

# **Citizen journalism: Emergence and theoretical perspectives**

*(Entry 95082. Citizen journalism)*

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*Synopsis:* Citizen journalism refers to nonprofessionals taking an increasingly central role in news reporting, writing, editing, publication and distribution. These roles are exercised both within news organizations as well as outside them. Studies of citizen journalism are commonly structured around a distinction drawn between citizens and professionals, with the key issue to what extent citizen journalism fulfills the promises of normative liberal-pluralist press theory.

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Citizen journalism refers to nonprofessionals taking an increasingly central role in news reporting, writing, editing, publication and distribution. These roles are multiple and variable, as Nip (2006) suggests in an influential typology. Although emerging primarily in the West, citizen journalism lays claim to being a global phenomenon, its Western roots extended and remade through countless instances in many parts of the world (Allan & Thorsen 2009). It is part of a global reorganization of media work (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery 2007).

### **Citizen journalism and the profession**

Citizen journalism draws its significance from a contrast with and resulting criticism of professionalized journalism. [[cross reference: 95019, Journalism.](#)] General acknowledgment of journalism as a profession aspiring to the same status as practitioners of medicine and law dates in England with the formation of the Chartered Institute of Journalists in 1884 and in the US from the teaching of courses in journalism in the 19th century and by the early-20th century the establishment of schools of journalism in universities (Chartered Institute of Journalists; Schudson 1978, p. 152). [[cross reference: 95057, Journalism and journalists.](#)]

Recognizing that citizen journalism gains its relevance by being distinguished from professional journalism emphasizes that its core claim is related not to an expansion of participation so much as its challenge to professionalization. The significance of citizen journalism comes from nonprofessional nonemployees taking an increasingly central role in a heretofore professional activity, and thus challenging the exclusivity and authority of professionalization itself. Indeed, an institutionalized distinction between a

professional class of writers and their readers/consumers can be traced to the beginnings of commercial media production (Hamilton 2008, pp. 50-53). Forms in which nonprofessionals have routinely been engaged in professional media include as readers, listeners, and viewers; as buyers and subscribers; as contributors of letters, comments, and opinions; and as sources, subjects and contestants (Griffen-Foley 2004).

Despite its usefulness, this relatively unproblematic definition is quite complex in practice. One key reason is the multiple positions from which the challenge to professionalization is based. Challenges of citizen journalism emerge both from outside as well as inside established news organizations (Atton and Hamilton 2008, pp. 63-76). On one hand, people outside of journalism industries see citizen journalism as a critique of the restrictions and privileges of professionalism and of the insulation more generally of journalism from its readers and society. On the other hand, citizen journalism is also practiced inside as part of management-sanctioned strategies of economic revitalization. For many publishers, managers and other professionals, citizen journalism can rescue the professionalized, commercial model of news production that has been a dominant form in the West for more than 150 years.

A second key reason for the complexity is that the multiple locations of these challenges are not opposites. Each draws upon the other for its own claims of legitimacy and authority. On one hand, citizen journalism as fostered and practiced outside established news organizations (such as by bloggers and activists) emphasizes its greater professionalism. This is often expressed in claims to greater 'quality' and 'objectivity' compared with under-financed, deadline-obsessed commercial news organizations that too often simply rewrite public-relations press releases. From this point of view, the

problem to which citizen journalism is a response is sloppy unprofessionalism or manipulation by publishers or advertisers.

On the other hand, citizen journalism as fostered by and within established news organizations emphasizes its ostensible democratization of news production. This is often expressed via liberal Anglo-American media traditions as a way to restore the ostensible 'marketplace of ideas' by encouraging the wider diversity of participants and views it requires (Altschull 1990). From this point of view, the problem to which citizen journalism is a response is insular preoccupation with immediate financial success and over-professionalization (McChesney and Pickard 2011).

### **Internal and external critical positions**

What became citizen journalism emerged through a series of developments and forms spawned by both internal and external critiques. Internal critiques took issue with the abrogation of social responsibility inherent in the disconnection of insulated professionals from the readerships/communities they were to serve.

During the 1960s, significant criticism of the professional convention of journalistic objectivity took place in the form of the so-called 'New Journalism'. This form of reportage repositioned the reporter, but, unlike citizen journalism, left the reader/viewer's position untouched. Also referred to as 'literary journalism', such writing placed the reporter as a character, if not the main character, in the story rather than as an outside, neutral observer and recorder (Hollowell 1977, Weingarten 2006). 'Participatory journalism' was how the work of author George Plimpton (1966) and documentarian Jon

Alpert was described, although not without criticism due to not adhering to the professional form of objectivity (Dickey 1977, Alter 1986).

Yet, the new, literary journalism quickly became a global phenomenon (Bak and Reynolds 2011). By the mid-1990s, additional criticism of professionalized, routinized journalism emerged from within the news industries. In a search for how to make news a more compelling product and perhaps better fulfill its role of empowering citizens to make more-informed choices, efforts emerged to involve readers by making the reporting process more transparent and thus open to public scrutiny. A significant, earliest effort was the *San Jose Mercury News* experiment with reporter Gary Webb's series 'Dark Alliance' on a CIA-crack cocaine connection (Webb 1996; the book-length report is Webb 1998). In the online stories, links allowed readers to view reproductions of a great deal of documentary evidence on which the reporting was based. The hope was that doing so allowed readers to make their own assessment of the veracity and legitimacy of conclusions drawn. The series was subjected to great hostility by the news industry, with the online version coming down and Webb's firing from the *Mercury News* (Webb 1998, pp. 437-466; Webb 2002, Paterno 2012).

By contrast to expanding the writing style of journalism, other industry-centered efforts saw in citizen journalism a viable business strategy for addressing declining readerships. Such efforts built upon pre-Internet projects in the US such as 'public journalism' and 'civic journalism' (Rosen 1996; Black 1997). By 2005, the industry recognized the general trend toward citizen journalism, recognizing it as largely a US and UK phenomenon, although present in other countries (Jesdanun 2005). Unlike the aspiring national and international reach of citizen-journalism efforts outside of the

industry, industry-centered efforts took shape as a hyperlocalized form of commercial community journalism (an early US description is Oxfeld 2005). While this can be seen in other countries in which private ownership and commercial support forms the bedrock of the system such as England, it is most prevalent in its development in the US (Roberts 2006). By the mid-2000, the increasing availability and diffusion of consumer-grade digital cameras (and, later, smartphones with video capability) enhanced the attraction of citizen journalism for television-news organizations, which not only used amateur footage more frequently, but formulated for amateurs online basic training in visual journalism (Romano 2005). [[cross reference: 95038, Television, general.](#)]

External critiques took issue with the selectivity and skewed nature of news coverage, which contradicted the professional ethos of impartiality and comprehensiveness. In so doing, they built upon press criticism from its earliest days (McChesney & Scott 2004, Theobald 2004, Goldstein 2007).

The late 1990s brought new capabilities for social movements to address global audiences entirely outside the sphere of corporate news media. [[cross reference: 95008, Alternative media](#)]. [[cross reference: 96024, Social protests.](#)] Following on the heels of various forms of community and citizen media, ranging from public-access cable channels to a community-run satellite distribution system, the Media Centers were established to provide grassroots viewpoints and information during the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999 (Howley 2005; Halleck 1993; Hamilton 2008, pp. 121-159). [[cross reference: 95076, Social protest and new media.](#)] Its innovation was to create a system of open-publishing, whereby individuals could upload to the website

their own news stories and video, for viewing by potentially anyone worldwide (Kidd 2003). [cross reference: 95005, Media and social movements].

Developments in the 2000s brought together all these disparate aspects. Additional digital platforms soon emerged, such as the website Blogger, allowed self-publishing and worldwide distribution in a form far less technical than had previously been the case. New amalgams of professional and non-professional news organizations emerged, such as in 2000 the South Korean organization *OhMyNews*, which exemplified a challenge to the mainstream media regime of that country by creating a sustainable hybrid nonprofessional/professional commercial news organization (Kim and Hamilton 2006). Proto-national and international systems in addition to Independent Media Centers emerged by late 2004, in such examples as Wikinews (Glasner 2004). The progressively greater integration of social media such as Facebook and Twitter into not only the organizing of social movements, but also of legitimate reporting has only furthered these trends (Heflin 2010).

**Theoretical approaches and studies**  
**[cross reference: 95044, Mass media: Introduction and schools of thought]**

*Postpositivism*

Postpositivist studies of citizen journalism search for a means of codifying stable and predictable relationships (Greer 1969) [cross-reference: 95001: Mass Communication, empirical research]. The typical research design is comparative, in which professional journalism and citizen journalism are compared directly or indirectly in terms of how well each lives up to the normative roles attributed to journalism by

Anglo-American liberal theories of the press (Siebert 1956, Altschull 1990). [[cross reference: 95054, Freedom of the press.](#)]

One common method of quantitative content analysis seeks to determine whether and to what degree citizen journalism exemplifies the liberal-pluralist normative goal of journalism of providing the broadest range of views and opinions. Examples include Carpenter (2010), which found in a comparison of coded news items that the range of diversity was greater in citizen journalism than professional journalism. Lacy et al. (2010) sought to determine whether and to what degree online citizen journalism was capable of substituting for professional journalism in the economic marketplace. Upon coding the content of online publication websites, they found that 'citizen news and blog sites can serve as complements to daily newspapers', thus posing little economic threat to professional news organizations (p. 44).

Research surveys also focus on whether and to what degree citizen journalism fulfills the normative role attributed to the press by liberal-pluralist philosophy. Kaufhold, Valenzuela & De Zúñiga (2010) address the issue of whether online user-generated news informs the public in the same way as professional journalism does. While consumption of user-generated journalism was negatively related to political knowledge but positively related to participation online and offline, consumption of professional journalism was positively related to political knowledge and only to offline participation. Nah and Chung (2009) found in their survey of newspaper editors that they rated the importance of professional journalism more highly than citizen journalism. And Robinson & Deshano (2011) sought to determine the motivations of people who engaged in citizen journalism. Among other findings, citizen journalists were found to gain a host

of positive affective benefits through their participation. [cross reference: 95069, Media, Uses of.]

### *Functionalism*

Similarly to postpositivism, a functionalist perspective also concerns itself with a comparison of professional journalism and citizen journalism in the degree to which each fulfills their normative role in a democratic society. While organicist conceptions of society as a set of interrelated systems and functions date from the earliest years of social theory, they were applied to mass communication research initially via the formulation of US political science scholar Harold Lasswell. Whether single-celled organisms or many membered groups, each similarly seeks to “maintain an internal equilibrium and to respond to changes in the environment in a way that maintains this equilibrium” (Lasswell 1948, p. 38). Avoiding dysfunction and systemic breakdown requires a consensus in the attention and views of leaders, experts and various publics (Lasswell 1948, p. 51). In some studies, the dysfunctions of the current professionalized system such as not enabling the correlation of different social groups (see Yankelovich 1991) compare negatively to citizen journalism, which in the best cases is seen to create a working if not harmonious fit between agendas of the institution, organization, profession, and publics. Through a functionalist approach, professional journalism and citizen journalism are often compared regarding their ability to bringing about such a consensus.

Functionalist studies of citizen journalism assess it either in national or international spheres. To investigate to what degree the introduction of citizen journalism

upsets the economic equilibrium of profitability in various local US media markets, Lacy, Watson & Rife (2011) found that while public-affairs blogs complement radio and TV (and thus pose no economic threat to their viability), they substitute for alternative newsweeklies by causing the readerships and resulting advertising revenue of the latter to drop. Xin (2010) found in China that citizen journalism had been generally incorporated into the workings of professional journalism and its potential systemic disruption thus contained. However, the study also noted that citizen journalism outside professional journalism also existed, largely to promote various forms of nationalism. In their comparison of eight European countries and the US, Domingo et al. (2008) found that citizen journalism had also been incorporated by professional journalism with minimal disruption, largely by restricting citizen participation to opinions and feedback, not extending it to news reporting as well. [cross reference: 95056, International communication.]

### *Technological determinism and convergence*

The relevance of technological change to citizen journalism is the focus of studies of convergence. Disruptions are attributed largely to the Internet, which provides the potential of open access and worldwide distribution. [cross reference: 95067, Mass communication: Technology.] [cross reference: 95070, Computers and society.] Studies of citizen journalism in this perspective become part of broader attention to changes throughout the full range of creative industries, thus coinciding with other fields of study such as sociological studies of labor, work and workplace organization (Hesmondhalgh 2007, Banks 2007, Deuze 2007).

This perspective takes a functionalist interest in systemic analysis, but extends it geographically from discrete localities to a globalized process (Castells 1996). Indeed, in his discussion of what he calls 'network journalism', Heinrich (2011) notes as much in his assertion that the emergence of citizen journalism is just one instance of a transformation in media work 'driven by two processes: globalization and technological advances in the form of digitization' (p. 2). [[cross reference: 95017, Information society.](#)] Studies of convergence pose questions about systemic disruptions or equilibrium, with the evaluative yardstick being that of normative press theory. While scholars such as Jenkins (2006) regard convergence as the steady democratization of cultural production made, others such as Cammaerts (2003) argue that user production—which includes citizen journalism—pacifies audiences with a false sense of agency which links participation to consumption instead of to critical reflection. [[cross reference: 95014, Electronic democracy.](#)]

Whether referring to the consolidation of jobs, roles, content or companies that earlier had been discrete, convergence as an organizing concept sets aside questions concerning which side—professional journalism or citizen journalism—is carrying the day. Instead it focuses on emerging hybrids of professional-citizen organizations and practices. For example, some studies claim that citizen journalism has been fully absorbed by professional journalism, such as the case of the Community Connection initiative of New Jersey Online studied by Boczkowski (2004). Similarly, Compton & Benedetti (2010) find that professional journalism will maintain its integrity in the face of citizen journalism. [[cross reference: 95083, New Media, News Production and consumption.](#)]

However, conclusions by other scholars emphasize emergent hybridities of production and consumption. Uricchio (2004) refers to the emergence of 'collaborative networks' as the organizational manifestation of convergence driven by technological change, and Bruns (2008) addresses the hybridization of roles through the concept of 'produsage' (an amalgam of 'production' and 'usage'). Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger (2007) conduct a multinational comparative study and find the emergence of new professional-citizen hybrids. Jouët (2009) finds a similar case of hybrid journalism in France.

### *Social constructivism*

Social constructivism departs from the prior perspectives in a number of ways. As inferred by the term 'constructivism', it seeks to account for beliefs, roles, organizations and systems as ongoing processes rather than established and stable attributes. Accordingly, studies of citizen journalism with this emphasis seek not to define or measure citizen journalism so much as to account for the processes that bring it into being and that maintain it.

A number of sources inform such work. In their emphasis on building workable public deliberation, studies of civic and public journalism (an earlier cousin of citizen journalism) made its cases via philosophical pragmatism (Coleman 1997, Bybee 1999, Rosen 1996, Merritt 1998, Eksterowicz & Roberts 2000). The relevance of pragmatism for newswork and communication can be traced most overtly in the U.S. by reference to the work of social philosopher John Dewey (Dewey 1927; Carey 1989; Rosenberry & St. John III 2010; Steiner & Roberts 2011). However, more recent social-constructivist

studies of citizen journalism rely more fully on the constructivism and phenomenology of Berger and Luckmann (1967), which came into relevance in studies of the sociology of newswork by Tuchman (1978) and others (a good overview is Carey 1989).

Social-constructivist studies of citizen journalism seek to determine whether and to what degree workplace norms and self-understandings of news not only differ between citizen journalism and professional journalism, but how these understandings either support or dissuade the integration of one into the other (Tilly & Cokely 2008). Studies rely upon mixes of analysis of news stories (as indications of the norms and beliefs used to report and write them, as well as of the situational resources and restrictions of time, money, access and so on) and analysis of direct interviews, with the presumption that the views expressed indicate relevant norms and practices at work.

One group of studies finds little in common between the two kinds of journalism. Carpenter (2008) finds that citizen journalists and professional journalists use different routines when reporting and writing. While professional journalists relied more on official sources, citizen journalists used opinion and unofficial sources, with the implication that citizen journalists' reports adhere less so to professional norms. In a study based on interviews with citizen journalists and professional journalists about how they went about reporting and writing their stories, Reich (2008) comes to similar conclusions. Citizen journalism differs from professional due to different situations and resources available to each, thus reflecting badly on citizen journalists in relation to professional norms. Other studies investigate more thoroughly professional journalists' perceptions of political-economic pressures that structure their work (Vujnovic et al. 2010).

However, other studies conclude that there exists a good deal of commonality between citizen journalists and professional journalists. Robinson & Deshano (2011) find that both groups share the liberal-pluralist professional ideology. Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen (2011) find that the BBC accommodated citizen journalism within existing professional routines, thus posing little challenge to professional standards. Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa (2010) find differing opinions and practices among a sample of community newspaper editors. While some editors oppose citizen journalism in any form other than reader feedback and opinion in order to uphold professionalism (also the conclusion of Singer & Ashman 2009), other editors approve it due to encouraging closer involvement of publics and the newspaper as well as helping provide additional labor at little extra cost. Pantti & Baker (2009) link the relevance of professional norms to medium. They argue that user pictures are deemed to be more credible and less reliant on skill and judgment than user reporting, and are thus integrated more easily by the profession. [[cross reference: 95023, Photography as a medium.](#)] [[cross reference: 95024, Photojournalism.](#)]

Still others conclude that, far from having little or no impact on professional journalism, citizen journalism is having a dramatic impact. Thurman (2008) concludes that much of the debate among editors and journalists about citizen journalism is spurred by increasing pressures of profitability and their pressures on newsroom routines (see also Hermida & Thurman 2008). Paulussen & Ugille (2008) find a similarly determinant role of newsroom structures, work routines and professional beliefs. These, and not intentional resistance to citizen journalism by professional journalists, explain the resulting resistance to its adoption.

*Critical discourse analysis*

Critical discourse analysis introduces a different problematic altogether. It posits inequalities as intentional and structurally necessary (not aberrations, distortions or dysfunctions), insights that remain opaque to other perspectives (Williams 1975). By conceiving discourse as social activity (not as a noun labeling a collection of words or meanings), such studies also share a constructivist predilection with process instead of a positivist preoccupation with attributes and characteristics of fully formed elements. Finally, such studies tend to define citizen journalism and professional journalism relationally instead of as opposites or as mutually exclusive. As such, its assessment of citizen journalism is often posed in terms of struggle and uneven merger instead of the comparative strength of opposing positions or fully realized hybrids.

The extent to which these presumptions of other perspectives are left behind can be seen in a variety of work. Robinson (2009) describes very complex relationships between citizen journalism and professional journalism in a study of news stories written and published after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster in the US that flooded the city of New Orleans and others on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Instead of opposing citizen journalism to professional journalism, the study identifies a complex array of different characters, themes, perspectives, overall messages and claims of authority by news items written to mark the one-year anniversary of the Katrina disaster. Such findings suggest the inadequacy of claims about which side (professional or citizen) has the upper hand or claims of a synthesis of the two. In contrast to such claims, Robinson suggests the existence of 'a patchwork of journalism and citizen work that represents the acting out of the tensions from these role shifts' (p. 810).

Moyo (2011) frames the use of blogging by nonprofessionals within the 2008 election in Zimbabwe within changes not only in technology, but also within changes in the very nature of journalism increasingly characterized by 'increased participation, multimodality and multidirectional flows' (p. 756). The emphasis on 'multi' rather than binary (either citizen or professional) broadens consideration of the complexity and interrelatedness of citizen journalism with many other spheres and practices. Citizen journalism is not a clear opposite nor clearly different from professional journalism, but a provisional activity generated through complex relationships as well as the particular context in which it takes place. While Moyo sees on one hand the emergence of 'a hermeneutic, constructivist and postmodern approach to journalism' very different from the professional mode, this citizen journalism still shares with the professional mode 'the idealism of the neoliberal discourse that empowers [both of] them as the watchdog of the state, but this simultaneously deprives them of the capacity to conceptualize the alternative in truly radical ways' (p. 758).

By contrast to organizations and efforts institutionally outside professional journalism organizations, Kperogi (2011) assesses citizen journalism as enabled by CNN News and its iReport feature. The study traces the 'enthusiastic valorization of citizen media' to 'the idea that they exist apart from and, in fact, in opposition to, the mainstream [professional] media' (p. 315). By contrast, this study suggests a much more nuanced assessment. On one hand, citizen-submitted items are successfully incorporated not through intentional editorial decision, but discursively, by 'construct[ing] the "normality" of prevailing conventions of news judgment', which people who submit items accept, if only provisionally (p. 320). On the other hand, and despite this largely successful

management, other iReport items 'openly criticize CNN's coverage of certain news events' and that 'give radical perspectives on the US economic recession', suggesting the permeability of means of control (p. 322). Citing theorists such as Gramsci and Zizek, Kperogi (2011) emphasizes the ongoing processual nature of this situation by noting that 'there is always contestation and that the volitional consent of the broad segment of subordinate classes has to be perpetually won and re-won' (p. 326). [cross reference: 95055, Hegemony and cultural resistance.] What thus becomes important is not to assert which side has won, but what the terms of the struggle between the sides is and, furthermore, how this struggle constitutes the very sides in contention.

### *Historical studies*

Finally, historical studies share many aspects with critical discursive studies. They ask similar questions about the ongoing, processual constitution of citizen journalism (instead of about its imputed and ostensibly fixed and intrinsic nature). However, their distinctive contribution is in expanding the time frame and range of interrelationships that enable this constitution.

A number of historical studies of citizen journalism emphasize its historicity instead of universality by noting its deep relationship with the industrialized West. In doing so, the imputed universal effects of digital technologies is recognized as determined more deeply by social intentions within particular social conditions (Williams 1975). To underscore this point, Pidduck (2010) argues in favor of 'conjunctural studies that trace how social and political agents deploy different media within particular historical, cultural, and political frameworks' (p. 475). It addresses the limits of citizen

journalism within the context of the autocratic regime of Burma, 'notorious for extensive censorship and for the harassment and imprisonment of journalists' of whatever kind (p. 475). Compared with the view that 'that the decentralized, participatory architecture of "new media" is intrinsically democratic', Pidduck argues that contextual awareness (such as of low Internet penetration in Burma) moderates such claims when extended globally. [cross reference: 95086, New media and the digital divide.]

Hamdy (2009) addresses the effectiveness of citizen journalism as operating outside professional journalism in Egypt prior to the changes wrought by the Arab Spring. [cross reference: 95085, New media and democracy in the Arab World.] The study emphasizes presciently the multitudinous challenges posed by Arab bloggers to the authority of the state, the laws and regulations active at the time to try to limit these challenges, as well as citizen journalists' tactics to avoid such limitations. Bosch (2010) discusses the South African experience, and concludes in that comparatively industrialized country that all can be seen as part of an 'online public sphere', which is an allusion to Habermas's influential formulation (Habermas 1989, Calhoun 1992). [cross reference: Public sphere and the media.] Finally, Hamilton (2008) seeks a broader historicization of citizen journalism by locating its dynamic and emergence within the centuries-long formation of capitalist media organization and its steady challenge brought on by accelerating pressures of competition in the contexts of the emergence of modernism and technological change.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the immense variety of perspectives, most studies of citizen journalism are structured by a framework of inquiry defined by normative liberal-pluralist press theory and the assumption of a categorical distinction between professional and non-professionals. That constructivist, critical and historical perspectives for addressing citizen journalism turn such a framework itself into a problem deserving of theoretical attention continues to move studies of citizen journalism into new and exciting directions.

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