, p. 26) argue that people "no longer had to read stifled accounts in state-run newspapers when they could go on the Internet and hear from ... protesters directly through social networks". During the internet blackout, activists telephoned their friends living overseas to upload tweets to the international media and the world, while professional journalists were unable to disseminate their stories: "Street protesters were using land lines to call supporters, who translated and published their accounts on Twitter for an international audience hungry for news of the unfolding events" (Ishani, 2011). Citizen journalists were recognised as being the most credible source of news during these significant events. After Mubarak's fall from power, the Egypt state media immediately turned against him and changed their coverage, leaning towards acknowledging the demands of the pro-democracy demonstrators (The Washington Post, 2011).

In Syria, the state-owned media continues to control the flow of information, and thus acts as propaganda machines rather than covering the protest (Tohme, n.d). The disillusionment with the state-run media in Syria has created a need for citizen video (Amos, 2011), which led the public to upload videos showing government repression and police brutality in quelling protests (Amos, 2011). "New social media – YouTube, Twitter, Facebook – along with online bloggers and mobile telephony, all played an important role in communicating, coordinating and channelling this rising tide of opposition and variously managed to bypass state controlled national media as they propelled images and ideas of resistance and mass defiance across the Middle East and North Africa" (Cottle, 2011, p. 648). When information flow is restrained by

state control, it could be argued that audience participation in the online sphere during the Arab uprising played a significant role by gathering real-time information and surpassing the state-owned media role in the coverage of this tragic event. Out of 95% of journalists working in Middle East, only 35% use social media tools as a source of information (Cottle, 2011, p. 11). Consequently, more events during the uprisings were covered by citizen journalism than by the mainstream media. According to Storck (2011), the 2011 Arab Social Media Report illustrates that most people on the Arab streets depended on social media tools to get information about the unrest. About 88% of Egyptians and 94% of Tunisians got their news from social media tools. “Both countries also relied the least on state-sponsored media for their information (at 40% and 36% of people in Tunisia and Egypt respectively: pp. 5-6). Equally noteworthy, Facebook users in the Arab region surpassed the number of newspaper subscribers (Ghannam, 2011).

The significance of citizen journalism lies in the fact that social media allows citizen journalists who are dissatisfied with the traditional media coverage to generate their own stories: “These patterns of political expression and learning are key to developing democratic discourses” (Howard, 2011, p. 182). This pattern of reporting not only facilitates the spread of information among the local audience, but it also has the capacity to reach international audiences through transitional satellite channels like Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera to increase the awareness about the violation of human rights, corruption and abuses exercised by autocratic governments and excessive use of force among protesters. The importance of the widespread coverage by citizen journalism encouraged the hesitant citizens to protest and “the marriage between satellite television channels and social networking sites has made it easier to let individuals know that their views are shared by enough people to make protesting worthwhile and safe” (Freeland, 2011). Furthermore, citizen journalism helped to promote civic engagement to participate in bringing positive social change (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). Additionally, citizen journalism enabled collaboration between activist from different Arab countries, like the case of Egyptian and Tunisian protesters, to share their experiences and exchange useful knowledge, especially when it came to confronting security forces (Khamis, 2013).

## SUMMARY

This paper suggests that the new employment of technologies of communication has empowered online activists to “create their own media or relied on social media networks for a non-hegemonic perspective” (Harlow and Harp, 2013, p. 27) and therefore challenges the professional role of journalism. User generated content has played a vibrant role in addressing social problems and advancing political communication, but this study does not intend to underestimate the mainstream media power in contemporary civil society. Although citizen journalism provides more opportunity for covering social problems, it is questionable whether citizen journalism efficiently adheres to the professional standards or matches the power of legacy newsrooms (Allan, 2014)

As the uprising erupted in the Arab region during the first half of 2011, audience-generated content was given a crucial role in gathering real time information and highlighting social and political problems. The state-owned media continued to be the arena of “confirmed” intellectuals, and the national newspapers and TV stations ignored or denied what happened in the streets.

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