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The Golden Age of Citizen Journalism

ABSTRACT

Citizen journalism has never been as strong as it is now. New technologies and the Internet have influenced it a lot. The differences between the citizen and the professional journalism – or cooperation of these two elements – have become a discussed topic. There are two different views to the issue. Certain experts say it is impossible to compare the professional journalism to the citizen one. But some cases show that the citizen journalism is important part of current media.

Key words: amateur journalism, citizen journalism, professional journalism, the Internet, social network, blog, Twitter, media.

INTRODUCTION

The name of this article is 'Golden Age of Citizen Journalism'. Reasons why current situation in media is the best time for civic journalists are obvious. Almost every member of modern society owns a camera, a video camera or a mobile phone and the most important thing – Internet access. People use the Internet daily, participate in social networks as members; and so the amateur (or citizen) journalism is a part of current media content.

There can be an opinion that civic journalism is very useful for current media but professional journalists do not have to agree. Non-professionals can be very helpful for mainstream journalism, but on the other hand it can make the difficult situation of traditional media even more complicated.

Although the citizen journalism has been developing very quickly since the beginning of the 21st century, it is still part of media studies which has not been researched very well. Many media experts are a bit sceptic about it. Professional journalists decline to put a 'journalism' label to articles published on blogs or shared on social media.

There are still problems with definition what citizen journalism really is and what it is not, what the main differences between civic and traditional journalism are and if we really can say that content made by non-professionals is totally independent or dilemma if citizen journalism is going to damage the traditional one.

I try to explain what citizen journalism is according to myself, but I compare it with opinions of media experts or journalists. I also use two examples of stories made by citizen journalists which were published also in mainstream media and try to explain why we should consider them as journalism.

The main aims of the article are to show the main differences between the traditional journalism and citizen journalism according to several authors and also own analysis and knowledge but also to show how modern citizen journalism works nowadays through two examples and explain why citizen journalists should be considered as journalists or not.

DEFINITION OF CURRENT CITIZEN JOURNALISM

There are many various names for citizen journalism. English names for the journalism coined by non-professionals are: networked, open source, grassroots, participatory, amateur or citizen journalism. All of the names used for citizen journalism are accepted as synonyms in English speaking countries, but there can be a problem with translation of the names. I can use translation of 'amateur journalism' to Slovak language as an example. Although 'amateur journalism' is used in English language without any negative meanings and connotations and it is just synonym to citizen journalism or the name for journalism made by non-professionals, there can be a problem with this term in Slovak language when 'amatér' (noun) means a person who cannot do something properly or 'amatérsky' (adjective) is a word which associates some product of lower quality (e.g. amateur video always means something technologically deficient).

What is citizen journalism? We can find many different definitions of the issue. The basic definition describes citizen journalism as "…the gathering, writing, editing, production and distribution of news and information by people not trained as professional journalists. Citizen journalists are non-professionals who collect, disseminate and analyse news on blogs, wikis and sharing websites using tablets, laptops, cell phones, digital cameras and other mobile and wireless technologies". [Curtis 2012] This definition contains all main characteristics valid for this kind of journalism including its authors, media and used devices. So one of the conditions of being a citizen journalist is to owe some device as camera, mobile phone or tablet but it is not the only thing which you need. A citizen reporter should also have some

features of professional journalist and will share his article, photo, video or other content with others.

Journalist and photographer Sean McMullen, who has been interested in amateur journalism and he has also participated in it, describes the nature of the amateur journalism very concisely. McMullen says about the amateur journalism as about: "type of journalism practiced by everyday people. Citizens, some without proper journalism training, are using this modern technology to publish their journalistic work. It can happen spontaneously or deliberately. Citizen journalists can use their cellphones to capture newsworthy events they are involved in or watching or they can go and cover something in their community as a planned activity" [McMullen 2009].

Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, journalistic experts from The American Press Institute call this kind of journalism participatory journalism. They define participatory journalism as: "The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires" [Bowman, Willis 2003].

Luis William Rutigliano says that citizen journalism is not the same as participatory journalism and he describes the main difference: "Participatory journalism provides a space for the public to discuss issues directly in their own words, but under the supervision and involvement of a news organization. Citizen journalism is the public's coverage of issues without news organization involvement" [Rutigliano 2008: 13]. For example: A photo and an evidence, which was sent to national newspaper by witness of an air plane crash and which will be used in news written by professional reporter is a kind of participatory journalism but if the witness published an article about the plane crash and used a photo made by himself on his own blog we could call it citizen journalism.

Another definition of citizen journalism is connected more to authors of the content considered as civic or amateur. It "…tends to be produced not by professionals, but by amateurs who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as journalists: they write and report from their position as citizens, as members of communities, as activists or as fans" [Atton, Hamilton 2008: 1–2]. But if we look at citizen journalism from another point of view, we do not have to agree with this opinion and we can say that also former professional journalists or graduates of journalism or media studies can be also civic journalists as far as they are not connected to mainstream media.

ORIGINS OF MODERN CITIZEN JOURNALISM

According to some authors there were first attempts of journalism made by non-professionals in 1960s. "For instance the roots of the popular music press in the UK and the US lie not in professionalized journalism but in the amateur, underground press of the late 1960s" [Atton 2008: 270]. Although it was alternative to mainstream

or even the origin of popular music press we cannot say that it was the same as citizen journalism of today which covers important issues with international consequences.

Everything changed with the beginning of The Internet and World Wide Web. Citizen journalism in its current form has its origins in the 1980s. It has been developing really swiftly since the 80s. Creation of FidoNews in 1984 was one of the first big attempts to collect content similar to today's citizen journalism. "Fido News was an open contribution online newsletter by the grassroots dial-up bulletin board called FidoNet" [Sterling 2009: 298].

Indy Media and Web 2.0 were another projects connected to users-generated content. But there are also other places where civic content is concentrated. It can be also world online Encyclopaedia Wikipedia or video-sharing website YouTube.

"The term 'citizen journalism' emerged around the year 2000 as a way of challenging the role of journalism and other dominant institutions in shaping public debate. In the USA this discourse tended to draw on the mixture of countercultural, libertarian, and communitarian ideals that characterized early online communities…" [Matheson 2008].

The biggest increase of content created by citizens was in the beginning of the 21st century when many online versions of mainstream media created special sections for amateur journalism (Current TV – 2005, iReport by CNN – 2006).

One of the most memorable moments for citizen journalism was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Many large news websites were looking for authentic material of people connected to the tragedy. "Everything from eyewitness accounts and photo galleries to commentary and personal storytelling emerged to help people collectively grasp the confusion, anger and loss felt in the wake of the tragedy" [Bowman, Willis 2003].

Events which followed after terrorist attacks in USA were breaking ones for citizen journalism too. "In the spring of 2003, with the US-led invasion of Iraq underway, mainstream news media took note of the rising popularity of the warblog, a feisty new genre of blog that focused specifically on the terrorism wars. Like many other citizen journalism projects, the original warblogs were often independent sites created by their authors, yet dependent on a network of relationships with audiences, other bloggers and the mainstream news media to sustain them" [Wall 2003: 33]. Since 2003 many warblogs appeared and wars or other kinds of conflicts created space for citizen journalists. There are several main reasons why it is so – mainstream media are not able to cover this topic properly and they do not want to rely on news agencies or another sources which bring the same content to all media but they need something emotional and original, their own story. There is also another reason – citizen journalists want to let people who are not involved in the conflict know what the situation really is.

Pictures, videos and stories made by amateur reports were demanded also in 2001 after tsunami in Asia, after hurricane Katrina in 2005, earthquake in China in 2008 or in Japan in 2011. This content was published also in traditional media.

We can find many websites where citizen journalism is published. Website Oh my news from South Korea, American The Daily Me, The Latest, iReporter on CNN or Global Voices online are the most successful now. Millions contributions of amateur journalists are published also on their private blogs. But also social networks as Twitter, Facebook or MySpace are considered as platforms for civic journalists.

BASIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM

There are two main views to citizen journalism – we can be sceptic about it and we can say that it cannot be full-featured alternative to journalism or we can be very optimistic about the content made by non-professionals and consider it as a new and very important part of media. We must accept it as a new form of presenting information which is different from the traditional way of making news.

Christopher H. Sterling describes the main differences between traditional and citizen journalism in his *Encyclopaedia of Journalism* "Citizen journalism emergent by its nature, which makes it hard to draw overly sharp lines on specific models" [Sterling 2009: 301]. According to Sterling's main features of citizen journalism and also according to my own analysis and knowledge about this type of content I try to formulate five main differences between citizen journalism and traditional one.

(1) Sources
"Traditional journalism acquires primary sources, whether interviews or documents, and then analyses and synthesizes them. New forms of contribution-based journalism, such as the website Assignment Zero[1], rely more heavily on the 'crowd' to collect sources and analyse and synthesize them in a distributed way" [Sterling 2009: 298]. In general, citizen journalism is even more authentic than traditional one. Citizen journalists rely on their own experience, own problems or own relations to something and they can be a perfect source. They are not reporters and they do not approach to reality in totally professional way but in human way what can make the story better.

(2) Borders between fact and opinion
Strict separation of facts and opinions used to be a golden rule for every professional journalist. Character of journalism has changed and these borders are not so strict anymore but we can still divide articles to news and opinions. An opinion of an author is still separated from facts in traditional journalism, especially in elite newspapers.

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[1] Assignment Zero was an attempt to create open-source journalism by connecting journalists with the public who can help contribute to the covering of a story.

But it is not the same in citizen journalism. If we read articles published by non-professionals (for example on blogs), we can see that many of the authors mix facts with their own attitude to them. The presentation of own opinions is much stronger in citizen journalism.

(3) The audience

Professional journalistic content is created for a big audience. Articles of non-professionals can be perceived by various numbers of recipients. There can be blogs read by few people or some amateur news videos on YouTube watched by millions. Size of the audience can change; everything depends on medium where it is published and on type, originality and importance of the content. When somebody made a unique picture of something with a big social impact, there is a strong assumption that it will attract many people.

(4) Attitude to truth

Professional journalist should respect law, journalism ethics, internal rules or some basic principles of journalism. Amateur journalist is not fully limited by these rules. A verification of information is one of the fundamental principles of writing news. Reporters look for more than one source to verify facts which they want to use in their articles. This principle or also a principle of asking for a statement from everyone mentioned in a story is not very usual in content made by non-professionals. It can lead to presenting lies or a deformation of reality. Citizen journalists can also write an article with a purpose to defame somebody.

We can use an example which appeared in US media after Hurricane Sandy. Mainstream media relied to citizen journalists because they were not able to cover all the happenings connected to hurricane by their own reporters. "During Hurricane Sandy, citizen journalism provided dangerous misinformation and fuelled damaging rumours because it wasn't appropriately checked and researched" [Mahoney 2012]. Writer and activist Tyler Mahoney wrote an article about rumours made by citizen journalists during Hurricane Sandy. He described the situation when information that New York Stock Exchange was under three feet of water appeared on Twitter and was taken by mainstream media immediately although it was not true. Tyler Mahoney has really strict advice to citizen journalists: "As a citizen journalist, you need to keep asking yourself if what you've discovered is really news? Do you have two sources? Are those sources credible? Do you have corroborating evidence? Repeat this process indefinitely. Until you can abide by these simple guidelines, stop hurting our democracy by peddling your garbage" [Mahoney 2012]. Yes, it is true that citizen journalism can cause misinformation and rumours with a big consequences but on the other hand professional journalist should be also more careful and should not have a blind trust to non-professional journalists. There is also one more question: If citizen journalist used all the rules and ethical principles of professional journalists, could we still call it citizen journalism?

(5) Independence

It is generally said that citizen journalism is an alternative to traditional journalism and it is a kind of bringing independent news. Citizen journalists who publish their articles, photos or videos on their blogs or social network profiles are not employees of media corporations and do not have to publish content which they are asked for. But on the other hand, there is a huge interest in citizen journalism from big corporations as Yahoo, Google etc[2]. "The political economy of citizen journalism is in flux with large-scale commerce and advertising dollars (and in some cases traditional media corporations) encroaching steadily into this area" [Goode 2009: 1289].

Content made by citizen journalists is also often published in mainstream media. Goode uses also one more example: "Even where there is clear institutional independence from 'traditional' media, citizen journalism sites may draw (consciously or otherwise) on norms and traditions associated with mainstream journalism" [Goode 2009: 1289]. It seems that we cannot talk about total alterity and independence of citizen journalism. We can consider it as the alternative, but not as totally independent content.

THE DEATH OF OSAMA BIN LADEN AND A CIVIC REPORTER IN ACTION

The case from May 2011 is a really interesting and relevant example of how the recent amateur journalism is working and what impacts it can have on the spreading of information in a global measure. This case caused a mass debate whether the common people and social networks can replace professional journalists and traditional journalism.

During the late night from Sunday to Monday (1st May – 2nd May 2011), 35 year old Pakistani specialist on information technologies, Sohaib Athar, sent a message through the social network "Twitter" (tweet) regarding the situation in his home town. Athar, who was in his house in the North Pakistani city of Abbottabad during the night, wasn't aware that he is in the middle of a happening that would have global consequences. Through his Twitter account, @ReallyVirtual, he started to post information about the on-going situation in his neighbourhood. Seven hours later after his first message, the US president Barack Obama told the world, that after a military operation of the US army, the terrorist, Osama Bin Laden is dead.

During this night, when the helicopters started to surround the complex in the city of Abbottabad and finally got inside it, Sohaib Athar informed the world about this operation through the social network as he was the direct eye-witness. Right after this happening, a discussion started, if his messages can be considered as a form of civic journalism. The American economist and journalist Dan Mitchell stated: "No,

Twitter hasn't replaced CNN… Because he wondered on Twitter, in real time, now he's a 'citizen journalist.' … Wondering on Twitter why there are helicopters flying around your neighbourhood isn't journalism" [Myers 2011].

Other experts are sure that this happening undoubtedly promoted civic journalism to the professional level and Athar's acting is considered as a journalistic one, regarding to various facts.

Firstly, although Athar is an ordinary man, he acted during this peculiar situation as a journalist. Single messages, which Athar posted on his Twitter account, had the attributes of real news texts, although they cannot be classified into a specific genre. He started to act as a journalist in the moment of realization that he is witnessing a strange happening and that he should inform the world about it. His first "tweet" serves as a proof: "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event). But he continued by adding more news: A huge window shaking bang here in Abbottabad Cantt. I hope it's not the start of something nasty:-S". He also tweeted exact place of the events: "Here's the location of the Abbottabad crash according to some people" >>> http://on.fb.me/khjf34. He added the statement of a taxi driver as well: "Report from a taxi driver: The army has cordoned off the crash area and is conducting door-to-door search in the surrounding". Then he posted tweets from news sites, which informed about this happening as well. Athar also answered the questions of those, who wanted to know more about this incident. Athar even analysed this happening which he witnessed and linked it with some other facts: "Since Taliban (probably) don't have helicopters, and since they're saying it was not 'ours', so must be a complicated situation #abbottabad". He retweeted a post from Munzir Naqvi connected to Obama's statement: "I think the helicopter crash in Abbottabad, Pakistan and the President Obama breaking news address are connected".

According to some experts, his approach can be considered as an act of a professional journalist. Even though the form of his posts wasn't on a professional level, the way he approached the situation, was very similar to actions of a professional journalist.

We consider his approach to inform about the happening as a journalistic one according to the following facts:
- He was a witness of something worthy to inform about.
- Athar decided to bring this information to the public. In certain point of view, this made him the person, who provided the information to the public (spreader of the information). He took over the role of the mass media. Athar became the witness and at the same time the publisher of this information. During this night @RealVirtual had together approximately 85,000 followers. This means he built up a relatively wide audience to whom he can provide all kind of information also in the future.
- The approach, how he spread the news reminded the work of a professional journalist. Athar looked for additional information that could confirm the facts he witnessed, he asked other people, checked the data before he published it. He analysed what happened, he searched context.

- After that night, when the incident happened, he continued to add information together with photos. That means he continued working with the data.

The approach of Sohaib Athar is therefore a really great example how useful can be common people's observation and activity with the symbiosis of modern technologies. It is interesting, that this particular Pakistani IT specialist achieved to inform thousands of people with his tweets about this important happening.

CO-OPERATION OF A CITIZEN JOURNALIST AND A PROFESSIONAL

Eliot Higgins is also an example of civic journalist who could do something even better than professional. Eliot Higgins is a man from Leicester, United Kingdom who worked in a financial office but lost his job in October 2012. He created a blog Brown Moses where he published articles about illegal weapons used in Syria. "Higgins has spent hours building a network of bloggers and social-media users in the region, and essentially acts as a filter or curator of the content they produce — mostly YouTube videos of exploded munitions, which he then identifies using the knowledge he has built up himself as well as that of his social network. Every night, he combs through more than 450 YouTube channels" [Ingram 2013]. The results of his analysis became a part of mainstream media and he became a source of information about illegal weapons in Syria not only for media but also for human-rights agencies. Higgins even started to co-operate with New York Times investigative journalist C.J. Chivers.

There is a difference between Eliot Higgins and Sohaib Athar. Sohaib Athar was a non-professional who just was in the right time at the right place and had good estimation that something what he was watching was interesting enough to share it with other people. Eliot Higgins has an extra ability or extra knowledge in comparison to other journalists. He was interested in something, spent much time doing it and it made him exceptional. But there are some mutual things for both – they spread the information which they had. Athar published data on Twitter and Higgins did it via his personal blog and content created and published by both of the citizen journalists became part of mainstream media.

I think that Eliot Higgins is not a classic civic reporter. He wasn't a witness of some interesting event; he didn't make a picture of it or wrote something about it. He used his extra knowledge for making analysis and uncovering something important.

A journalist and media analyst Matthew Ingram thinks that this is a good example of how useful cooperation of civic journalist with traditional can be useful. "His partnership with Chivers shows that this kind of journalism can be a great supplement to – not necessarily a replacement for – traditional reporting" [Ingram 2013].

Higgins uncovered something with a great meaning, something what was really interesting also for mainstream media but his research would not be so successful if he did not co-operate with a professional journalist from a reputable newspaper. The

co-operation of Higgins and Chivers was successful because Higgins used his extra ability and Chivers used his role of authority in spreading information to masses. When the Higgins's data were approved by somebody who people trust his blog became more successful and more reliable.

THE MEANING OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN MODERN SOCIETY

The examples and also opinions of journalist, media analytics or experts to the topic show that citizen journalism has a really strong position and impact in today's society. It is generally said that the most important role of it is making the alternative to mainstream media reality. "Alternative media construct a reality that appears to oppose the conventions and representations of the mainstream media" [Atton 2008: 268]. Citizen journalists have strength to uncover truth and show some issues which are worthy to inform about and change and get over mainstream media stereotypes. "Alternative journalistic practices present ways of re-imagining journalism and not only of adopting media practices for purposes of self-education and community empowerment. They offer a challenge to professional practices through their very recognition of those practices" [Atton, Hamilton 2008: 1–2].

If we look at news made by ordinary as a source for traditional media we can say that they help to attract the attention of masses to problems which haven't been presented to public or solved.

The original motivation of citizen journalism was politically and socially motivated. "Earlier effort believed in making journalism more responsive to ordinary people, and in turn helping ordinary people become more active in solving community problems and taking part in politics" [Lewis 2010: 65]. Also Shayne Bowman and Chris Wilis claim that participatory journalism helps to keep democracy: "The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires".

Although the main motivations of citizen journalists used to be political, it is not the only reason why people decide to publish some content but there motivations can be various, the same as it is by co-operation with traditional media. "Every day, journalists persuade sources to give up their time and information, at no cost. Publicists cooperate because it's their job, academics do it for career enhancement, social activists do it for the cause, and others go on record for civic duty or for the hedonistic pleasure of seeing their name in print" [Lewis 2010: 66].

Every participator can have a different motivation or own meaning of this kind of work, the only important thing about it is that it exists and helps in solving problems of individuals or groups in various ways.

CONCLUSIONS

It is a kind of revolution. Those who used to receive news from media became these who made their own news, who can share their opinions with masses and construct their own media reality.

The role of citizen journalism in these days is incontestable. An influence of this kind of spreading information is very strong. But there is a duty to see main differences between traditional journalism and the journalism of amateurs. People have been trusted to mainstream media for years because it was the only source of getting information about some important issues. Everything changed when people came online and started to share their opinions, knowledge or experience with masses. Of course, content made by ordinary people has many advantages – it can be more independent and also very helpful for professional journalists who do not have a chance to be witnesses of some unexpected event or do not have enough time or abilities to inform about some topics. But on the other hand many people still do not trust articles written by non-professionals and some occasional bloggers are not considered as authorities or people who can be trusted.

From my point of view citizen journalism will never replace traditional one, but it can improve it. Athar's and Higgins's examples prove that there would be things which we do not know (or do not know so early) about if there were no ordinary people with the ability of journalists. But there are also negative examples of citizen journalism, when information published by civic journalist was just a rumour.

There are many questions and dilemmas connected to the topic. We still cannot answer the question what exactly civic journalism is. Is one tweet, status on Facebook or picture on Instagram a kind of journalism? And if not what is it? If we want to talk about content made by non-professionals, which has a potential to be some kind of news, as about journalism, it should have some rules and it should not be made and published in anarchistic way. Although civic journalists do not have any education in journalism, they should think as journalists and feel responsibility for everything what they decide to publish.

Another serious question is if alternative media and civic journalists can be a full alternative to traditional journalism and if it is able to replace it.

But we should consider also the fact that traditional journalism has changed after the impact of citizen journalism and professional journalist should understand it and use. Things like fake pictures or untrue facts from citizen journalist should not appear in mainstream media. Never. Editors and reporters of mainstream media should consider civic journalists as helpers, good source, but mustn't rely on them and trust them totally. They should check up everything what they can and stay in position of the person whose job is to inform people and tell them truth.

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