

Essay: Is Citizen Journalism the best way to Report Human Suffering?

In a world challenged by disasters, war, and suffering, citizen journalism emerges as a beacon of hope- a prospect for justice and betterment. In the modern world, characterised by the limitless reach of the Internet and new technologies, people without professional training have the opportunity to create and disseminate content to the whole world, also called citizen journalism (Barnes, 2012, p.16). Despite the historical roots of citizen journalism dating back to the eighteenth century, the rise of Web 2.0 has paved the way for an unprecedented surge in citizen journalism, transforming it from a historical phenomenon into a dynamic and ubiquitous force in today's media landscape. Traditional barriers were eliminated by the move toward interactivity, real-time reporting, and the democratization of information, which made it possible for people without professional journalistic backgrounds to create content. Because of social media's widespread distribution, multimedia content could be shared quickly, giving citizen journalists a platform to tell stories and record occurrences. This paradigm change greatly increased the timeliness and diversity of news narratives, especially when it came to reporting on human suffering (Cummings, 2018, pp.10-16).

However, this paper seeks to answer the question: Is citizen journalism the best way to report human suffering? For the purpose of this study, human suffering is operationally defined as an experience of pain, hardship or distress that an individual or a community has to endure due to various factors, ranging from the aftermath of disasters to terrorism, poverty and socioeconomic inequalities. The paper delves into the advantages of citizen journalism in reporting human suffering, supported by real-life evidence. Rather than engaging in blind argumentation, this study also sheds light on the disadvantages. Despite its limitations, citizen journalism surpasses traditional journalism in many aspects of reporting on human suffering.

Citizen Journalism in Reporting Human Suffering

In the contemporary world, unlike in older times, instances and events of human suffering can be quickly reported through citizen journalism, enabling ordinary citizens to act as both the producers and the consumers of these reports (Allan and Thorsen, 2006, cited in Petrosian, 2014, p.5). When it comes to reporting human suffering, citizen journalism outperforms traditional mainstream journalism in various aspects, including immediacy, diverse perspectives, and grassroots coverage, which are evident in real-world instances. The realm of citizen journalism, particularly the Internet, is being referred to as the ‘eyes and ears’ of a disaster (Allan, et al., 2007, p.376).

Immediacy

Immediacy stands out as a pivotal feature of citizen journalism when it comes to reporting human suffering. The capacity of citizen journalism to swiftly disseminate information and communicate events to the world as they unfold is one of its foremost strengths (Barnes, 2012, p.22). This attribute becomes particularly crucial during the reporting of human suffering amid disasters. It enables people to act promptly and remain vigilant and helps the officials proactively initiate the rescue processes. Barnes (2012) argues, “In covering disasters, journalists are racing against time, and it is a fact that journalists are not always present when these incidents occur” (2012, p.23).

An illustrative example occurred during the Mumbai floods of 2005, where the immediate source of news on the rains was no longer the radio, TV or the press; it was a news website named Rediff.com; they received an email with the subject-

“URGENT: 100 LIVES AT RISK IN KURLA, NEAR BKC BUS DEPOT, IT IS A DOUBLE DECKER BUS, PLEASE HELP!!!” (Allan et al., 2007, p.380). The text of the email is as follows:

hi

please do something. my younger sister and more than 100 people are in a double decker BEST BUS near BKC bus depot. they are unable to call from their mobiles, i called my sister with great difficulty. the water has filled the first floor of the bus and they are all stuck.is there no one that can help, fire brigade, helicopters, even if someone could pass them a rope from some height their lives can be saved. they are unable to come out as the water is flowing with force and is above 15 feet.

i tried calling police 100 and 101 but no reply. u r my only help as i know u can reach to many people. I am in nagpur and am helpless.

please help.

gopa (2007, p.380).

This immediate act of citizen journalism not only enabled Rediff.com to report the news but also facilitated the transmission of this crucial information to the relevant officials. In contrast, the mainstream media crews were hindered by waterlogged streets and had to rely on citizen-gathered content for television broadcasts (Allan et al., 2007, p.380).

Similarly, during the bomb blast in London in 2005, the Internet emerged as the primary source of information for Londoners, particularly for those confined to their workplaces, who learned about the attack only through citizen journalism on the Internet (2007, p.5).

Grassroots Coverage

Citizen journalism has demonstrated greater efficiency in providing grassroots coverage while reporting human suffering in catastrophes. Sometimes, reporters may face challenges visiting crisis zones for live news updates. Consequently, they resort to distant reporting, which is limited and can only reveal one facet of the story. There are cases where reporters had to do aerial reporting, which Schechter (2005) terms “helicopter journalism” (Allan et al., 2007, p. 375). This limitation of traditional journalism hinders reports from capturing the minor ground details, the sufferings of isolated victims and accurate assessments. Citizen journalism addresses this constraint by offering a clearer, more concise image with inside-out and bottom-up coverage, as exemplified in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. During that event, mainstream media heavily depended on citizen journalism to cover the story. “Never before has there been a major international story where television news crews have been so emphatically trounced in their coverage by amateurs wielding their own cameras” (2007, p.376). Ordinary people and holiday-makers in the affected areas significantly contributed to grassroots coverage, even when stranded amid a disaster. Still, images and videos were often sent via email and mobile telephones to relatives and friends before becoming part of television news coverage. Similar scenarios unfolded during many other natural disasters, such as the Haiti earthquake of 2010 and the Japan earthquake of 2011, where the traditional media outlets had to rely on grassroots coverage of citizen journalism (Barnes, 2012, p.22).

However, this limitation of accessibility of traditional media extends beyond natural catastrophes; instances such as the upheavals of 2009 in Iran over the presidential election illustrate this point. Traditional media faced severe restrictions and a news blackout, preventing them from entering and capturing the stories of elections. Even media giants like CNN, MSNBC, BBC, CBS and many more had to rely on the information provided by the amateurs, which was later termed the “Twitter revolution” (2012, p.22). Ordinary citizens sent in

eyewitness reports and pictures from the streets via mobiles through digital media, this user generated content was subsequently processed by mainstream media newsrooms in London and across the world. Those people who had uploaded the UGC could watch their footage being broadcast on the news channels (Hanska-Ahy and Shapour, 2013, p.30).

Countering Hegemony: Empowering the Subaltern

Moreover, citizen journalism can serve to empower the ‘subaltern’ and act as a practice for counter-hegemonic discourses, particularly in dictatorial regimes and within state-controlled media. The concept of ‘subaltern’ in this context applies to the groups in society who are poor, lack autonomous political power and are marginalized. On a broader scale, this category includes people from different religions or cultures or those who exist on the margins of society (Smith, 2010, p.39). Media giants frequently overlook the sufferings of the subaltern, leaving the minor peripheral groups to be voiceless and unheard. A compelling example of this is observed in the case of media in India where “rural communities in India are often underserved by the mainstream media” (Mudliar et al., 2012, p.159). Citizen journalism has proven to address this significant inequality in reporting human suffering. In India, citizen journalist initiatives, such as CGNet Swara, play a vital role in addressing and raising issues within poor communities. “They highlight voices few media focus on and, in the process, help mobilize communities for social change” (Pain and Chen, 2019, p.335). CGNet Swara has even trained 90 women to report their issues (Segran, 2013). In one notable instance, these newly trained citizen journalists reported three men for raping a tribal woman, leading to their subsequent arrest by the local authorities.

Similar to CGNet Swara, other citizen journalism initiatives such as Manipurionline.com, E-Pao.net, Kanglaonline.com and the Sangai Express have played a huge significance in

supporting the causes and resolving the issues of the population. They underscore the capacity of citizen journalism to bear witness to human suffering (Pain and Chen, 2019, p.337).

Similarly, Ndebele civilians utilised citizen journalism through digital platforms to unite and respond against their genocide, known as Gukurahundi, and the prolonged sufferings they endured. With the Zimbabwe government restricting open public deliberations on these issues, considering them taboo, the subaltern (Ndebele) had no choice but to initiate discussions on alternative media platforms. Digital spaces emphasising online interactivity, user-generated content, and articles have become playgrounds for subaltern voices to deliberate their issues. Available research proves that these digital platforms have been crucial in exposing the sufferings of the subaltern. “These forms of citizen journalism foster counter-hegemonic discourses which give the subaltern a voice and, in the process, fill a communicative void in the mainstream public sphere” (Mitra, 2001, cited in Mpofu, 2015, p.92).

Another instance that happened in Zimbabwe that illustrated the capability of citizen journalism in mediating crisis and exposing human sufferings was during a run-off election. In this case, Kubatana bloggers shared stories of vote rigging, violence, rape, abductions, torture, murder and starvation. These citizen journalist discourses shaped a counter hegemonic project that threatened the survival of the political elite for the elections (Moyo, 2011, pp.746- 754). Such revelations would not have been possible with traditional journalism, as they “presented pictures of human rights victims and victim accounts that would easily have been censored in the institutionalized mainstream media in Zimbabwe” (2011, p.754).

Citizen journalism also possesses the power to ignite a spark and make it a huge protest. People draw inspiration from the acts of citizen journalism to protest and revolt against injustice. As citizen journalism embodies citizenship as one of its core principles, people are motivated to join their hands together against authoritarian injustice. This is evident in the case of

Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia, a 26-year-old fruit vendor who set himself on fire after facing police harassment and confiscation of his unlicensed wooden cart. The news of his suicide spread rapidly, mainly due to ordinary citizens and students posting videos on digital media platforms. This act of citizen journalism further inspired over the days and weeks ahead in many other countries, first in Egypt, then in Yemen, followed by Syria, Libya and Bahrain (Allan, 2013, p.120).

Removing the Linguistic Barrier

Citizen journalism also eliminates the language barrier when reporting on the human sufferings of linguistic minorities. In India, a shortage of trained journalists in rural areas resulted in the absence of major media sources in tribal languages like Kurukh or Gondi, each spoken by two million speakers (Mudliar et al., 2012, p.160). Trained journalists do not understand these languages, leading to the neglect of the views and issues of these linguistic minorities, with 95 per cent being ignored (Chadha and Steiner, 2015, p.707). This linguistic barrier has hindered the Adivasi population from raising their issues to the officials (Mudliar et al., 2012, p.160).

However, citizen journalism initiatives like CGNet Swara have made significant strides in addressing language issues. CGNet Swara has played a crucial role in eliminating the reporting void by enabling tribal communities to share their news in their own linguistic tongues. This has had a huge impact on the linguistic minority community, as they report that their issues about employment, subsidised food and healthcare got addressed and resolved directly:

I can raise issues related to my village in my own language without any fear of reprisal. I received calls from officials who heard my reports and inquired directly from me about complaints I filed on Swara. They have resolved many issues I raised (Segran, 2013).

Developing Diverse Perspectives

Furthermore, citizen journalism is necessary for the audience to comprehend different perspectives on an issue. Mainstream media, including television and the press, is central in conveying global stories to the public. However, audiences, being the second receivers, lack direct knowledge and actual experiences of events, for which they become heavily reliant on the media. This dependence on the audience is being manipulated by mainstream media to set agendas and direct public interest towards specific subjects, thereby limiting and diverting the range of arguments and perspectives (Happer and Philo, 2013, p.321). Petrosian argues that mainstream media sometimes focuses on certain themes while reporting only on certain themes that justify the power of administrative institutions such as the police, the government and the courts (2014, p.13). In such scenarios, diverse perspectives are neglected and concealed, aligning with what Foucault describes as discourses of absence. “They both enable and constrain the production of knowledge, in that they allow for certain ways of thinking about reality while excluding others” (Cheek, 2004, p.1142). This practice in mainstream media can often undermine the viewpoints of the people who are suffering. However, with citizen journalism, people can deliver alternative perspectives and shed light upon the different aspects of an incident.

This is evident in the blog “Where is Raed?” by Salam Pax during the Iraq war. The blog exposed the inner perspectives of an ordinary Iraqi during the early phases of the war. It offered the Western audiences an authentic and unfiltered point of view of an Iraqi’s suffering in the war zone. Whereas the mainstream media did not cover this, as they primarily followed the US forces and their activities (Epstein and Reich, 2009, p.11).

Limitations of citizen journalism in reporting human suffering

Citizen journalism excels in most areas of reporting human suffering, such as offering unparalleled immediacy, performing counter-hegemonism, providing grassroots coverage, delivering different perspectives and inspiring protests for justice. It also has certain limitations when considering every aspect of reporting human suffering.

In today's digital age, anyone with a smartphone and access to social media platforms can become a citizen journalist, reporting and publishing local stories to a global audience (Gee, 2023). This change empowered untrained individuals in news gathering and its dissemination process. The principle reason for the limitations of citizen reporting lies in the lack of formal training (Okeke et al., 2022, pp.40-42). The disadvantages of citizen journalism in reporting human suffering range from ethical concerns, lack of verification, bias, security challenges, and unethical surveillance.

Ethical concerns and lack of verification

The ability of citizen journalism to disseminate information immediately and globally, accessible to anyone, makes it vulnerable to the spread of misinformation. An example occurred during the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008 when the mainstream media faced challenges due to inaccurate reports. Twitter emerged as a significant source as #mumbai trended, featuring user-generated images and reports of suffering. However, the status of Twitter as a reliable news source quickly diminished as it re-tweeted inaccurate, unfounded and outdated claims about the event. Tom, a blogger at TomsTechBlog.com wrote-

“The facts ARE THE NEWS. Nothing else is relevant. In fact, the noise that Twitter generates in situations like these is downright cruel and dangerous” (Allan, 2013, p.113). This issue

became so aggravated that even the government had to intervene in the issue, as reported by BBC Mumbai:

1108 Indian government asks for live Twitter updates from Mumbai to cease immediately.

“ALL LIVE UPDATES – PLEASE STOP TWEETING about #Mumbai police and military operations,” a tweet says.’ The BBC was criticised by some commentators for reporting a claim which was later revealed to be untrue (2013, p.113).

Similar incidents happened during Hurricane Harvey in Texas, Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Irene; fake and outdated images were circulated through Twitter and other social media handles (Cummings, 2018, p.1). Furthermore, this fake content can instil trust when it gains a certain amount of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’(Willingham, 2017, cited in Cummings, 2018, p.1). These incidents of reporting human suffering in Mumbai, Texas, New York, and Florida shows the dark side of citizen journalism concerning ethical concerns and spread of misinformation. In such crisis situations, major news organisations employ long ritualised strategies and procedures to process the truth- claims, setting them apart from this limitation.

Moreover, certain ethical aspects of citizen journalism remain unanswered in the realm of mass media communications. Mythen (2011) questions:

Is it humane to standby and film the suffering of people in the aftermath of a disaster, rather than seeking to aid or assist the wounded? What is gained by filming and disseminating horrific images of human suffering?

A vivid example of ethical considerations in reporting human suffering is Kevin Carter’s iconic photograph of a starving Sudanese girl who collapsed on her way to a feeding centre beside a deadly vulture. The image was sold to The New York Times, and Kevin also won many awards for this photograph, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 (Augustine, 2018). This photograph

raises a challenging question about the act of reporting and capturing human suffering: Should Kevin have gone and helped her?

Biased Reporting

Citizen journalists lacking professional training may prioritize their personal or political beliefs, resulting in distortion of news reports. This distortion has the potential to influence public opinion and shape the views of the audience (Gee, 2023). Mahrouse (2009) argues there is racialized dimensions of witnessing, documenting and reporting practices of white/western citizen journalists/activists. Through interviews with Western white citizen journalists who travelled to Palestine and Iraq to report people's lives in warzones, he found their practice maintains a racial hierarchy, which is hidden under the notions of neutrality and exceptionalism. Journalism, practised with such biases and hierarchical positioning, tends to reproduce power relations rather than challenge them (2009, pp.660-670).

Unethical Surveillance and Privacy Concerns

The advent of mobiles allows anyone to capture a story and report it to the rest of the world. In a world where we are constantly surveilled by different means of authoritarian power, including forms of control by means of surveillance cameras, citizen journalism utilising cameras and mobile phones represents a third form of control and surveillance. The string of control has shifted from controlling agencies to ordinary people, meaning anyone can exert this control at any time. The other forms of controls, such as panopticism, neo- panopticism, are not specific or aimed at anyone; however, catopticon, as Ganascia (2010) terms it, can exert control at individual levels (2010, cited in Mallen, 2012, pp.6-9). This nature of citizen journalism has proven to be efficient in reporting crimes and human suffering in October 2006, when a man was beaten by two security guards, it was filmed by a citizen, resulting in gaining

much attention and leading a case to be filed. Nonetheless, in this way, people lose their privacy and have to live in a world of surveillance (2012, pp. 4-15).

In conclusion, citizen journalism emerges as an unparalleled method for reporting human suffering, as evidenced by this study's exploration of its advantages and limitations. Citizen journalism provides immediacy, a crucial feature when reporting on sufferings that require immediate assistance, such as during disasters. It also has the ability to offer a diverse perspective and act as a counter-hegemonic playground. Grassroots coverage makes the reporting focused on the details, something that mainstream media lacks during disasters. It also removes the linguistic barrier for linguistic minorities. However, these strengths are accompanied by a few limitations, such as ethical concerns, lack of verification, biased reporting and unethical surveillance.

Reflecting on the question- "Is citizen journalism the best way to report on human suffering?"- it is evident that this practice holds superiority. However, its limitations in certain aspects can be mitigated through collaboration with traditional journalism. This would likely result in a much clearer picture of the world and possibly bring light to the sufferings of humans and help them address it to the entire world.

In light of the research done, it is impossible to claim that citizen journalism is the perfect method for reporting human suffering. Instead, it can be argued that for future reporting of human suffering, a combination of citizen journalism and traditional journalism can be one of the best way to report human suffering.

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