PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TO THE JOURNALISM IN THE INFORMATION AGE: CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Assistant Ö. Mert Denizci
Marmara University,
Faculty of Communications,
Journalism Department, Turkey.
omdenizci@yeditepe.edu.tr

For more than a hundred years, news – journalism – has been based on a model of restricted access. Only a few organisations could afford to send reporters to places where important events were happening or find information of interest to others. Even fewer had the resources to distribute that information – either through newsprint or by access to limited, usually regulated, radio or TV bandwidth. The model was one of central control, top-down, one-to-many.

Today those limitations have gone. Information is increasingly commoditised and widely available on the internet. Distribution of that information can be achieved at almost zero cost with a blog or podcast. The internet model is bottom-up (or edges-in), networked, peer-to-peer with everything from one-to-one to many-to-many.

When Tim Berners-Lee invented the hypertext technology, which became the World Wide Web in 1991 it was to be able to share and edit information. In other words, the social functionality of the web was at its heart when it was invented. It's that functionality, social networking as it's now called, which is driving the huge changes in communication we are currently seeing, including citizen journalism. Dan Gillmor in his seminal book "We the Media" (1) suggests the rise of citizen journalism can spark a renaissance of the notion of a truly informed citizenry. "Self government demands no less, and we'll all benefit if we do it right."

Citizen journalism, also known as public or participatory journalism or democratic journalism (2) , is the act of non-professionals "playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information," Citizen journalism should not be confused with civic journalism, which is practiced by professional journalists. Citizen journalism is a specific form of citizen media as well as user generated content. The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube.

Citizen journalism can broadly be grouped into four different kinds of activity – or sharing. (6)

- Firstly, there's eyewitness reporting – the sharing of experience. This includes the mobile phone pictures sent to news organisations, email descriptions of what people have seen and, increasingly, video. News organisations have always interviewed witnesses and used their pictures when available. Now witnesses to an event can send their material directly to the newsdesk – and do so in their thousands.
- Secondly, there's the sharing of opinion, usually through blogs. For decades, radio broadcasters have used radio phone-ins to reflect the views of their audience and to encourage debate. Today, on the internet, the same thing can be achieved with blogs linked from a news site or news pages linked from blogs. Citizen Journalism sites like Digg.com or Netscape.com, which include recommendation and voting for best items as well, reflect the views of the readers as well as conveying the core story.

- Thirdly, there is original, investigative reporting on the web – the sharing of discovery. This is sometimes achieved through conventional means of investigative reporting where an individual uncovers something newsworthy, or occasionally it happens as a group activity – sometimes called a swarm – where a number of bloggers descend on an issue and pick it apart until the bones are revealed.
- Finally, there is what some call Networked Journalism – the sharing of knowledge. This is founded on the idea that, whatever you write or broadcast about, someone out there will know more about it than you. How can you find that expertise and use it to improve the quality, accuracy, insight of your journalism? How can you tap into the collective wisdom, knowledge and experience of the public to report what would otherwise have been unreportable?

For decades now, the combination of radio and the telephone has allowed members of the public to share their opinions through mass media. Phone-in shows have become a staple format for talk radio and many of them have developed into communities with regular callers, extended discussions and themes – in much the way that bulletin boards and some blog communities work.

For the media, the ability to tap into their audience for views and opinion has enabled them to produce content, relatively cheaply, which is by definition of interest to, and closely aligned with, their audience. And, although there are good and bad examples as ever, phone in shows are a popular format for that reason.

The broadcaster acts as host and the audience is clear what is a callers opinion and how it may be differentiated form the broadcasters views or position.

Now, with blogs in particular but also podcasts and videoblogs, the ability of the public to express opinion in public has exploded. They no longer need to be "hosted" by broadcaster. This explosion of opinion in the public space has had a number of effects. It has put pressure on the traditional framework of impartiality and objectivity for some news organisations. There is clearly a great appetite for opinion. It has undermined the value of the columnist or op-ed writer – there is excellent commentary available for free on the web. But it has also provided a challenge (and therefore an opportunity) for news organisations to integrate the opinions of their readers, listeners and viewers in new ways. The quantity of views, and the means by which they are expressed, have grown hugely. So too have the benefits of being seen to embrace and support public discussion. (10)

Participatory Media include (but are not limited to) blogs, wikis, RSS, tagging and social bookmarking, music-photo-video sharing, mashups, podcasts, participatory video projects and videoblogs. These distinctly different media share three common, interrelated characteristics: (7)

- Many-to-many media now make it possible for every person connected to the network to broadcast and receive text, images, audio, video, software, data, discussions, transactions, computations, tags, or links to and from every other person. The asymmetry between broadcaster and audience that was dictated by the structure of pre-digital technologies dictated has changed radically. This is a technical-structural characteristic.
- Participatory media are social media whose value and power derives from the active participation of many people. This is a psychological and social characteristic. One example is StumbleUpon.
- Social networks amplified by information and communication networks enable broader, faster, and lower cost coordination of activities. This is an economic and political characteristic.

Citizen journalism can differ into the following types: A blog (a contraction of the term "Web log") is a Web

- Audience participation (such as user comments attached to news stories, personal blogs, photos or video footage captured from personal mobile cameras, or local news written by residents of a community),

- Independent news and information Websites Full-fledged participatory news sites,
- Collaborative and contributory media sites
- Other kinds of "thin media." (mailing lists, email newsletters), and
- Personal broadcasting sites (3)

site, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. (9)

Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, Web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual, although some focus on art (artlog), photographs (photoblog), sketches (sketchblog), videos (vlog), music (MP3 blog), audio (podcasting), which are part of a wider network of social media. Micro-blogging is another type of blogging, one which consists of blogs with very short posts.

Many bloggers, particularly those engaged in participatory journalism, differentiate themselves from the mainstream media, while others are members of that media working through a different channel. Some institutions see blogging as a means of "getting around the filter" and pushing messages directly to the public. Some critics worry that bloggers respect neither copyright nor the role of the mass media in presenting society with credible news.

Citizen journalists "the people formerly known as the audience," who "were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another—and who today are not in a situation like that at all. ... The people formerly known as the audience are simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable." (4)

"Doing citizen journalism right means crafting a crew of correspondents who are typically excluded from or misrepresented by local television news: low-income women, minorities and youth -- the very demographic and lifestyle groups who have little access to the media and that advertisers don't want,"

News organizations can employ the citizen-journalism concept but Citizen journalism isn't one simple concept that can be applied universally by all news organizations. It's much more complex, with many potential variations. (5)

- Opening up to public comment: For some publishers skittish about allowing anyone to publish under their brand name, enabling readers to attach comments to articles on the Web represents a start. At its simplest level, user comments offer the opportunity for readers to react to, criticize, praise or add to what's published by professional journalists. If you look at news Web sites that allow user comments (and at this writing, it's still a small minority of all news sites),
- The citizen add-on reporter: A small step up the ladder is to recruit citizen add-on contributions for stories written by professional journalists. This approach turns a standard 10-inch minor article into an ongoing story, with victims or witnesses to the crimes contributing information and news over a longer time period. (Until the culprit is caught and the story fades.) The information from the public serves as a warning to other trail users about which parking lots have had break-in problems. The public-submitted information could even be crafted by the news staff into an online map of crime reports, featuring victims' self-reports and photos.
- Open-source reporting: The term generally is understood to mean a collaboration between a professional journalist and his/her readers on a story, where readers who are knowledgeable on the topic are asked to contribute their expertise, ask questions to provide guidance to the reporter, or even do actual reporting which will be included in the final journalistic product.

- The citizen bloghouse: Blogging started out as an "everyman" phenomenon (and now, it seems, almost everyone has a blog), but then professional journalists took up the form, too. But the real promise of blogs remains with the non-journalists, for whom blogging has given a powerful and inexpensive publishing tool to reach out to the world with their stories and thoughts. A couple different approaches work for citizen blogs on news Web sites. The first is simply to invite anyone who's interested to start a blog, by offering a blog hosting service. The other model is to be selective, inviting people who you think would be good additions to the Web site to start blogging under your news site's brand name. This might mean seeking out local people who already have independent blogs and encouraging them to move over to the news Web site -- perhaps with enticements such as free hosting, promises of promotion to increase their blog audience and visibility, or even money.

- Newsroom citizen 'transparency' blogs: A specific type of citizen blog deserves its own category here. It plays on the notion of news organization "transparency," or sharing the inner workings of the newsroom with readers or viewers. This involves inviting a reader or readers to blog with public complaints, criticism, or praise for the news organization's ongoing work. A reader panel can be empowered via a publicly accessible blog to serve as citizen ombudsmen, of a sort, offering public commentary on how the news organization is performing.

- The stand-alone citizen-journalism site: Edited version: This step involves establishing a stand-alone citizen-journalism Web site that is separate from the core news brand. It means establishing a news-oriented Web site that is comprised entirely or nearly entirely of contributions from the community. Citizen contributors can submit whatever they want, from an account of a kids' soccer game, to observations from an audience member at last night's city council meeting, to an opinion piece

- by a state legislator, to a high-school student telling of her prom-night experience. The site's editors monitor and perform a modest degree of editing to submissions, in order to maintain some degree of "editorial integrity" of content placed under the publisher's brand name.

- The stand-alone citizen-journalism site: Unedited version: This model is identical to No. 6 above, except that citizen submissions are not edited. What people write goes on the site: blemishes, misspellings and all. With this model of stand-alone citizen-journalism site, it is important to have safeguards against inappropriate content being posted. Having a site editor review all submissions as soon as possible after they've been automatically published is ideal -- but impractical, of course, since editors do have to sleep and posting by the public is possible 24 hours a day.

- Add a print edition: For this model, take either No. 6 or No. 7 above (stand-alone citizen-journalism Web site, either with edited submissions or a hands-off editing approach) and add a print edition. A number of newspapers have tried this, using a print edition distributed freely once a week as an insert into a traditional daily or weekly paper, or as a stand-alone print product delivered to people's doorsteps and/or delivered to local retailers and placed in news boxes for consumers to pick up.

- Pro + citizen journalism: The next step up the ladder creates a news organization that combines citizen journalism with the work of professionals. South Korean site OhmyNews is the best example of this approach. It has recruited, to date, some 38,000 "citizen reporters," who contribute articles for review by OhmyNews' editorial staff. A small team of professional reporters also create content for the site. Citizen reports account for about 70 percent of the site's content, and pro reporters create the rest, so the emphasis clearly is on the citizen. (8)

- Integrating citizen and pro journalism under one roof: news Web site comprised of reports by professional journalists directly alongside -

submissions from everyday citizens. This is slightly different than No. 9, above, because on any one page there will be a mix of professionally written (paid) and citizen-submitted (free) content -- labeled appropriately so that the reader knows what he/she is getting -- rather than the more typical walling-off of citizen content as a way of differentiating it from the work of professionals.

- Wiki journalism: Where the readers are editors: The most well known example is the WikiNews site, a spinoff of the famed Wikipedia public encyclopedia, which allows anyone to write and post a news story, and anyone to edit any story that's been posted. It's an experimental concept operating on the theory that the knowledge and intelligence of the group can produce credible, well-balanced news accounts. The jury is still out on whether or not WikiNews will work, but the wiki model does seem to succeed with Wikipedia. The online encyclopedia is now one of the top information sources on the Web, and its entries are, for the most part, accurate and useful. WikiNews, at this writing, is a less compelling service. Traditional news organizations are unlikely to copy WikiNews, but the wiki concept might be useful to them in certain situations. For example, an obituary might work as a wiki. A family member might write the initial article, then friends and family add remembrances, photos, etc. (11)

On the other hand, untrained citizens reporting for the media can in some cases put them in risky environments. The BBC alone received more than 1,000 pictures, 20 videos and 4,000 text messages documenting the disaster as it happened. All in the space of six hours where most journalist teams were being informed by authorities that the uproar was caused by a "power surge" on the underground. This just shows the power that the public has by constantly being at the forefront of news all around the world. Here, the accessibility to news that the public has, and its instant delivery of information, helped the mainstream media gain essential facts and details – a skill which journalists pride themselves upon.

Understandably, the lack of journalistic knowledge of the public means that information is often not clear and of a low standard. Newspapers have the advantage of a consistent format and reliability making readers loyal out of habit. This consistency is obviously hard to achieve due to the amount of information and reporters that the internet connects. The public also lacks the database of resources that is crucial to news gathering and reporting, which could lead to a lack of substance.

Public participation in a field where it has little or no experience can however sometimes create its own drawbacks. Journalists who argue against the trends of citizen journalism say that the majority of the public cannot compete with what they have to offer in terms of training. In response to this, some bright sparks have found a way to combine the power of the people and the power of journalistic knowledge to their advantage. In the cases where citizen journalism has succeeded, the amateur reporters have often received support and assistance.

News blogging brings in a different aspect of journalism whereby the user writes stories that interest them on an open platform where readers can comment. Citizen journalists have the advantage of the outsider view – they are not tied down to any company or contract. As a result, they can often provide a more personal point of view than what we see on TV or read in the paper. On the other hand bloggers everywhere were astounded and wrote about it, eventually leading to mainstream media coverage of the story.

Citizen journalism may still be a vague term in its beginning stages but its growth reflects that people are looking for fresh ideas from sources which allows users to interact and be a part of the journalistic process. By opening up reporting and journalism to the public, broadcasters are bringing new ideas and methods of presentation into play, and enabling a more diverse audience to take a greater interest in the news.

References
(1) Baase, S. "A Gift of Fire". Prentice Hall, 3nd edition, 2008.

(2) Lasica, J. D. "What is Participatory Journalism?" 2003-08-07, Online Journalism Review, August 7, 2003.

(3) Rosen, Jay "The People Formerly Known as the Audience", PressThink, June 27, 2006.

(4) Steve Outing, The 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism,
http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=83126

(5) http://wethemedia.oreilly.com/

(6) Gillmor, D, "Where Citizen and Journalist Intersect", Nieman Reports, Winter 2005.

(7) Allan, S., "Histories of Citizen Journalism", Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives, Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.

(8) Deuze, M., "The Future of Citizen Journalism", Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives, Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.

(9) Bolsinger, T., "Blog as Microwave Community", The New Media Frontier: Blogging, Vlogging, and Podcasting for Christ, Crossway Books, 2008.

(10) Rettber, J.W., Blogging (Digital Media and Society, Polity, 2008.

(11) Bradshaw, P., "Wiki Journalism", Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives, Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.