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CITIZEN JOURNALISM-OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES YURTTAŐ GAZETECİLİĐİ- FIRSATLAR VE ZORLUKLAR

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Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Zehra Özkeçeci
İstanbul Niřantaşı Üniversitesi
İktisadi, İdari ve Sosyal Bilimler
Fakültesi
Gazetecilik Bölümü
zehra_ozkececi@yahoo.de

ORCID ID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4822-6899>

Abstract

This article deals with the phenomenon of citizen journalism from a critical perspective. Citizen journalism is also known as grassroots or participatory journalism. It has become more widespread, especially with digital development. The internet and social media allow every user as a member of civil society to participate in the social discourse. The citizen journalism also reaches its audience on podcasts, on homepages or by participating in video platforms such as YouTube.

This development goes hand in hand with the credibility crisis of the established media. Traditional print media, in particular, are struggling to survive and the monopoly position of professional journalism has finally been lost.

In this paper, the influence of citizen journalism on democratic processes will be examined and it will be asked whether a general evaluation of participatory communication models is possible at all. Therefore, different forms of medial participation are examined and some examples of its abuse are discussed.

This study is particularly interested in the grey areas that exist between professional media work and participatory citizen journalism. Based on Jürgen Habermas' deliberative model of democracy, the question is asked whether this development democratizes the public discourse and whether a clear distinction can be made between established and participatory news or between professional and lay journalism. Finally, this research also evaluates how the governments and the law react to these new developments and what potential consequences citizen journalism could bring.

Key Words: Citizen Journalism, Democracy, Participation, Media

Öz

Bu çalışmada, yurttaş gazeteciliđi fenomeni kritik bir bakış açısıyla ele alınmaktadır.

Yurttaş gazeteciliđi; halk gazeteciliđi veya katılımcı gazetecilik olarak da bilinmektedir. Özellikle mesleđi gazetecilik olmayan vatandaşların dijital gelişim teknolojileri ile birlikte haber üretim sürecine katılımıyla yaygınlaşmıştır. İnternet ve sosyal medya, her kullanıcının bir sivil toplum üyesi olarak, haber üretim sürecine katılmasını sağlayıp bizzat sosyal söylemde yer almasına izin vermektedir. Yurttaş gazeteciliđi aynı zamanda podcast'lerde, ana sayfalarda veya youtube gibi video platformlarında da hedef kitesine ulaşmaktadır.

Bu gelişme, kurulan medyanın güvenilirlik krizi ile birlikte devam etmektedir. Özellikle geleneksel yazılı basın hayatta kalmak için mücadele etmektedir ve profesyonel gazetecilik tekel konumunu kaybetmiştir.

Bu makalede yurttaş gazeteciliđi olgusunun demokratik süreçler üzerindeki etkisi incelenmekte ve katılımcı iletişim modellerinin genel bir değerlendirmesinin mümkün olup olmadığı sorgulanmaktadır. Bu nedenle, farklı medya katılım biçimleri dikkate alınmakta ve kötüye kullanımının bazı örnekleri tartışılmaktadır.

Çalışmada, özellikle profesyonel medya çalışmaları ile katılımcı yurttaş gazeteciliđi pratiđi arasındaki gri alanlarla ilgilenilmektedir. Alman siyaset bilimci Jürgen Habermas'ın tartışmalı demokrasi modeline dayanarak, bu gelişimin kamu söylemini demokratikleştirip demokratikleştirmeyeceđi, yerleşik ve katılımcı haberler arasında ya da profesyonel olmayan gazetecilik arasında net bir ayırım yapılabileceđi sorusu irdelenmektedir. Araştırma sayesinde, hükümetlerin ve yasaların bu yeni gelişmelere nasıl tepki verdikleri, yurttaş gazeteciliđinin hangi potansiyel sonuçları doğurabileceđi sorgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yurttaş Gazeteciliđi, Demokrasi, Katılım, Medya

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Introduction

In this article I deal with the dissemination of citizen journalism and its significance in communication theory. I try to answer the question whether this phenomenon leads to a democratization of public discourse and what perspectives it opens up for the social coexistence.

Due to my studies in communication sciences, I am particularly interested in those democratic attempts to reform the classical transmitter-receiver model. For there is no doubt that the questions of citizen journalism are linked to certain models of democracy, which do not favor an elitist or representative democracy, but a direct democracy with opportunities for participation.

Moreover, the issue cannot be separated from technological developments and related innovations. The digital age opens up new opportunities for journalism that works independently of large corporations and without a large budget.

Does citizen journalism challenge or support the established power? Could it bring new dangers to democracy or does any form of participation mean a strengthening of democracy?

With the help of topic-specific literature that served me as a primary and secondary source, I try to answer the research questions. I have researched several citizen journalistic projects to highlight the democratic achievements without ignoring possible disadvantages of an oversupply of information.

On the definition and meaning of citizen journalism

Other terms for citizen journalism are "grassroots or participative journalism". Citizen journalism is not a new invention, but only a relatively new term for an already familiar phenomenon. The conflict between forbidden and permitted opinions runs through history like a common thread. Not only knowledge is power, but also the influence on the media, which convey this knowledge and make new perspectives possible.

With the digital age, there are completely new opportunities to disseminate information outside the big mass media and for disempowering previous monopolies of knowledge. Without a large budget, anyone can produce and post news on the Internet. In fact, there is a multitude of blogs, Internet newspapers or distributors, and citizen journalists are also active on social media and video platforms.

"Participatory journalism is the activity of a citizen or group of citizens who play an active role in the process of researching, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The aim of this participation is to provide the independent, reliable, accurate, detailed and relevant information that a democracy needs". (Bowman/ Willis, 2019)

In representative or elite democracy, citizen participation is mostly reduced to election day and the rare exceptions of plebiscites, otherwise there are not many opportunities for political participation. Citizen journalism, on the other hand, is seen as an expression of participatory democratic approaches.

But the dividing lines are not clear in the media world. What is journalism, what is blogging and what is just a comment or a banal insult? The boundaries are not only fluid, but actually blurred by now. It is not clear when an article is recognized as journalistic and serious work. It is not even possible to clearly define where the boundary between lay or hobby journalists and professional editors can be drawn.

Well-paid newspaper writers are not necessarily better informed, but may only report on those sections of reality that are desirable for the financier, publisher or editor. This does not mean, however, that on the other hand, every blogger who writes an offensive commentary on an article is already a journalist.

In summary, the question of whether reporting is paid for or not is of little importance, because the form and amount of the remuneration says nothing about the quality of news. Even well-paid media work is often nothing more than a preconceived opinion, poorly researched or unquestioningly adopted by agencies.

The crisis of the mainstream and the established media

Traditional providers, especially commercial print media, are in a crisis. Advertising revenues and ad placements in the official media are declining. Their monopoly on widespread opinion has been lost due to the digital possibilities of forming opinions and disseminating news. Free of charge and online, all important news can be accessed with just a few clicks.

In addition, the established media have lost a lot of credibility and are fighting against the image of being in line and spreading fake news. Under certain circumstances, an unofficial disclosure platform

like Wikileaks may appear more credible than a renowned daily newspaper that has been valued for decades for its quality journalism and reliability. But the old securities have been lost today -just as much as media customers and recipients. Many traditional publishing houses are about to be closed down or are being taken over by other media groups. Sometimes this also happens through a hostile takeover, which can lead to the dismissal of the established editorial staff or to a complete change in the newspaper line.

The competition from citizen journalists also increases the material and financial pressure on professional editors. This pressure often leads to greater adaptation and a lack of willingness to take risks on the part of journalists, which in turn leads to a vicious circle and makes traditional media too boring and uniform.

The spectrum of media counted as citizen journalism is relatively broad. Even Wikipedia is included, despite the criticism of the non-verifiability of the sources and the influence of so-called forum guards on the content.

One of the advantages of citizen journalism over commercial media is its relatively low cost. Usually, bloggers or website owners offer the news for free, while the traditional provider is much more dependent on financial and political factors. Advertisers or political parties often demand compliant reporting. Content regulation is also carried out by press promotion, for which an uncritical flexibility is required.

Also, mainstream media rarely risk taking an alternative position to the prevailing opinion. Otherwise, they could be accused of spreading conspiracy theories or not being serious. That's why most commercial media accept the messages provided to them by the biggest news agencies. These are simply adopted without further verification. The main press agencies are:

The US agencies Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI), the British agency Reuters, the German press agency DPA and the French agency France Press (APF). (cf. Dottke 2015, 21) Of course there are more news agencies worldwide, about 180 in total, but they do not have the same influence as the agencies mentioned.

Often the editorial offices also copy each other, this is why the articles in different media often appear in almost the same wording. This is sometimes misunderstood as a confirmation of the truth of a message: in fact, only the content of the same broadcast was adopted.

"80% of all news in the media is based on a single source, and further research reveals that the press office that circulated the news is the exact one." (Becker/ Beham 2008, 18)

For this reason, the established media are also suffering from the credibility crisis already mentioned. Their messages are questioned and agencies are also being accused of deliberate manipulation.

However, lay reporters must also struggle with disadvantages that should not be ignored. Their scope of action and the circle of their recipients are limited. This is not a problem of the lack of technical possibilities that are available today on a large scale. In contrast to the earlier distribution possibilities of traditional providers, even today's alternative media would theoretically have access to a worldwide audience. Primarily, however, they suffer from a lack of awareness and sales opportunities, a lack of public relations, but also from limited know-how. Since basically every Internet user can be a citizen journalist, at least in terms of potential, there is competition in the millions.

Social media allows a direct exchange between communicators and recipients. This form of communication is a challenge to conventional journalism: the traditional media only had classic one-way communication. Therefore, all known print media or TV- and radio stations are now also available online and offer a special service there, such as video clips or online forums for bloggers.

There is also a grey area between established mainstream and citizen journalism. This is the case, for example, when there is an opportunity for the recipients to participate, for example by offering comments on articles or sending photos. In the past, the possibility for recipients to react was reduced to writing a letter to the editor or contacting the complaints office of a broadcaster. This power gap in communication is being seriously questioned by the new media.

But citizen journalism also has its downsides. As an example, you can look at the many right-wing extremist sites that recruit like-minded people via the Internet or the distribution of racist content. Awareness of the widespread hatred on the Internet is growing, as the alleged anonymity on the Internet apparently encourages the willingness to offend or discriminate against other users.

Information overload has increased with the spread of citizen journalism. This also makes it more difficult for recipients to filter which reports are important or which pages offer serious and verifiable reporting. In view of the flood of data, the overview can easily be lost.

The beginnings of citizen journalism

When the media became "mass media", the mass suitability and thus the triviality of the media also grew. Their commercialization increased, which usually resulted in a quality loss in content. However, it was still reserved for reporters and journalists to edit their articles themselves, which require appropriate training or study in journalism and communication science - even in so-called boulevard media.

The development of citizen journalism required a number of important prerequisites, such as technological innovation and new ways of disseminating news. The consumption of media has only gradually increased with the number of recipients, with the growth of the population, the reduction of illiteracy and new distribution channels.

Alternative journalism started to reach its audience in the form of leaflets and self-produced magazines. Depending on the form of government, an alternative opinion could be published with a larger or smaller circulation or reach. In dictatorial regimes, the spread of citizen journalism was a dangerous affair, punishable by imprisonment or death. And in some countries this is still the case today.

But even in the bourgeois liberal democracies, the spread of alternative media was not a matter of course. Under certain conditions, a liberal media law could be used here. But the allocation of broadcasting licenses and frequencies was very selective and costly.

Many of us still remember school newspapers, which were tolerated and enjoyed great popularity due to the small circulation and the cooperation of benevolent teachers. The history of the so-called pirate radio already moved strongly in the grey zone between underground and illegality. Only through legislative reforms did some channels become legal, which initially began as autonomous radio stations.

Today it is the purchase of technical receivers that also requires certain financial resources. It is still the case that many so-called developing countries have very limited resources to receive or even publish media. Nevertheless, it can be said: With the Internet, the monopoly of a few media groups over the published opinion ended worldwide.

Citizen journalism as a promotion as well as a challenge of democracy

In his presentation of the "deliberative theory of democracy", Jürgen Habermas believed in the rationality of public political discourse, where there is a communicative exchange between decision-makers and citizens.

"Deliberative politics derives its legitimizing power from the discursive structure of opinion and will formation, which can only fulfil its socially integrative function by expecting a reasonable quality of its results". (Habermas 1992, 369)

First, citizen journalism is a participative form of media use and dissemination. It largely corresponds to the form of communication that Habermas recommended in his deliberative model of democracy. For the recipients, this form of citizen participation has a high credibility. For a long time, independent journalism was considered more reliable than established media. (see Eberwein 2016)

Lay journalists are often more authentic than employees who depend on their donors. But as I said, the payment issue in the history of journalism speaks neither for nor against the accuracy of the reporting. In any case "fake news" can be disseminated more easily through technical innovations. In other words, recipients face the challenge of having to decide for themselves whether a message is credible or not.

In 2003 Iraq was attacked by a military alliance led by the United States. The legitimacy of this aggression was the information that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that threatened the world. This message was not only published by decorated generals and the US Secretary of State, but also by all renowned media worldwide. (cf. Khella 2012, 93-97) There was hardly a voice among the internationally recognized communicators that contradicted this official version.

This oppositional voice was rather reserved for lay journalists, who were accused of being conspiracy theorists or of standing by the side of a vicious dictatorship.

On the other hand, on the side of the lay journalists there are enough messages that should actually be questioned or reflect a certain ideologically questionable orientation. The criticism of the participatory model condemns the view that the citizen is mature and competent enough to represent political opinions and make the right decisions. That would be unrealistic and ignore the difficult and complex problem of political action. This would also slow down democratic decision-making. (Dachs 2008, 26f.)

The role of social media

Social media are seen as the channels through which citizen journalism is currently most widely disseminated. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whats up and similar media are used by broad sections of the population. The transitions between social communication and journalism are often fluid.

It is well known, for example, that the current US President has a preference for Twitter, about which he says more every day than he discusses with his advisers. The example shows that the use of social media is not just a tool for citizen journalism. If the supposedly most powerful man in the world also communicates via Twitter, the initial euphoria that accompanied the introduction of social media must be questioned. (cf. Eberwein 2016)

So it can be said about these offers: They are used independently of the social class. They often serve only as communication channels and replace conventional telephone and chat- options. Even where social media are used for journalism and to communicate information, they serve as a platform for already established media. Usually, user-selected articles that have already been published are shared, not new articles. Citizen journalism is also an exception in the digital network. Nevertheless, this minority program also contains social explosives. To make this clear, it is important to be aware of the dimension of social media.

Daily, weekly or monthly magazines appeared on certain release dates, which, in view of their monopoly, was tolerated by the recipients without question. The number of subscribers was manageable and the media with the highest circulation distributed strictly controlled news. Today we are experiencing acceleration in the transmission of news, which spreads information in near real time.

The radius of action has greatly expanded and even the most distant parts of the planet can be reached in fractions of a second. Even amateur journalists have opportunities that even the largest media companies could only dream of in the past. Even if only a small part of the social media is used for citizen journalism, millions of people can be achieved. New protagonists enter the media scene. (cf. Eberwein 2016)

The direct as well as indirect exchange between communicator and recipient means a revolution in communication, so that the hierarchy between sender and recipient is abolished. More detailed background reports and analyses often fall by the wayside. The political experts lose their influence and are displaced by engaged but untrained commentators. Therefore, all security and intelligence agencies responsible for collecting information and data are on alert.

It is therefore not surprising that the Internet is monitored and manipulated internationally.

Bloggers in forums such as YouTube are often sponsored by commercial companies without this being visible at first glance. It is a particularly successful form of product placement. Also the influences of political parties or powerful lobby organizations are often disguised as citizen journalism.

Hasbara" is the name given to a globally effective "blogger army" that is supposed to advertise the Israeli state on the digital net and is organized and paid for by the Israeli government - specifically by the Foreign Ministry. A separate Hasbara handbook provides the arguments, which are presented as separate discussion contributions.

The bloggers are not only paid for their work, but are also invited to Israel for sightseeing and exchange with the settler programs. (Hasbara Fellowships 2019) Similar programs are being pursued by other lobby organizations and governments.

Attitude as a crime

Freedom of opinion and of the press is regarded as a high good in democracies, but in theory it is often more strongly defended than in practice and in everyday political life. In history, there have often been restrictive measures to prevent less tolerated or dissenting opinions. But all these methods, drastic as they may have been, never prevented people from taking an alternative stand against the prevailing dissemination of information.

Anyone who not only reports on everyday events or banalities, but also addresses social or socio-political problems can get into trouble. This is where citizen journalism reaches its limits that have remained invisible as long as they have not been crossed.

The question of legality is especially important for grassroots journalism.

Divergent views are often perceived as dangerous as they may lead to a more critical attitude toward politics or ultimately to resistive behavior.

As Hofbauer describes, the published opinion can quickly become the subject of court proceedings (cf. Hofbauer 2011). Not only in dictatorships, but also and especially in democracies that want to protect themselves against extremist ideologies as well as against dissenting opinions. In most cases, attempts are made to ignore or ridicule unloved lay journalists. But where this tactic is not enough, it could entail repression and convictions.

Official representatives of opinion and employees of the established media are more aware of the media law consequences that accompany certain publications. Lay journalists are less concerned about such problems and face unexpected prosecutions. Also in the European Union there have been several convictions in connection with non-tolerated reporting. In 2005, for example, the German Bundestag decided that it would be criminalized if the Turkish intention of genocide against the Armenians is questioned. (cf. Hofbauer 2011, 121)

In Switzerland, a guilty verdict was also imposed in 2007 because a Turkish-Kurdish migrant had questioned the genocide and called it an "imperialist propaganda lie". (Hofbauer 2011, 233) The irony of history is that for a long time in Turkey the opposite assertion was forbidden. Because of doubts about the massacre in Srebrenica, Bosnia, two journalists were convicted in Switzerland in 2010. (cf. Hofbauer 2011, 234-239)

In any case, the legislator has reacted to the new developments and tried to regulate and control the published opinion. However, the aim is often overstepped and, under the pretext of taking action against illegal contents, a restriction of freedom of expression and freedom of the press is accepted.

There is not only an increased effort to censor the content of grassroots journalists. Restrictions are also caused by new copyright policies, so the use of images, music or videos can be expensive.

New laws are passed in several countries to ban network anonymity. In Austria, an obligation to identify oneself on the net is currently being adopted, obliging social media operators to store precise data on all bloggers, including their address and name.

This is to be ensured by software that automatically provides information about the users when logging in to social media or online forums. Mobile phone numbers are matched with names and addresses. Data protectors and the political opposition are warning of these new forms of control, while the government insists on the measures to be implemented by September 2020. (Standard editorial office 2019)

Conclusion

The preceding lines made it clear that today's spread of participatory journalism is primarily related to the Internet and social media. Digital development opens up new possibilities for the emergence of alternative media that can be published with little money and relatively little effort.

But although the latest events can be spread to all parts of the world in fractions of a second, we as humanity are not necessarily better informed and have not become wiser. The over- and disinformation cover up the possibility to filter from the many messages we receive every day. For this problem, it does not matter if it is official information or alternative basic journalistic news.

The Net is a fascinating new world, but it is also disturbing due to its acceleration. Somehow one is constantly given the feeling to miss something or to publish even more outdated news.

In fact, however, the increase in lay journalism has already led to a process of media democratization. Unfortunately, this process has also been used by anti-democratic forces that have successfully fought for a social regression. The spread of lay journalism is also associated with dangers that have not only led to greater democratization, but in some cases also to a greater trivialization of the media.

The legislator reacts as always and beats around. The collateral damage is considerable: the regulation and control of the net could lead to new forms of censorship where the child is thrown out with the bathwater. In the longer term, however, it will not be possible to stop citizen journalism. The form of

journalism, where experts and specialists had a monopoly over the published opinion, seems to be really over.

The criteria that apply to so-called quality journalism can also be transferred to citizen journalism. Just as there will still be boulevards and trash journals in the future, the net will continue to be clogged by so-called hate postings, ideological spam, propaganda, conspiracy theories and fake news.

We know this from the traditional media landscape. Thousands of magazines and channels do not always mean a greater diversity of opinion. So also the widespread citizen journalism does not mean that every blogger really has something to say. Regardless of whether someone is a layperson or a trained professional communications scientist, a journalist usually only reproduces what he or she has previously heard in other media. Thus the poor quality of the traditional media is transferred to the new participative projects.

And just as in the analogue media landscape, amateur journalism also shows that qualitative media are rarely among the most successful.

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