

Citizen Journalism Incompatable With Human Nature

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Abstract

Citizen journalism, a rapidly growing concept based on random individuals actively taking part in reporting news, violates the basics of news literacy those have been thought in journalism schools for decades.

Citizen journalists lacking of objectivity and journalistic ethics lead to countless inaccurate, biased and subjective reporting done by people who either want to have a little “fun”, intent to cause damage, jump the gun or seeking conspiracy theories.

However, what makes citizen journalism dangerous is not only the journalism done wrong but also the human nature that fail processing information thoroughly; our brain, as the result of evolution, leading us to seek for bad news, our instant belief in information we gather is correct until something more convincing challenges that particular knowledge and the way we collect information not to enlighten ourselves but to confirm what we think we know is true.

Keywords: *Citizen Journalism, News Literacy, Reporting, Information Process, Internet, Ethic*

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Vatandaş Gazeteciliđi İnsan Doğası ile Uyuşmazlık

Özet

Sıradan internet kullanıcılarının haber sunumunda aktif rol almasına dayanan vatandaş gazeteciliđi hızla büyümekle beraber, üniversitelerde yıllar boyunca öğretilen temel gazetecilik kavramlarını da ihlal etmektedir.

Son birkaç yılda, kendine “eğlence” arayan, zarar vermek isteyen, erken davranan ya da komplo teorilerine kaptıran sayısız vatandaş tarafından ortaya konulmuş, habercilik etiğinden yoksun, hatalı, taraflı ve subjektif pek çok çalışmaya tanık olduk.

Ancak vatandaş gazeteciliđini tehlikeli kılan yalnızca hatalı yapılan habercilik değil, bir o kadar da bilgiyi doğru işlemekte başarısız olan insan doğasıdır; evrimin sonucu olarak kötü haberlere öncelik veren beynimiz, yeni bir bilgiye ulaşana kadar bildiğimizin doğruluđuna olan inancımız, kendimizi geliştirecek bilgidense, inandığımızı doğrulayacak bilgiye yönelişimiz...

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Vatandaş Gazeteciliđi, Habercilik, Bilgi Edinme ve İşleme, İnternet, Etik*

News Literacy, Citizen Journalism & Human Nature

The citizen journalism is a concept that is based on public citizens actively participating in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. It is also known as open source journalism, distributed journalism, public journalism, participatory journalism, street journalism, user-generated content and so on.

Citizen journalism is a rapidly growing concept basically due to two reasons; (1) it can be done by anyone who owns any of the 2 billion smartphones in the world and (2) it is supported even by the world's largest media corporations because user generated content costs from nothing to pennies compared to the solid news reporting.

We have witnessed citizen journalism playing crucial role in news reporting in the past few years. In 2011, the group of citizen journalists reporting Occupy Wall Street movement inspired protests in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Chicago and many other places in less than 4 weeks. The same year, contributions of participants and witnesses towards reporting the Arab Spring uprising have changed the course of history. In 2013, when violent outbreaks were reported in over 60 Turkish cities, mainstream media had no clue what the protests were about. The deeper dissatisfaction was revealed via videos, pictures and more published by citizen journalists.³

That being said, my intention with this particular assignment is not to cherish the concept of citizen journalism but to make a contradictory statement. Considering audience reporting itself as a type of journalism could not go any further than an insult to news literacy since it violates all the basics of reporting. However, content creation is only the half of what makes citizen journalism dangerous. The other

³ *"Is Citizen Journalism Good For News Media? - Facts & Infographic." Mapsofworld.com. Web.*

half consists of the reasons that cause human nature to fail processing information flawlessly.

News Literacy 101: Basics of Solid Journalism

It is essential to know the foundation of news literacy and what it actually takes to become a real journalist so we can make sense of the downsides of the citizen journalism that is done by majorly the people who are lacking of necessary education and experience.

There are three major check points in news reporting that journalists must be aware of; balance, fairness and bias. **Balance** is the equality between the totals of the two (or more) sides of the account. It is more of a technical, a quantitative measurement. **Fairness** is marked by impartiality and honesty. Every journalist has to be free from self-interest, prejudice or favoritism being fair to the evidence. **Bias** is a predisposition that distorts journalists' ability to fairly weigh the evidence and prevents them from reaching a fair or accurate judgment. It is a pattern of unfairness.

Journalists are expected to be loyal to the truth. Like scientists, they do not believe in absolute truth; truth is provisional, it changes over time. Like the scientific method, the journalistic process of verification relies on a system of sorting and testing information. It starts with gathering and followed by assessing and weighting the evidence.

The reliability of the source is another key point of fact checking. Who exactly is this source? How would this source know? What he/she doesn't know? Does anyone else say so? Is it verified fact or assertion? What is her/his self-interest?

There are so many questions to be answered by the journalists themselves making sure that the evidence was gathered from the source with no contingency of misleading.⁴²

“The public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything. Except what is worth knowing. Journalism, conscious of this and having tradesman-like habits, supplies their demands.”

- Oscar Wilde

Cons of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism has a greater margin with factual inaccuracies diluting reporting standards mentioned above. Objective news reporting is an ideal whose aim is to tell a story as it is and allow the audience to make their own judgement. On the contrary, citizen journalists lacking of objectivity and journalistic ethics lead to biased or subjective reporting. Objective reporting cannot be concluded without knowing the stories behind the scenes that underlie the official news. However, immediacy of citizen journalism prevents participants from following the truth. Hence, sensationalism and rumors become inevitable with false reports often going viral. Audience that is misled on a particular subject due to lack of editorial controls could harm public health via the dangerous potential it possesses of riots or panic. Yet, citizen journalists cannot be hold responsible for compromising public or individual security once they put others at risk.

Citizen Journalism Gone Bad

Citizen journalism has been marred by countless inaccurate reporting done by people who either want to have a little “fun”, intent to cause damage, jump the gun or seeking conspiracy theories;

⁴ “Glossary: Key News Literacy Terms.” Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook University School of Journalism. Stony Brook, NY. 2012.

Fake Reports

Weather reports are perhaps the most innocent kind of fake journalism even though they cause panic or even economic downturns. During the Hurricane Sandy for instance, the New York Stock Exchange had



Floating Statue of Liberty is actually a scene from
the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*

been supposedly flooded. While the hurricane itself did cause some serious damage, fake images of the approaching storm had even greater psychological affects as citizen journalists shared and retweeted what turned out to be photoshopped images.

Citizen Journalistic behavior has gotten even more confusing when 16-year-old girl Kara Alongi reported her own kidnapping on Twitter which was retweeted by over 3,400 people. Alongi's tweet turned out to be a fake call once she was found safe by the police officers.

Then of course, there have been so many fake reports of celebrity pass aways including the Oscar winning actor Morgan Freeman which went viral on Facebook. Even the page dedicated to him as a tribute by his fans accrued over a million likes.

Similar incident occurred in 2008 on a greater level when a citizen journalist reported the supposed heart attack suffered by Apple's former CEO Steve Jobs on CNN's citizen journalism site, iReport.

Steve Jobs was rushed to the ER just a few hours ago after suffering a major heart attack. I have an insider who tells me that paramedics were called after Steve claimed to be suffering from severe chest pains and shortness of breath. My source has opted to remain anonymous, but he is quite reliable. I haven't seen anything about this anywhere else yet, and as of right now, I have no further information, so I thought this would be a good place to start. If anyone else has more information, please share it.

- Citizen Journalist on CNN's iReport

Although the rumor which spread like wildfire across the internet was denied immediately by the company, Apple stocks fell 10% in 10 minutes. Even The Security and Exchange Commission's (SEC) enforcement unit started an investigation to determine whether the posting was intended to push down Apple's stock price.

Deadly Accusations

On April 2013, two bombs went off near the finish line during the Boston Marathon. Three days later, grainy photos of two male suspects aired on TV. With its 70 million members, Reddit community began hunting for suspects online, trying to solve the mystery from computer chairs. In less than 24-hours, a name Sunil

Tripathi spread all over the Internet as the face of one of the two Boston Marathon Bombing suspects.

Tripathi was the over a month missing 22-year-old Brown University student. His family had been cooperating with Brown University and FBI to find him for almost 8 weeks. Even a Facebook page called Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi was created in case Sunil logged online. There he'd find messages from loved ones praying for his safe return. But he never did. He wasn't guilty of Boston Marathon Bombing either. As his family would soon find out, he was dead.

A user stumbled upon the Tripathi family's Facebook page copied Sunil's photo, pasted it next to a photo of the youngest bombing suspect who later on turned out to be Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and shared it on Reddit along with the information about the missing Brown University student. From there, misinformation and speculation had gone out of control.

At midnight, BuzzFeed Senior Writer Erik Malinowski tweeted, "FYI: A Facebook group dedicated to finding Sunil Tripathi, the missing Brown student, was deleted this evening." About 300 users retweeted the post including Perez Hilton, sending Sunil's name to his 6 million followers. Later on, another BuzzFeed journalist Andrew Kaczynski sent out the police-scanner misinformation to his 90,000 followers stating, "Wow Reddit was right about the missing Brown student per the police scanner. Suspect identified as Sunil Tripathi." Yet, it was sealed in the digital world that Sunil Tripathi was one of the suspects, minutes later @YourAnonNews, a Twitter news feed connected to the hacker collective Anonymous, tweeted out Tripathi's name to the hundreds of thousands followers. And it all started with the audience reporting on Reddit. Between 3:00 and 4:15 AM that night, Sunil's sister was called 58 times. The family received hundreds of threatening and anti-Islamic messages even though they are not

Muslim. Groups that had been working to find the missing son shied away, thinking he might still be one of the Boston bombers. Including Reddit, journalists who jumped to conclusion and fed the rumor later apologized to the family on the phone, in tweets or in articles. Former GM at Reddit wrote on the official company blog that he hoped the lessons learned from Sunil Tripathi case would help make the online community more sensitive in the future.⁵³

Conspiracy Theories

From Obama's so called weather weapon usage to distract the country from Washington scandals, to the arguably staged moon landing of the Apollo astronauts, conspiracy theories may be the most frequent discussion topics to spot in digital world. Though, the most relevant example could perhaps be the anonymous reporter on supposedly hidden agenda of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) known as Fuat Avni.

Following the blackout in Istanbul on March 2015 for instance, Fuat Avni tweeted claiming that it was one of the three scheduled rehearsals of the major blackout planned for the Election Day by the ruling party. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's order for the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency (BDDK) to turn one of the largest banks in Turkey which also funds the major opposing party CHP to the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) is another allegation made by Fuat Avni. From supporting terrorist group ISIS to constitutional violations, there are no limits to his (since Fuat is a masculine name) accusations.

I am in no such position to decide whether he is correct in each and every claim he has been making or not. On the other hand, even though I strongly support transparent government, the citizen

⁵ Shontell, Alyson. "What It's Like When Reddit Wrongly Accuses Your Loved One Of Murder?" *Business Insider*. Business Insider, Inc, July 26, 2013. Web.

journalism role that Fuat Avni has been taking is against every aspect of solid news reporting, from balance, fairness and bias to the steps of the verification process. Ironically, the same goes for the predictions on the identity of Fuat Avni as well.

P.S. A good comparison to Fuat Avni could be WikiLeaks. Quite a similar role has been taken by the foundation as well. What makes the difference is that WikiLeaks makes sure they pass through the checkpoints of news literacy before reporting any story.

It is essential to keep in mind that I make judgments against citizen journalism under the assumption of the media groups are loyal to the foundation of the news literacy. Obviously that is not the case since they are either owned or pressured by the political groups. This means politicians are not playing by the rules either. When this becomes the case, we have witnessed so many pros of the citizen journalism that has done by the people who respects the concept.

I particularly chose building the first half of my paper on the cons of citizen journalism providing comparison with original journalism and examples on how could it go wrong. However, a study on the obvious would be dull. My purpose for the second part is digging deeper and supporting my complete argument which is human nature is what makes citizen journalism dangerous.

Blame It On Your Brain

You are thinking you do not believe all the information you receive so what you believe in must be true. If it was not, you would have corrected yourself. Wouldn't you? Actually, you wouldn't.

Negative Bias

This is the term for our collective hunger to hear, watch, listen and remember bad news. The question is why are we attracted to negative bias?

Because nothing is more fatal to the living species than survival, all of our visual and auditory data is funneled into the temporal lobe of our brain named Amygdala. It is our danger detector; an early warning system. The Amygdala combs through all of the sensory input looking for any kind of danger. It was a tiger in the bushes back then; it is the bad news on media today. The Amygdala calls our attention to negative stories which makes the majority of the news content.

If it bleeds, it leads.

Confirmation Bias

Vladeis Krebs of Orgnet analyzed the purchasing trends on Amazon.com during the 2008 presidential election in the United States.⁶ Results show that people buying books positively portraying President Obama were the same people who already support him. On the contrary, people who already disliked him were the ones buying books painting him in a negative light. In other words, people weren't buying books for the information but for the confirmation.

~~“People like to be told what they already know. Remember that. They get uncomfortable when you tell them new things. New things aren't what they expect. They like to know that, say; a dog will bite a man. That is what dogs do. They don't want to know that man bites a dog,~~

⁶ Krebs, Vladeis. “New Political Patterns.” Orgnet.com. 2008. Web.

because the world is not supposed to happen like that. In short, what people think they want is news, but what they really crave is olds. Not news but olds, telling people that what they think they already know is true.”

*- Terry Pratchett through the character Lord Vetinari
from his novel, “The Truth”*

An Ohio State study from 2009 shows people spend 36% more time reading an essay if it aligns with their opinion.⁷ Which means we are not thoroughly seeking information to widen our perspective, we are in fact looking for support to prove what we think we already know is true.

Truth Bias

FBI’s former Behavioral Analyst John R. Schafer states, “People want to believe others despite evidence to the contrary” explaining the phenomenon referred to as truth bias. Believing others in general is a norm allowing society and commerce to run efficiently. In absence of truth bias, we would have to spend an inordinate amount of time checking information provided by others. “Faced with minor discrepancies in a story,” says ex-FBI agent Schafer, “people tend to excuse away inconsistencies because they want to believe the person who is telling the story” providing liars with an advantage. Furthermore, the effect of truth bias is stronger if the person telling the story is a close friend, a spouse or our children.⁸

Descartes vs. Spinoza

The argument on whether belief is an automatic reaction or an extra effort has been around over 400 years. On the one hand, the French philosopher, mathematician and physicist René Descartes argued that

⁷ McRaney, David. "Confirmation Bias." *Youarenotsosmart.com*. June 23, 2010. Web.

⁸ Schafer, Jack. "Truth Bias: A Psychological Cloak for Deception." *Psychology Today*. June 26, 2013. Web.

understanding and believing are two separate processes. First, people take in some information by paying attention to it and then they decide either believing or disbelieving it. On the other hand, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza argues that the very act of understanding information is believing it. According to Spinoza, we may be able to change our minds afterwards if we come across evidence to the contrary. Until that time, we believe everything.

Daniel Gilbert, psychology professor at Harvard University, put these two theories head-to-head in a series of experiments. In a classic social psychology experiment, 71 participants provided with statements about a robbery before sentencing the robber to years in prison. Some of the statements such as “robber had a gun” were designed to make the crime seem worse and others, “robber had starving children to feed” for instance, to make the case less serious. Participants were told only the statements displayed in green were true while others displayed in red were false. The clever bit is that half of the participants were purposefully distracted while reading the false statements.

In theory, if Spinoza was correct then those who were distracted while reading the false statements wouldn't have time to process the additional fact that the statement was written in red, consequently would be influenced by it in the jail term they gave to the criminal. On the other hand, if Descartes was right then the distraction would make no difference as participants wouldn't have time to believe or not believe the false statements so they wouldn't make any difference to the jail term.

The results showed that when the false statements made the crime seem much worse rather than less serious, the participants who were interrupted gave the criminals almost twice as long in prison time. By contrast, the group in which participants hadn't been interrupted

managed to ignore the false statements. Thus, there was no significant difference between jail terms depending on whether false statements made the crime seem worse or less serious.

False statements made crime...	Not Interrupted	Interrupted
...less serious	6.03 Years	5.83 Years
...more serious	7.03 Years	11.15 Years

This meant that only when given time to think about, people picked up the clues and realizes false statements were actually false. Without time for reflection, people simply believed what they read. Believing is not a two-stage process involving first understanding then believing. Instead, understanding is believing. A fraction of a second after reading, people believe in the information they receive until some other critical faculty kicks in to change their mind.⁹

As a result, cons of citizen journalism are not only resulting from the side that creates the content but also the side that absorbs that content. Part of our brain, as the result of evolution, leads us to seek for bad news. What is worse is that we believe in the information from the moment we gather it until something more convincing challenges that particular knowledge. That is not easy either since we are not looking for information to enlighten ourselves but to confirm what we think we know is true. Hence, journalism has to sincerely be careful telling a story due to human nature and citizen journalism is not helping it at all.

⁹ Dean, Jeremy. "Why You Can't Help Believing Everything You Read?" PsyBlog. Spring.org.uk. Web.

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