Citizen and/or Main Stream Journalism? 
Aspects Concerning Digital Communication Today

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Abstract

Media communication is under the pressure of democratization today. It is characterized by preserving some elements from mainstream (or old) media while it evolves under the pressure of new technologies, innovative models of institutional management, the process of creation and diffusion of information, news and entertainment products. The content of communication is marked by interactivity and the pressure of non-professionals (nevertheless, some of them very skilled) on classical media institutions. Citizen journalism has complex forms and a clear impact on traditional media. This paper focuses on the dynamic relationship between the old (mainstream) media and citizen journalism.

Keywords
Citizen journalism; mainstream journalism; media; new technologies; interactivity; professionalism; ethics.
I. Mass media

Citizen-journalism is a complex phenomenon with an outstanding impact, although not all elements are known in detail. Being an evolving phenomenon, it is natural that contradictory opinions, covering different aspects are in the debate. From the perspective of communication studies, the average citizen appears as liberated from the constraints imposed by the inevitable technical communication in printed media, radio or television. Technological convergence combined with primary education (in the sense of acquiring basic skills). The use of electronic equipment (computers, tablets, mobile phones, digital cameras) and the lower costs in terms of access and communication have allowed the concentration on the content of communication, without the daily constraints related to the broadcast platform. Until the rise of virtual communication, a journalistic product could have been placed in the media only after going through all routine editorial procedure and the manufacturing of the final product (newspaper, journal of news, entertainment productions, live etc.). This liberation from the constraints of classical technical media (mainstream or old media) has a lot of gains because, as seen in the case of new media it means overcoming institutional bureaucracy and the destruction of balance and control points, the professional editors. But there are also some concerns, mainly regarding quality and ethics in handling the news. And of course, mainstream media is adjusting to this new situation.

These are some of the aspects this paper is interested in.

II. … more challenges

Citizen-journalism can be expressed in several ways:
1. An independent media under construction, trying to break as many ties with traditional media as possible, as well as with professional journalistic communication in the virtual environment;
2. A counterbalance to professional media, creating conflicting and engaging debates;
3. A collaboration in traditional media institutions (but modernized), complementing and diversifying their activities. This outlines the complex relationships between media communication practitioners (both professionals and non-professionals) and the convergence of media, facilitated by technology.¹

Relevant events which have taken place in society retain public attention if and to the extent they have been reported by various media. These can be classical (mainstream), where traditional journalists do their job, or they may be new media or social media platforms where citizen-journalists evolve. In practice we encounter mixed situations when media professionals compete or collaborate on online platforms, an interaction which “supports and mutually maximizes collective intelligence.”²

While generally traditional journalists accept the rule that media only reports the news and does not create them, in citizen-journalism this aspect is much more difficult to control, because even the most serious of the citizen-journalists are tempted to hold their own views as facts. In this context, facts are competing with opinions, while, paradoxically, the large amount of information conveyed does not lead to better information, but widens the state of confusion. This is an interactivity phenomenon that manifested itself in Romanian in the fall of 2015, in the evening of October 30.

A terrible accident, caused by a fire, killed more than 60 people in a Bucharest club on that evening. This incident infuriated the people and became the starting point of a series of demonstrations across the country, culminating with the dismissal of Prime-Minister Victor Ponta and several people from the local administration. On the following Wednesday, protesters handed “Ziarul Colectiv” (“The

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¹ Lucian Vasile Szabo, “Intermedia: Provocari in comunicarea profesionala” [Intermedia: Challenges in Professional Communication], in Industria media si invatamantul journalistic [Media industry and journalistic education], ed. Ilie Rad (Bucuresti: Tritonic, 2014), passim.
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Colectiv Newspaper”) to the demonstrators in the Unirii Square in Bucharest. The newspaper used the name of the club where the accident took place. As the news agency Mediafax announced on November 4th, the paper was comprised of A4 papers with only four texts printed on it, including the following one: “We gather texts from people who do on Facebook what media forgot refuse to do. We are the new media.” This statement was placed immediately under the title of the publication. One of the texts was written by Adrian Rugină, the drummer of the band “Bucium,” who was playing at “Colectiv” and who lost his life during the fire.

The cited statement embodies the tensions between mainstream journalism and citizen journalism as well as some of the accusations made by new, self-made journalists to the representatives of the old media.

The media intervention coming from an outsider (someone alien to the newsroom and with no specialized training) is known today as “citizen journalism.” It requires involved citizens who are aware of the problems in the society and who intervene in order to solve them. The citizen journalist is often the first one present on site, before traditional journalists arrive. This especially happens in case of unforeseeable events. In some cases, the first information is dispersed by bloggers. This reveals the new time pressure on the representatives of the traditional media. The audience demands to be informed immediately, while the event is still unfolding. New technologies allow this to happen—furthermore a non-professional can also use the same technology (whose costs are affordable today) and can inform the public before the professional journalist does it. In this case, as the journalist appears second on the informational market, (s)he is bound to convince the public to read him/ her. Therefore, (s)he must demonstrate that the quality of his (her) text is higher than that of the one produced by the citizen journalist.

In other cases, the information only comes from bloggers. This is the case when the media is entirely owned and controlled by the state.

We currently define civic journalism as part of citizen journalism. A civic journalist is both a spokesperson and a debater for civic causes, although his efforts are often not paid. He writes petitions, asks to be received to institutional audiences, and intervenes in radio or television shows. His profession does not affect his work, thus he can hold any profession. Citizen journalism has its limitations and two of the most evident ones are the following:

1. The practitioner is usually a non-professional (he/she may however have certain skills in journalism, while he/she may also be a former or current worker in the press);
2. (S)he covers only sections of the reported event, neglecting the traditional sectors of interest to the public.

Additionally, citizen journalism too often manifests a militant and exclusivist voice which is an approach that traditional media tries (although not always succeeds) to avoid. The professional journalist has a key-role in the field, namely to continuously monitor events in society and to raise awareness on societal issues, as well as discuss entertainment events. Furthermore, his activity is constant and ideally never one-sided or focused on one cause, as it often happens with amateurs, even citizen journalists. The events with major impact on society are reported by professional media, but the contributions from citizen journalism are highly relevant, sometimes balancing professional standards.

There are certain issues questioned when discussing citizen journalism: quality, on the one hand, as some citizen journalists do not adjust to journalism rules (regarding writing) and ethical principles. On the other hand, the independence of civic journalists is questioned, as some of them may be serving the interests of an enterprise, a government etc. This paper however, analyzes citizen journalism made

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by people for the sake of quality journalism and aiming to be good citizens, who are voicing relevant topics.

III. Citizen journalism and public debate

It is necessary to differentiate between citizen journalism (as a public manifestation of any person) and civic or public journalism. The latter is a concept developed in the late twentieth century, before the internet-revolution, as a way to engage in public debate (especially electoral debate) – it is meant to attract a public increasingly disinterested. It started a criticism to mainstream (traditional) media. Traditional media was denounced for failing to devote enough attention to community problems and the life of ordinary citizens, while only promoting the elites or the political strata, entertainment or sports. As already stated above we define civic journalism as part of citizen journalism. The ability to use new technologies and the internet, allow direct engagements in various issues and in areas of interest without the need for a direct relation to mainstream media. Moreover, this public display is often not even related to journalistic communication, as seen in recent social media developments.

Concerning the concept of public sphere, its best definition is given by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the originator of the concept. In a critique of late capitalism, Habermas found the citizen evolving alone against bureaucracy, unable to adequately express ideas and perspectives. He saw the return of the citizen as an (re-)entrance in the field, i.e. in the public sphere. This was defined as a sphere in which private persons aggregate as a public. The public sphere is not merely a meeting place, but a place for debate, as John Richardson remarked: “Thus, the public sphere is simultaneously an intellectual space, a deliberative democratic space as well as an institutional space, centred on coffee houses, theatres, debating societies, libraries and other forms, which stand between the ‘system’ and the private activities of the members of the society.”

A comprehensive analysis was conducted by Zvi Reich in 2011. He made comparative investigations between conventional media channels, print and radio, and the online sphere. One of the outcomes was that the number of online media journalists present in the newsroom was much lower than that in other newsroom. Some of them were employed on a part-time basis, while they also worked in traditional media organizations. Many online journalists came from traditional media outlets. This situation can be generalized to worldwide mass media, as the closure of printed publications was determined, in part, by the appearance of electronic publications. Thus, there is a core of experienced journalists working in electronic media newsrooms, while many others were forced to retire or to change their profession. Meanwhile, journalists who remain are forced to adapt to the rigors of online communication, such as special methods of writing and editing and the necessity of integrating techniques related to radio and television. This is certainly a challenge. The transition to new forms of online media is done by the rise of new workers who are not bound by old newsrooms and who intend to do things in their own style, not bound to rules, on websites or blogs, some of them with great impact.

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IV. Two case studies to digital media

In the following section we will briefly present two cases which show on one hand the more complex field work of a journalist today and on the other hand the ease of becoming an engaged citizen today, using the new media devices on the market. The work of a journalist is more complex than several years ago, when he went on an assignment with a paper notebook, a pen and a recording device. Today, the journalist is supposed to spend more time outside the newsroom and not only take notes, but draft and send the text to the editor or even sometimes edit and post the article himself, along with photos, also taken by himself and not by a photographer joining him. All these steps take place usually on the spot of the event. The reason why this is happening is the need to air the news as quickly as possible, as the public expects it almost instantly. Several years ago it was necessary to return to the desk in the newsroom or wire the news to the editor. The media institution as well as the headquarter (the newsroom) played a fundamental role in the process of transmitting the news to the public.

Today, the same technology is available to someone from outside the newsroom, who decides to act like a journalist. The second case mainly shows that everybody who has access to technology can act as a citizen journalist. The financial costs and the time spent are not an impediment. The interesting point is that not only technology empowers him to do so, but also the acceptance by the public, the trust, which the public is willing to place in him. And mainly all because of the desire to be informed almost instantly when something occurs.

The first case: On a cold winter morning, a train locomotive hits a bus with 22 passengers. Emergency teams do precise work to remove victims from the pile of crushed metal. The activity is high, intensified by the civil police and prosecutors who examine the scene. A bare-headed gentleman with an open jacket acts involved yet isolated from the others. He approaches, pries everywhere, and asks precise questions. He uses equipment which can do audio and video recordings, as well as take pictures. He stays aside and quickly drafts a text on his device’s keypad. The text, together with several photos and two videos (digital storytelling), form a file. The man selects the e-mail of the editor, attaches the file, and clicks “send.” Immediately, the editor calls him on the same device and informs him that he is transmitting. Within minutes, the text, photos, and videos will be posted on the main page of an electronic newspaper. It may happen that the editor is not available or there may not even be an editor, due to financial cuts in the editorial scheme. In this case, the field journalist will edit the material on scene and post it online himself with the help of his gadget.

The second case: A beautiful autumn afternoon. A gentleman is heading home from work. He observes a massive hole in the sidewalk near a school. The man decides to sit on a bench in the public garden near the school and takes a Smartphone out of his bag. He opens a link to the local news. He notices that the danger of the hole in the sidewalk he discovered is not listed. He has three possibilities, in addition to doing nothing: 1. Contact a newsroom (phone or email) and give them brief references about the situation; 2. Quickly formulate a text containing this information and send it to a newsroom. Attach photos taken with his Smartphone, then wait. Normally, a service editor, i.e. a specialist in media communication, will draft and post online an article with the photos received from the gentleman. 3. The incidental journalist can write himself a journalistic material (not just an outline), and insert it in the online publication, without waiting for the intervention of a professional editor. For the sake of speed, he will choose the latter, stimulated perhaps by the secret pride that he can act as a journalist, and go public even with an unsigned intervention.

While he awaits the reactions of other users, he wants to read the news in detail, so he enters the section where news are arranged based on freshness and relevance. He quickly notices that the news is presented on various media channels, with differences in approach and drafting. The online discussion gets animated by the information the man posted about the hole in the sidewalk. It starts to be taken seriously. Later on, the man leaves towards his home when an intervention car stops near the school and the workers start fixing the problem.

The employees of the repair company which sent the intervention car are usually on field. They access their devices where all the information (news) related to their field of activity appears. These are also the problems they are sent to repair.
V. Professional activity and private sphere

We can further develop the second case study and imagine that while transmitting his news, the incidental journalist might be interrupted by various other problems: he might need an appointment with a dentist, he might want to check his bank account or he might get informed that he will be delivered a book he has bought on Amazon. He will manage all these problems using different apps. We note the interconnection between professional activities and the private sphere. Some applications imply economic and social aspects which do not require public and are not made public. On the other side we have the actions related to the identification and dissemination of information in the media sphere: tracking breaking news, and posting content that is followed by a reaction within the community and a decision of the local government. Such devices, technologies, in fact, are mostly reality, what we anticipated there being only a greater degree of integration and reliability.\(^8\)

In early 2013, special publications announced the intention of developing multifunctional devices, which offer integrated services. According to a news piece from Bloomberg, the search for a solution to allow employees to use their own Smartphones and tablets for work without compromising privacy and without additional equipment and maintenance costs was undergoing.\(^9\) The user of the device chooses (before using it) the type of usage: private or professional. The data is secured so that personal information will remain unknown to other employees unless the consent of the owner is given. If the gadget can tackle both personal and professional issues, it becomes obvious that the phone and tablet will exceed their roles by providing opportunities for acquisition, storage and data processing.

Meraz lists the elements which ensure the popularity of citizen journalism over traditional media (at least regarding blogs): “The blog tool is popularly believed to be a vehicle of democracy because it fosters decentralized citizen control as opposed to hierarchical, elite control.”\(^10\) Rich references are cited in support of this argument, but we believe it cannot be accepted without question. Obviously, interactivity is great again.

There is a great pressure from citizens who favor democracy, at least through calls to protests and solidarity. However, they prove their effectiveness when strong traditional media channels adopt the democratic themes, amplifying the debate, disseminating messages and especially presenting facts. There is also a pressure on governments, organizations, and on the general public which springs from media which are stable, reliable, with proven and successful bureaucracies. The amplification of the debates through blogs remains in cyberspace, until it passes onto media systems with enhanced prestige. However, traditional media give more voice to the public, as the readers can immediately post an opinion to an article. The border between journalism and blogging is sometimes blurred – for instance, when an online paper also has links to the blogs of its own editorial staff members. This underlines that writing for the traditional media implies respecting certain rules, and blogging gives a greater freedom of expression.

The differences between media professionals and citizen journalists can be highlighted in terms of the goals of their approaches:

1. A specialized, professional journalist produces a text (hypertext) to inform or to propose debates;
2. Citizen journalists are interested in producing an opinion, promoting an idea, persuading and influencing.

The first point respects (more or less) ethical and professional requirements. The second point is not bound by mass communication rules. A citizen journalist can be guided by the general criteria of


ethics, but the neutrality and impartiality to those involved would limit support to (almost) any means of ideas promoted. This is one of Macek’s conclusions, when he states that “participation in online content is based on the desire to produce more than text.”

Citizen journalism in the digital age matured around 2010. This was the time when its main features were defined and stabilized. The revolutionary political developments in North Africa highlighted the important role citizen journalism can play. Citizens in countries like Tunisia or Egypt used new media tools such as Facebook or Twitter to organize and project their voices and demand reform. At the same time, it also confirmed the limitations of citizen journalism. The first limitation is the fact that this kind of media can take the form of mainstream journalism, but few of its media products can take the form of traditional media products. The second one results from the type of channel used; social networks are very important here, especially as a platform for mobilizing to various activities. A third limitation is the unilateral approach to subjects and the use of a small number of sources, often only one. A characteristic aspect is the strong polarization of the authors. They often have irreconcilable positions, excluding cooperation and compromise: they assume that they are the only ones holding the truth. A fourth limitation is the vulnerability of the social media themselves.

Another difference between the craft of journalism in traditional media and citizen journalism is the shift to comment, analysis and interpretation, to review the expense information. In citizen journalism, the rigours of news-writing are not respected and the differences in journalistic genres are annihilated. These issues appear to be important for amateurs who have become enthusiastic bloggers active on various platforms and media channels, but despite the freedoms they won (including the freedom of speech), when discussing totalitarian societies or deficient democracies, the gap between the two types of journalism is evident.

VI. News, sources and media platforms

Collaboration between media professionals and non-professional journalists could successfully combine, if it were a continuous, convergent process, two profound aspects which define the two fields. We start with the most essential element: information. Information in media may be defined as something new and relevant, worthy to be made public.

Pavlik gave an example worth exploring: Osama bin Laden’s death was announced on Twitter 20 minutes before the news was officially confirmed by mainstream media. At the time, Twitter had 100 million users, while Facebook had 800 million users. Thus, the benefit of social media (as overwhelming potential sources of information and suppliers) is easily recognizable in terms of speed of information.

The disadvantage is that most users of social media lack the skills of news collecting, writing, and dissemination. The process of collecting and publishing relies on professional journalists (and other communication sectors such as that of public relations). However, the number of professional journalists is much smaller than the unspecified users who are active on social networks. Returning to the news of bin Laden’s death, it was highlighted before that the information was made public. However, on social media platforms, such news may often turn out to be false or jokes, as it had happened before with bin Laden himself or other similarly notorious people.

The tardy reaction of traditional journalists in broadcasting this news might not have been due to negligence, but because of the usual double-checking of information, and the expectation of the confirmation from a reliable source.


Traditional journalists have fallen under an augmented time pressure, given both by the technology which makes instant news broadcasting possible while the events are unfolding and by citizen journalists who sometimes arrive sooner onsite and who do not obey the rules of the newsroom (such as the often time-consuming double-checking process).

This pressure is the reason why professionals from mainstream, traditional media sometimes mistakenly rely on posts from Facebook or Twitter such as the case of the post by a former spokesman of George Bush Sr. who sent his condolences for Nelson Mandela’s death before it happened. Because of the position of the person who posted this information, many media representatives worldwide did not double-check the information and took it for granted. Also regarding the death of Mandela, it is relevant to note that in order to insure the best pictures and the most exclusivity of the news, some mainstream media and news agencies rented apartments in the proximity of Nelson Mandela’s house, waiting for his death. Asked about the rightfulness of this action, the answer was that it had been done before, when Pope John Paul II had died. This is how the competition for the instantly sent news (while the event is unfolding) shaped the process of news gathering.

These are some elements which help understand the differences between media professionals and social media users.

References


