Chapter 12

Citizen Journalism: News Gathering by Amateurs

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ABSTRACT

Last decade has brought several advanced technologies for journalists. This in turn brought in a new era of revolutionary concepts of journalism. One among those concepts is citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is a concept in media that refers to journalistic activities of ordinary people. It means citizens themselves report the issues confronting them. Although the practice of citizen journalism existed even centuries before, it is the new media only that have accelerated its pace in contemporary times. The proposed chapter, ‘Citizen Journalism: News Gathering by Amateurs’, presents a detailed description of various aspects of citizen journalism, including its concept, parameters, significance, limitations and types. It provides a detailed history and evolution of citizen journalism. It reveals that citizen journalism has a history older than professional journalism. The chapter also draws a comparison between citizen journalism and mainstream journalism. Moreover, it presents status of citizen journalism in India and Indian-administered Kashmir.

CONCEPT

Citizen journalism is a concept in media that refers to journalistic activities of ordinary people. It means citizens themselves report the issues confronting them. Citizen journalism has enabled people to raise their voice on what they feel need attention. These people are, thus, termed as citizen journalists. Duffy, Thorson and Jahng (2010) have defined ‘citizen journalist’ as an individual, who is not a trained professional, but who nonetheless may report on his or her neighbourhood or community. Citizen journalists or amateur reporters are none but the general audience, that is, viewers, readers and listeners of mainstream media. Referring to citizen journalists as “people formerly known as the audience”, PressThink blogger Jay Rosen (2006) mentions that earlier they would be “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.” He, however, argues that pres-
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ently they are no more in a situation like that. The founder of the Centre for Citizen Media, Dan Gillmor (2004) defines citizen reporter as any person, who participates in such a conversation that is helpful, and who is not patently a ‘fake’ citizen, that is, someone representing a corporate interest (as cited in Tilley & Cokley, 2008). The key to practice of citizen journalism lies in the proactive nature of citizens. It sits well with what Coleman (2001) has rightly stated that ‘to be an active citizen is to be a communicative agent’ and that ‘there can be no community without communication’. This implies that a citizen journalist is an active citizen, for citizen journalism derives its significance from communicative acts of citizens. Wilson (1993) discusses that the term ‘citizen’ has three current standard meanings:

1. Someone born in a particular place or nation;
2. A voting member of a republican city, nation, or state, who has various rights and responsibilities because of that status; and
3. A civilian, as contrasted with a soldier or other official.

However, Tilley and Cokley (2008) observe that none of these translates directly into the application of the term ‘citizen journalist’. They assert that a citizen journalist may be a ‘netizen’ (Internet user) rather than being identified with a particular nation-state; a citizen journalist may not be a voter; and a military official can also be posting to news sites as a citizen journalist.

Citizen journalism is also known as participatory and democratic journalism (Baase, 2008). There are various other synonyms used for citizen journalism—‘public journalism’, ‘civic journalism’, ‘stand-alone journalism’, ‘networked journalism’, ‘open source journalism’, ‘crowd-sourced journalism’, ‘collaborative journalism’, ‘grassroots journalism’, ‘community journalism’, ‘bridge media’ and so on. These forms of journalism are related to ‘citizen journalism’, but each is a unique species that has evolved out of a larger family of social media. All these terms refer to different acts (Cohn, 2007). One of the most accepted and inclusive definitions of citizen journalism has been put forward by Bowman and Willis (2003) in New Media. They define citizen journalism as the act of non-professionals, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. This definition covers all the possible activities of citizen journalists in existence. The authors further write, “the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.” Ross and Cormier (2010) have defined citizen journalism as a rapidly evolving form of journalism, where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community. According to the authors, news reported by citizens is of the people, by the people and for the people. Citizen journalists are independent and freelancing reporters. They are not constrained by conventional journalistic processes or methodologies, and they usually function without editorial oversight. Citizen journalists gather, process, research, report, analyse and publish news and information, most often utilising a variety of technologies made possible by the Internet. Radsch (2013) defines citizen journalism “as an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as repose to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field.” Citizen journalism uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism. Quinn and Stephen Lamble (2008) provide a more formal definition of citizen journalism. According to them, citizen journalism occurs in two forms: The first is when members of the public, who are not professional journalists, contribute content that is published on traditional media.
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