

Media essays - news citizen journalist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

News Citizen Journalist

Introduction

We live in an era of information overload: it requires no groundbreaking analysis to establish this. Society is bombarded from every angle with news: Newspapers; television; streaming news services on the Internet and independent blogs written by ‘citizen’ journalist. This worldwide change has occurred over the course of a minute timescale.

Since the dawn of journalism until very recently, there were always a finite number of news sources. In the 80’s there were ten UK dailies, and three channels which contained news bulletins. By 1998, at the dawn of online news coverage, articles were a day old and suffered the disadvantage of not being specifically written as an online medium. Sites were updated once a day, and breaking news would sometimes be covered by a small news ticker at the most.

If we are to use September 11th as a comparative vantage point, set close to the present and catastrophic at a worldwide level, the scale of the change within the news becomes visible.

The 7/11 bombings in America were viewed in Britain on five terrestrial television channels, three dedicated news channels (BBC News 24, Sky News and ITV News), and news services such as Reuters, CNBC and Bloomberg provided continuous information updates. This does not even attempt to cover the countless other news sources around the world whose focus was to cover this tragic event around the clock. The Internet was saturated with theories, creditable news stories and speculation. The Guardian and The New

York Times at the time provided online coverage, and since then nearly every news channel has developed online news services.

For the first time everyone was capable of getting their opinion out there: The Internet allowed people to post their views, share their sadness and grow theories of conspiracy as could never have been done before.

On the 7th July bombings in London BBC 1 and ITV1 had coverage completely uninterrupted until 7pm. Material included large amounts of footage sent in by the public, including videos and pictures taken on camera phones.

News now travels at light speed. The gaps between major news stories, which steal the public's attention, are hardly long enough to allow absorption of the story, let alone understanding any greater sense of context within which it may lie.

The Internet itself is growing at a massive and uncontrollable rate. According to Eric Schmidt, chief executive of Google, the search engine would need another three hundred years to successfully index the five million terabytes of data it is approximated the internet now holds. Google has been indexing information for the last seven years, and has managed to index somewhere in the region of one hundred and seventy million terabytes.

Statement of subject

Because it has never been easier for individuals to broadcast their opinion, the divide between what is and isn't considered to be 'journalism' is being narrowed. The power to be published has been extended to anyone who may

wish to take it: Words no longer need to be passed through an editorial filter; instead the public can broadcast their opinions through blogs, feedback and their own webpages.

There are countless online forums and e-zines where the public can submit their own work, and as such there are no official standards because we are no longer tied to words entwined in the ethos of a large corporation. For the individual, when it comes to getting their word out, things have never been better, and the same applies to music, filmmaking and photography. To be published no longer certifies a vocational integrity.

In my dissertation I am going to assess the increasingly important role of citizen journalist, and the effect of new media on independent reporting. In an article in the Guardian on the 12th November 2007, David Leigh points out that our principles are being degraded through the lack of discrimination we exert over sources. “ Some voices are more creditable than others...a named source is better than an anonymous pamphleteer”.

Essentially I want to assess whether the reporter is a dying species, overrun by ‘ citizen journalist’, and in what areas a sense of vocationally based journalistic integrity will prevail and withstand the peripeteia taking place in the media. Reporting staffs are being cut globally, with more and more reporters going freelance. Investigative journalism is on the decline, and citizens are contributing to more stories than ever before.

Leigh quotes a BBC Radio 4 interview where John Simpson, the BBC’s veteran international news correspondent was asked if all news corporations were cutting back. He confirmed that in his opinion reporters were under real

threat, and were not needed anymore, “ We just want people’s opinions about what’s happened, not the facts”. In the article Leigh quotes Max Hastings, the ex-editor of the Daily Telegraph, who states that “ all sorts of areas of the world are now thought to be too boring to keep a correspondent there. The commentariat has taken over.”

Explanation of research

Restrictions of study

The topic I am researching is very broad, and varies very much from place to place. The role of citizen journalist is still developing and maturing. The public are only now fully realising the effects of independent reporting. There is also a psychological dimension that is constantly changing: People are only now beginning to trust articles that do not come from the larger news corporations.

Research questions and hypothesis

I need to inspect public broadcasting standards, and see what mechanisms are in place to stop the news of larger corporations turning completely into infotainment. I need to find out how much larger news corporations rely on spin departments and press offices for their information, and how much investigation is carried out independently.

At the moment people rely on news corporations for objective news, and tend to read the work of citizen journalist for a second opinion. My hypothesis is that all of this will eventually invert, and the only form of sincere and detailed reporting will actually be that of citizen journalist.

Definition of key terms

In order to understand this essay, the definition of the term ‘ citizen journalist’ must be clarified. There has been much debate over this topic, and much confusion has ensued.

The Internet is the most effective medium through which the public can dynamically post comments, leave opinions after news stories and feel a direct level of interactivity with their news. While it would seem that this would lead to ‘ vandalism’, sites such as Wikipedia have demonstrated that there are systems effective at minimising this sort of input, and I will examine this in greater detail later.

But the ability to simply broadcast opinion isn’t, nor has it ever been ‘ journalism’. Audiences have always been harnessed into the process of news making, whether the input may be in the form of letters to the editor or a clip of video phone footage. Despite the fact that during the 7/7 London bombings contributed video footage was used, public contributions have always been vital to journalists.

It is easy to forget that when Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963, Abraham Zapruder, a member of the public who got the best shot of the assassination, shot the video footage seen across the globe. It was his film that was used by analysts to try and determine from where the president was assassinated.

But recently the public have been recruited into the news making process at a much greater level. People are intrigued by people, and want to witness the experiences of others, to humanize their news stories. Editors and

producers embed stories and experience from members of the public into news stories to give them a more personal dimension. This is the citizen as an addition to a news story.

At a greater level of interaction, citizens can help report in a ‘participatory’ manner, whereby they contribute to a story in the field of their expertise. Their knowledge or guidance is framed within the journalist’s context. The ability to publish a soft draft of a story on the Internet has made it easier for journalists to gain help from the public to aid a story.

Citizen Journalists are too often mistaken for eyewitnesses armoured with new technology. In wake of the 7/7 bombings, people are quick to label the footage and pictures submitted by members of the public as the work of ‘citizen journalist’. But I believe ‘citizen journalism’ entails the bypassing of the commercial news system completely.

This is the only way for reporting to not contain the agenda of a large corporation. It can be argued that reporting can never be truly devoid of a personal agenda, but a corporation will inevitably be entwined in a political agenda.

Citizen Journalist is a term used to describe the actions of amateurs taking it upon themselves to report on subjects in an accurate, and independent manner. It is not to be confused with ‘participatory journalism’, where the public are used as sources.

Another relevant term is “Infotainment”, which is essentially a slang term used to describe information given the slant of entertainment.

A summary of what is to follow

I am going to assess the liberation technological advance has made for ‘ citizen journalist’, including beneficial and detrimental effects on news production as a whole. I want to see whether there is room for both professional and citizen journalists and whether traditional reporters are a dying species. Using case studies I am going to analyse where stories written by citizen journalist may not have been possible in a larger, corporate journalistic context, and similarly, where reporting would not be possible without the resources available to a larger news corporation. As well as this I am going to analyse the trends of corporate news, and assess whether the very roles of citizen journalist and news by larger corporations will invert: with serious stories being written by the citizen journalist while corporate news is almost entirely reduced to infotainment.

Literature review

This topic is relevant because it affects all of the information we receive. The forces of supply and demand work heavily on the corporate news system, and as such are debasing the level of our news. Citizen journalist on the other hand, is relatively free from such forces, and more able to write for niche audiences. There is a new freedom to write passionately about non-mainstream topics, with the possibility of a worldwide audience.

When newspapers first came into circulation, in 15th century German and Flemish states, they lacked the same institutionalized nature that they do today. It was the dawn of the industrial revolution and the creation of large cities, the cheapening costs involved in mass printing and the growth of literacy rates provided the market for newspapers in the nineteenth century.

Then advertisers realized the true potential for marketing to an ever growing population of newspaper readers, and the costs of newspapers went down even further.

The corporate model first took over the Hollywood film industry in 1914, and then the movie distribution system. By 1920 radio had become corporate, and by 1950's television had followed suit. All forms of media were organized in “ accordance with corporate industrial logic”.

Government controlled media started to arise in many parts of less developed countries. In Africa and Asia, where power had been handed over to those whom the departing colonial powers were most comfortable with dealing with. These people were ‘ clones’ of the ruling elite who had once colonised them. Hence the newly emerging media were staffed by the most Westernised natives. The New World Information Order (NWIO) was created to justify ‘ development journalism’.

The ethos of the organization encouraged state control of the media in order to ‘ educate’ and develop the respective local populations, and in within this line of thinking the education system in developing countries was also shifted into the state run sphere. As Louw points out, Communist control of the media was justified through the same line of argument.

“ In Afro-Asia ‘ education’ and ‘ development’ were managerial tools by which ruling elites (forcibly?) Westernised their populations, thereby increasing the numbers of their own Western ‘ tribe’”. (p. 43)

One of the most relevant aspects of the Internet, is the creation of an accessible worldwide community that endangers such political mechanisms of control. While once people's perceptions of life itself were very much narrowed by the culture in which they lived, now people from all over the world have an interface with which they can communicate.

The internet has evolved: third world countries, with their antiquated and even non-existent phone lines missed out on the first generation of the internet. But as technology developed, fibre optic lines and broadband replaced the traditional ways of plugging in, and third-world countries, with no existing infrastructure to replace and facilitated with cheap labour costs, have quickly connected themselves in.

The mobile phone revolution was similar: Five years ago in India if you wanted to make an International call you had to call an operator and book it in. You would then wait by the phone for an hour or two, and at some point the operator would call you back and connect you. Now every Indian with a roof over their head also has a mobile. This is an unbelievable phenomenon in a country which frequently still has power cuts, is home to immense poverty and still has a massively unreliable wired phone network. Despite this the prevalence of a mass mobile phone culture took place there even before America had abandoned their two-way.

Having come from an Indian background, and with all of my family currently residing there including my fifteen-year-old sister, I have visited the country at least once a year for the last twenty years. I am persistently surprised by the massive changes that occur there from one year to the next, but these

are factors relating to matters of economy and fiscal development. The most prominent changes have occurred, in my opinion, since the Internet and the mass availability of American cable channels.

The standardization of social values simply through watching American cable television is enormous, and the impact on the younger generation is massive when in contrast to their parents. An issue, which is widely ignored in more developed western countries, is the dominance of their media throughout the world, and the lack of correspondence between them and local cultures. The birth of citizen journalist has empowered countless people in less developed countries.

But spatial boundaries have been eroded by technology, distance has been tamed and while news once took months or even years to travel, today it travels in the blink of an eye. Because of this the relevance of political borders, and the concept of culture and country has become more peripheral. The importance of the citizen as a reporter, the value of hyper-local news and the democratic nature of the internet as tool for expression is quickly becoming invaluable.

In part due to these matters authoritarian states such as China, Cuba and Iran have been forced into moving away from their isolation, both ideologically and culturally, and individuals are privy to the writing of journalists not within the borders of their own, controlled domains.

Monroe Price asked the question “ Can a nation state survive in a world in which the boundaries of culture, faith and imagination do not (1995: 236). Nation states have survived and, McNair argues in ‘ Cultural Chaos’, they will

continue to do so. He argues that they will bring into conflict nation states with conflicting ideologies.

A brief account of the issues relevant to the topic

The creation of a press department in any company or political organization is a key factor. Journalists rely more and more on the information fed to them by the very people they are trying to write about.*EXPAND

“ What is clear is that there will always be some individuals or groups trying to control meaning. Underpinning this is a competition over resources (material, cultural and status). Our life chances are set by the social parameters facilitating or hindering our access to such resources” (p25 The Media and Cultural Production – Eric Louw, 2001)

Technological advances have resulted in a massive, global, spatial dissolution, and are becoming more and more relevant to our lives. This enablement of social realization through geographical space is a concept being dissolved through the advancement of technology. Technology affects the way we write, the footage we can capture to accompany our stories, and our ability to access the news itself. It is the advancement of technology which has enable the creation of a citizen journalist in the first place.

The world is getting smaller, and the amelioration of communicative potential is bringing human beings closer together. Since the 1980's, and more specifically with the onslaught of ' live' news coverage that CNN brought to the Gulf War in 1991, a new sense of immediacy has been brought to the news.

There is a new sense of participation, and interactivity that has been brought to broadcasting and the news in general, with broadcasts becoming more dynamic. We can be transported from the isolation of our domestic environments to the parochialism of the news environment we are watching.

Through news exposure, which includes the horror of human catastrophe, society is becoming more and more disengaged with the context of what it witnesses. People don't have enough time between major world events to become fully acquainted with the context of any particular situation.

Broadcasters would rather keep viewers engaged with sensational footage, than risk losing audiences with a contextual background which could be deemed more 'boring'.

As a result people feel that there are too many events to care about any at all, and more importantly there is a widespread concern that we are essentially powerless to do anything about it. Our press has the freedom to fully articulate the injustices of today, but tomorrow there will be new injustices.

When the format of the news we are subject to is too consistent and perpetual to never expect not to be shocked by a front page or a top story on a daily basis, we have no choice other than to be emotionally indifferent. McNair describes us as having 'become fatigued by the proximity of human suffering' (pg 7, Cultural Chaos). The News corporations, governed by the same principles of supply and demand as any other capitalist institutions, have advertency converted our round the clock news coverage into a form of entertainment...of 'infotainment'.

One of the primary book I am going to look at is “ We the Media: Grassroots journalism, by the people, for the people”, by Dan Gillmore. “ We the Media” inspects the blogging phenomenon, and more specifically analyses the relationship between the readers and creators of news.

Gillmor acknowledges that blogging is still in an early stage of development, and that in many respects professional journalists are not only behind the developments occurring in news production, but struggling to keep up. He goes on to argue that institutionalized journalism needs a new model of conduct in order to be in a position to “ fight the good fights”.

I have also been looking at Cultural Chaos: Journalism, news and power in a globalised world by Brian McNair. He draws on examples from the War on Terror, the invasion of Iraq, Hurricane Katrina and the London Underground bombings to examine the relationship between journalism and power in the digital age. McNair explores the geographic and cultural breakdown-taking place as provoked by the digital age. He examines the impact of the digital age on journalism the effects it has in creating a global culture.

There is a fear among news media professionals that the rise of ‘ citizen journalist’ will eclipse the role of the professional journalist. The biggest, and most universal fear is a public reliance on the information provided by citizen journalist will lack the accuracy and “ objectivity” of the larger corporation.

Citizen journalists on the other hand feel that the professional media lack the passion or the flexibility to report as accurately or incisively as them. One of the advantages of citizen journalism is that the massive number of amateur writers overshadows the comparatively small number of professional

journalists. When people can choose what to write about, it is guaranteed that they will do so with passion. Their articles will be researched; it can be argued, with greater dedication. Citizen journalist are ruled by no sense of hierarchy; as a group citizen journalist can use a skill set appropriate to a project.

However, a journalist is merely meant to be a vehicle through which to convey a message. Will this influx of citizen journalism actually diminish objectivity? At least with the mainstream media the public can have an understanding of the context of the paper in which they read their article. When a different writer, writes every article with no editor to moderate output, can we ever have an understanding of the standpoint of the writer, with no prior knowledge of him or her. On top of this, we can't even count on a set of defining, professional journalistic principles, nor will amateur writer ever have access to the resources of a professional department.

Case Study

On Sunday, April 6th there was an article in the New York Times Observer about an undercover vegan, who set out to expose the horrific conditions of a South California slaughterhouse. “ To fit in he bought sandwiches made from soy riblets and ate them in a dusty car parking lot with the other workers”.

Despite his vegan beliefs, this citizen journalist spent long days escorting cows to the kill. Armed with a buttonhole camera, he “ made sure he was successful in recording images of workers flipping sick dairy cows with forklifts, prodding them with electrical charges and dragging them by their

legs with chains so that they could be processed into ground meat". The investigation resulted in the United States authorities taking action at a national level.

The film the citizen made was picked up by the mainstream media, and was effective because it was edited in a sensationistically limited manner. Citizen journalism is useful because it allows smaller groups of people to be heard, and the more empowered we become by technological advances, the easier it becomes for us to challenge the images we are exposed to by the mainstream media.