

***Citizen journalism and news credibility:
BBC and Al Jazeera networks. A Comparative study***

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Abstract

In a world facing rapid technological advancements and a continuous occurrence of events, citizen journalism has become widely used in the news business. Many news agencies are actually implementing citizen journalists and depend upon their reports on breaking news as they are faster and less expensive. There is a plenty of confusion regarding this concept. Many editors have real concerns regarding engaging audience to truly participate in news media.

Media professionals often suspect citizen journalists with doubt, especially when they are supporters of the issues they write about. As only professionally-trained journalists can understand and effectively apply the reporters' code of ethics.

This research aims at investigating how usage of new media methods and the new trend of citizen journalists affect the credibility of news gathering. How can news stations guarantee the truth behind such videos and how can this affect its credibility among viewers.

The researcher is conducting a comparative study between BBC and Al Jazeera News Networks in terms of how they measure the ethical code of videos sent by citizen journalists. According to the objective of the study, the two main research methods that apply for this research are focus groups and intensive interviews. This research aims at explaining how usage of digital media can be able to either enhance or decrease the credibility of news, and how it can actually affect audience perceptions and understanding of reality in terms of broadcasted news.

Key words: Citizen Journalism, BBC, Al Jazeera, News credibility

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Introduction

What is Citizen Journalism?

In the past, citizen journalism was mediated and limited to people writing newsletters, letters to the editor, or contacting news organizations. Local citizens then provided video or film to news organizations. For instance, the famous Zapruder Film of the November 22nd, 1963, assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, was one of the first instances of citizen journalism that took a visual form rather than interpretative print comments. Around the turn of this century, mobile phone usage gave individuals the "power of the palm" and the ability to write text messages that could be forwarded by the original senders. As the technology improved, people were able to use their mobile phones as cameras then video recorders. For example, the video Al Jazeera news channel got of former Libyan leader, Moamer Gadhafi, was a citizen video, the final video that showed that Gadhafi was killed in October 2011, was recorded on a mobile device and sent to the channel. (Dreier, 2012) Another example is the video of the killing of the Iranian student, Neda Soltan in Tehran in the Iranian elections protests in June 2009, went viral on the Internet and reached mass audiences.

Citizen journalism is currently popular in places where media access is unavailable or problematic, like during the Arab Spring and civil war in Syria. Also, YouTube has become a major outlet for all kinds of movements and citizen journalism. Saudis, for example, view more YouTube videos produced in KSA than watch local television.

In some places, alternative news channels are created by citizen journalist on YouTube, such as the Red Shirt-Yellow Shirt political struggle in Thailand before its military coup.

Citizen journalism provides normal citizens with the chance to document their own version of reality and tell their own side and point of view of the story. It is actually distinguished from professional journalism in that normal citizens utilize digital media methods to report on events on the ground, upload text, and videos directly to the internet and supply the information and videos to media outlets. (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013) Therefore, citizen journalism "is a promising new breed of news-making that has been championed by various scholars...[for] granting ordinary citizens a novel, hands-on role" (Reich, 2008, p. 739). It "gives people a voice and therefore power. The people's participation itself and what they produce are regarded with the hope to contribute to an informed citizenry and democracy," (Nip, 2006, p. 212). It also assumes that "average citizens are capable of intelligent judgement, mature understanding, and rational choice if offered the opportunity; in other words, that democracy as 'self-government' is not a dream but a practical premise," (Rosen, 1994, p. 18)

Steve Outing of Poynter.Org has outlined the different types of citizen journalism, which are mainly two main types: semi-independent citizen journalism and independent citizen journalism. The first type, which is semi-independent citizen journalism mainly, includes the contribution of citizens to existing professional news sites. There are many examples to this type. The First is the readers who post their own comments next to stories done by professional reporters. Currently, most of the news websites allow readers to post comments; however, in order to avoid

objectionable messages, many websites require registration before posting comments. The second is the readers who add their information to articles written by professional journalists. The third is readers who keenly work with professional reporters in putting a story together. Reporters might ask readers who have certain experience in a particular field to send information concerning this topic. This information is then integrated into the final story. The fourth is reader blogs that are integrated into professional news websites. This also includes blogs where readers actually critique the performance of the news organization, such as Lawrence Blogs.

The second type which is independent citizen journalism involves working in means that are totally independent of traditional, professional news outlets. This type includes blogs where individuals report on issues in their societies or offer commentaries on daily events, such as Life Must Go On In Gaza and Sderot. Also, Independent citizen journalism includes websites that are run by an individual or a group of people who report on news events in their local community; some of them have editors and others do not. While some of them have print editions such as Daily Heights. There are also the hybrid sites where both professional and citizen journalists work together. (Rogers, 2014)

Citizen Journalism VS Professional Journalism

In a world facing rapid technological advancements and a continuous occurrence of events, citizen journalism has become widely used in the news business. Many news agencies are actually implementing citizen journalists and depend upon their reports on breaking news as they are faster and less expensive. There is a plenty of confusion regarding this concept. Many editors have real concerns regarding engaging audience to truly participate in news media. Media professionals often suspect citizen journalists with doubt, especially when they are supporters of the issues they write about. As only professionally-trained journalists can understand and effectively apply the reporters' code of ethics.

In a digital world with an entire collection of different methods to communicate an accurate message, it is harder to judge the value of non-professional eyewitness film that is shot on a cellular phone and posted on the internet opposed to a well thought-out, observational documentary that is broadcasted on a traditional television channel. (Bulkley, 2012) Incidents such as YouTube videos of citizens under fire from government forces in Syria and other videos related to Arab Spring events are altering the landscape of documentary filmmaking. This has become possible through the technology citizens are currently using, the available distribution platforms and the passion of normal citizens to tell the types of extraordinary stories that once have been the field of professional documentary makers. Accurate filmmaking has become hostage to such new instant technologies. However, many of those who are working in the field praise the developments for adding a richer component to factual documentaries and current affairs. It is apparent that the genre will never be the same again. (Bulkley, 2012)

Molly Dineen, documentary pioneer, believes that internet videos and phone cameras should threaten broadcasters who assume that TV audience will move away from them. However, the combined field is a hive of creativity that should be adding to the performance of traditional documentary makers and not take away. The founder of

Films of Record and award-winning filmmaker, Roger Graef, speaks with enthusiasm about his ability to source and utilize footage from YouTube and social networks to enhance what he himself shoots. In his film, *The Trouble with Pirates*, for Channel 4, Graef used home video footage that pirates and captives shot. He wouldn't have gotten this material through any other means. But he also underlines the risks. The first risk is provenance as it costs time and money to verify whether the shot material is real or fake. The second risk is that if one can simply shoot using a camera phone doesn't mean that one should do this. Graef worries that commissioners will be applying this as a justification to cut budgets for factual even more. (Bulkley, 2012)

Adrian Wills, UKTV's general manager factual, declares that social media and citizen journalists' footage do not impact his programming; on the other hand, he admits that it is a vital marketing method. Wills says that digital activity has found place in reaction to news events as the digital stuff is more about strengthening around what broadcasters are already doing. (Bulkley, 2012)

On the other side, editorial director ITN Productions, Chris Shaw, argues that social networks are opening up completely new landscape for documentary filmmakers. Shaw says that one can use content from social networks to make the most amazing films. Shaw adds that ITN's documentary for Channel 4, *Syria's Torture Machine*, drew on about thirty thousand clips that were uploaded on different social network sites such as 'trophy videos' from Syrian military torturers and also footage from local citizens and families who were caught up in demonstrations. Shaw says that objective journalism is not the same as investigating social networks for citizen journalism. There are two problems with this view. The first is that places like Syria, for example, journalists have not been able to be there. The second is that there is an extraordinary source on social networks for updated events even though broadcasters have to take extra caution to verify what they are using. From Shaw's point of view, the future will rely upon mixing citizen video with professionally shot footage in order to reach a more smoothed image. (Bulkley, 2012)

Ivan Sigal, Global Voices' executive director, says that the idea that citizen journalism is in conflict with or opposed to traditional journalism is obviously past currently. He clarifies that both types exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other and there are many opportunities to work together on news creations, content distribution and storytelling. (Bunz, 2010)

Jeff Deutchman, whose documentary of the day after Barak Obama was elected as the United States president called *11/4/08* used crowd-sourced footage, says that the new technologies definitely open up new opportunities for filmmaking. He explains that what is really interesting regarding what he had done is that it is basically oppositional not only to conventional documentaries but also to traditional thoughts of filmmaking that most of broadcasters have internalized. Deutchman believes that there are even more essential things to come as people discover how to utilize the current technology to create new and unique things. There is still much more to be explored in the coming time. (Bulkley, 2012)

Research design and methodology:

This research aims at investigating how usage of new media methods and the new trend of citizen journalists affect the credibility of news gathering. How can news

stations guarantee the truth behind such videos and how can this affect its credibility among viewers. The researcher did an online survey on 300 Egyptian youth aging between 18-40 asking them which is the most credible news network and which is the least. About 90 percent of the sample agreed that BBC news network is the most credible source of information and 93 percent agreed that Al Jazeera News Network is the least credible source of information. Therefore, the researcher has conducted a comparative study between BBC and Al Jazeera News Networks in terms of how they measure the ethical code of videos sent by citizen journalists. In order to achieve the purpose of the study, three research questions need to be answered appropriately.

RQ1: How usage of new media methods and the new trend of citizen journalists affect the credibility of news gathering?

RQ2: How can news stations guarantee the truth behind such videos?

RQ3: How can this affect its credibility among viewers?

According to the objective of the study, the two main research methods that apply for this research are focus groups and intensive interviews. The sample of the focus groups consists of 300 literate Egyptian youth aging 18-40, where literate refers to his/her ability to read and write and doesn't reflect a certain educational degree. About 30 focus groups were conducted where each focus group consisted of about 10 participants. Two intensive interviews were conducted. The first one is conducted with Dr. Ralph Berenger, a media scholar and an associate professor at the American University of Sharjah, UAE. Dr. Berenger is chosen due to his experience in the field of journalism and his vast amount of research regarding political media. The second one is conducted with Mr. Ashraf Sadeq, a media professional who works as the managing editor of the Egyptian Gazette, which is considered the oldest English newspaper in Egypt.

Discussion:

The data collected from the focus groups and the intensive interviews; in addition, to the data collected from the literature review have shown that the main reason behind the participants trust in BBC news network and mistrusting Al Jazeera News Network is because Al Jazeera is a propaganda broadcaster moving towards advocacy journalism. On the other hand, BBC news network strictly applies to a great extent editorial value judgements on any piece of news.

Al Jazeera has its own citizen journalism portal, called Sharek, it can found on (<http://sharek.aljazeera.net>), where normal contributors can become official. Once they have accomplished that trusted status, their videos will post without control. Sharek portal is available in twelve languages and is used by people from all over the world. (Dreier, 2012)

Riyad Minty, head of social media for Al Jazeera, says that Al Jazeera allows citizen journalism because it is a tool aiming at empowering people to tell their own stories. He adds that in many places such as Tunisia or Libya or even Bahrain, Al Jazeera couldn't have any reporter on the ground; in addition, they were kicked out several times. In such times, people used to send them their own perspective of what's happening and after Al Jazeera verifies such stories, they broadcast such videos on screen. Also, citizens can submit stories via e-mail or Smartphone applications that

the agency has created. As for citizens with less advanced cellular phones, Al Jazeera accepts reports to be sent via SMSs. (Dreier, 2012)

Minty explains that when the Arab Spring started during the end of 2010 and early 2011, Al Jazeera team witnessed a major increase in the type of content sent through to them and they were required to scale extremely. At times they were actually getting up to a thousand videos daily from street protestors in Egypt, Bahrain, and Libya. Most of such footage was driving Al Jazeera coverage onscreen and online as well. During 2011, Al Jazeera received almost seventy thousand videos from citizen journalists. Minty confirms that gathering videos through citizen journalists is not just a way for Al Jazeera to gather content, but also has become its own functioning community of citizen journalists and ordinary people who have a passion to express their points of view, tell stories and interact with each other. (Dreier, 2012)

The majority of the participants of the focus groups, almost 81%, have stated that Al Jazeera is a channel owned and controlled by the authoritarian and undemocratic Qatari royal family that sends independent journalists to jail when they criticise the regime. Also, about 92% of the participants confirmed that many leading journalists and TV presenters started to leave Al Jazeera channel since 2013 because the channel has become a propaganda broadcaster.

According to an article published in Der Spiegel, a German magazine, the German based journalist, Aktham Sulimen, has resigned from Al Jazeera channel because 'Al Jazeera has become a propaganda broadcaster'. Moreover, a Beirut based correspondent, says, Al Jazeera is taking an obvious position in every country from which it reports. This position is unfortunately not based on any journalistic priorities; however, it is based on the interests of the foreign ministry of Qatar. He adds that in order to keep his integrity as a reporter, he had to quit. (Hussein, 2013)

Dr. Ralph Berenger, associate professor and researcher at University of Sharjah, indicates that the main reason behind drawing down Al Jazeera's ratings is because it has over-reached in some places and moved toward advocacy journalism. That's always dangerous turf for media since in any controversy you have divisions that support the advocate, and divisions that don't. Berenger stressed on the fact that the Arab Spring would never have occurred had mainstream media did business as usual and ignored social media from citizen journalists. Mainstream media empowered social media users to reach mass audiences they could not have reached on their own networks. Social media, then, played an agenda-setting role. Finding the truth of submitted news stories involves leg work and research by journalists--the old-fashioned way. There are also technological techniques that can be employed to discern whether there was any digital editing going on that could raise questions about the report's veracity. (Berenger, 2014)

Ashraf Sadeq, managing editor at the Egyptian Gazette newspaper, indicates that the Doha-based al-Jazeera news channels (especially al-Jazeera Mubashir Masr), has reached a deplorable condition among news consumers in Egypt because it has lost its credibility, neutrality and its excessive reliance on media volunteers as its main source of information. The products of those volunteers are always laced with politically and religiously motivated messages, whose content serves the interests of Qatar, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood group that want to destabilize Egypt. (Sadeq, 2014)

Regarding Al Jazeera coverage to the Egyptian revolution in January 2011, almost 71% of the participants criticized Al Jazeera for dedicating about two hours to a sprawling speech by Muslim Brotherhood associated cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Al-Qaradawi turned out to be based in Qatar. Despite the fact that the speech didn't even attract a huge crowd in Egypt and being unrelated to what was happening on the Egyptian streets, Al Jazeera yet broadcasted it on screen. Participants explained that this was mainly propaganda for the Muslim Brotherhood, who actually did not lead the revolution but are favoured by the Qatari royal family. About 52% of the participants said that Al Jazeera opposed dictators such as Mubarak, not because he was a dictator, but because it was encouraged by a desire to weaken such system the Qatari state viewed as unfavourable. Also, about 78% of the participants stated that since the Muslim Brotherhood came to rule in Egypt, Al Jazeera has focused all its power in order to represent such group in a constructive light, in addition to, giving Morsi's shallow and disappointingly constructed speeches positive coverage.

As a similar event, Al Jazeera network totally ignored the protests taking place in Bahrain. However, the channel dedicated a huge amount of attention to the protests in Syria. Al Jazeera's commitment to principles of fairness and justice seem to apply only when it is dealing with peoples or governments who they dislike. However, as resignations of correspondents and journalists continue and the increase regarding public criticism to Al Jazeera, the actuality of its political agenda will be really hard to hide. (Hussein, 2013)

Regarding BBC trustworthiness as a source of information with respect to citizen journalism, about 89% of the participants agreed that BBC News Networks depend mostly on professional reporters to cover the occurring events worldwide. However, participants added that when citizen journalists' reports are being broadcasted, BBC anchors clearly indicate that these are reports sent by normal citizens and not their professional ones. Due to such transparency, such participants indicate that BBC is a trustworthy source of news.

Ashraf Sadeq claims that the reasons behind the BBC's international success as a credible news outlet can be summarized into two media terms: professionalism and a strict application of the editorial value judgments on any hard or soft news story. (Sadeq, 2014)

Dr. Ralph Berenger believes that citizen journalism doesn't affect the credibility of respected news organizations such as BBC, as long as citizen journalist reports are disclaimed as what they are, which is unverified reports from citizen journalists. (Berenger, 2014)

Regarding the dependence of some news networks on citizen journalism technique as a source of spreading information, Sadeq indicates that as a journalist, he found out that has had negative effects on the profession and the news consumers themselves. He explains the most important negative effects as follows: first, Citizen Journalists or self-imposed media workers do lack the essential skills and requirements that are needed to make their product/stories credible or newsworthy. Professionally – speaking, for example, a news outlet be it a newspaper, magazine, or a radio or TV station should not run a story that is produced by a citizen journalist because his/her news values and editorial judgment do not meet the internationally recognized

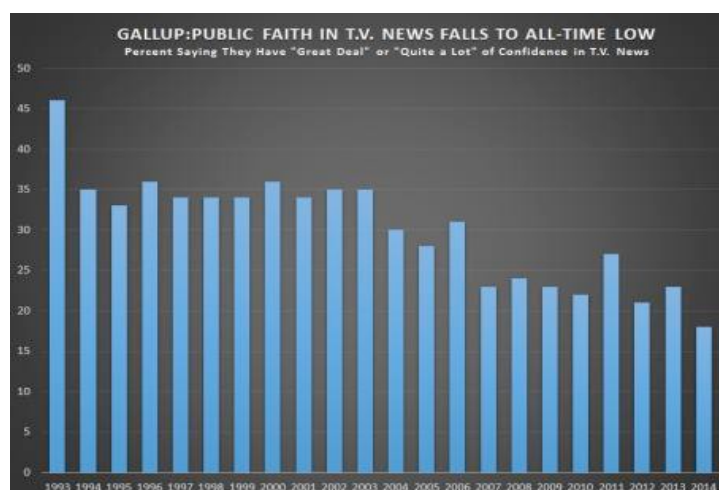
standards, codes of ethics and specifications that are applied by professional media outlets worldwide. Second, Citizen Journalists do not follow the profession code of ethics that has been approved by the Paris-based International Journalists' Union (IPU), and each country's press syndicate or union. Third, Citizen Journalists are not accredited union members and therefore they illegally practice a technical profession and misuse it for spreading false information or blackmailing purposes, which are considered crimes according to the Egyptian Penal Code. (Sadeq, 2014)

Dr. Berenger commented that he would be sceptical of most citizen journalism efforts since they seem to be advocates of something, and use their large soapboxes and megaphones to espouse their points of view by selectively editing, videoing and reporting. In the absence of professional journalists on the ground, however, much of this material gets broadcast, usually with a disclaimer that the information cannot be verified. He adds that one of the fears is that by giving so much attention to citizen journalism reports, verified news reports by professional journalists get squeezed out in the time constraints of traditional media. This is less of a worry in the digital realm where timeliness and space are less a problem. Editors are being forced by economic concerns such as staff shortages, less space, less broadcast time and more competition for upstarts, to consider the economic benefits of citizen journalist reports. (Berenger, 2014)

Concerning the Egyptian youth tend to trust bloggers and social media rather than news channels, about 92% confirmed this fact. They explained that such sources of information is much more clear, honest and free from censorship; therefore, they tend to believe in it more than normal news channels that follow certain agendas and political bias. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that only 8% of the participants confirmed that social media and bloggers do have their own hidden agendas and do follow certain political path.

Berenger confirmed that citizen journalists do benefit from being printed or aired on mainstream media, which are considered more credible. He referred to the fact that in the USA at least, television has sunk to a new low in credibility and now hovers around 40%. That's a big reversal from the 1960's when 70% regarded TV journalism as credible. (Berenger, 2014)

Public Faith in TV News 2014



Recommendations:

After conducting this research, the researcher has reached a final fact, which is that credibility of citizen journalism will always be doubtful. Despite citizen journalists' importance in documenting events, they will never be fully trusted. Such documentaries, videos and reports will always be suspicious of reflecting certain points of views, ideas and political trends.

Citizen journalism neither reflects nor represents professional journalism and is not as well considered as a credible source of information. Its product, which is the news story, will misguide and misinform the receivers. Such audience will unfortunately relay this wrong information to millions of people via the electronic social media outlets.

As for media workers, they should strive to correct some errors in the profession and purify their practices of any deviation in co-operation with lawyers and media professors, intellectuals and opinion makers. This is the only way to end the on-going battle between professional journalists and citizen journalists, in which no one will win. The only losers in this war are the people, who lose their right to receive correct and authentic information and know the truth.

News networks and agencies should double check whatever information, stories, and/or photos they receive from citizen journalists before broadcasting and transmitting them. However, such a process is absolutely a waste of the news outlet's money, time, and efforts. Therefore, it is highly recommended that news agencies should refrain as much as they can from using any material that comes from citizen journalists to avoid relaying or quoting information, whose credibility and authenticity are doubtful. This will as a result affect the news agency's credibility and trustworthiness.

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