Critical Approaches to Citizen Journalism

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Abstract

Citizen journalism (CJ) on social media platforms has been seen as a means whereby the ordinary citizen can obtain and disseminate information and exchange views with a certain degree of freedom. This is especially the case in countries like Saudi Arabia, where the traditional media is highly regulated and, to some extent, acts as a mouthpiece for the government. However, criticisms have been directed to CJ, with some authors arguing that it may not be the democratizing force that some claim it to be. This paper explores these criticisms with reference to CJ in the Arab context, in particular in relation to the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring; and in the light of a study of Saudi citizen journalism on Twitter, specifically on hashtags that addressed serious economic issues of concern to citizens in the KSA, such as the controversial tax on unused land. The paper concludes by suggesting that CJ is a complex phenomenon which needs to be considered in the specific context in which it appears so that the socio-cultural, political and economic factors that influence it are fully understood and a proper assessment be made of the impact that it has.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism • Social media • Populism in citizen journalism

Introduction

Social Media as an Alternative Platform for News, Information, and Debate

The power of digital technology enables modern social media platforms to form a global structure in which all users, who may passive social media users, bloggers, vloggers, or be traditional correspondents are all potentially interconnected; this interconnectivity enables users to follow so called "nodes" of connectivity when checking information [1] Former journalist Andy Carvin leveraged these social media inter-connections to source information for a report on the Arab Spring [2] He accomplished this by asking his Millions Twitter followers to validate the information he gathered; he was also able to verify accounts associated 2 with traditional news platforms, work with influential bloggers, and obtain information from non-government organisations that were involved Carvin's activities demonstrate that citizen journalists are not utilising social media simply to obtain news, but also to promote and divulge the obtained information. However, in spite of this system of cross-checking, the quality of CJ is still in question and there are a number of serious criticisms of CJ that need to be addressed if its role in serving the public interest is to be properly assessed. [2] noted that social media were of central importance in how the Arab Spring was reported, and that they made it easier to understand its impact from the point of view of various Arab states; however, due to information spreading quickly during the course of a news event that develops rapidly, the situation has become rather complicated. This new type of journalism (as adopted by Carvin) easily crowd-sources information from an array of social media platforms (e.g. YouTube and Facebook); however, acquiring information this way may well exaggerate or misrepresent the information provided and received, potentially resulting in a distorted view of Arab nations [2]. According to Khondker (2011), several Arab online people, when writing online show little to no restraint; and, indeed, several citizen journalists tend to disrupt ethical standards or exaggerate stories, in the absence of correct gatekeeping. Jackson (2019) also indicates that there is confusion regarding who should be referred to as a "journalist", since anyone can publish news content on

social media. Furthermore, most citizen journalists do not adhere to the standards of quality upheld by traditional news outlets, probably because they have little understanding of the concept of what constitutes worthy news [3]. Because there is a high degree of plagiarism in the contents of citizen journalism (CJ) [4], and because citizen journalists are not as organized and pragmatic as those working for the traditional media, their work is seen as less credible. There have also been numerous cases whereby citizen journalists were found to have uploaded unethical or highly biased material and stories. Citizen journalists have also been known to exaggerate their reports, due to malicious intent or to ignorance, in a manner which, as Johnston (2015) claims, transgresses professional and ethical standards. Cammaerts (2008), who believes that there is a "dark side" to the naïve view of CJ as a tool for equality and the democratization of communication, highlights five problematic aspects of CJ. Of 3 these, three are structural (colonization by the market; censorship by states, organizations, and industries; and appropriation by political and cultural elites) and two occur at the individual level: social control enforced by citizens, or by antidemocratic voices. These problems were addressed in Almutarie (2019) in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with licensed professional Saudi journalists, Saudi citizen journalists, and public figures on Twitter who are famous on Twitter and constituted the main voices in debates on economic issues that were seen as crucial on social media, in order to assess the impact of Twitter on news production and its reception in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) [5]. Regarding state censorship, Cammaerts (2008) notes that Saudi Arabia is among those non-democratic countries whose government monitors the contents that are shared online, which are all contents that are shared online are thought to be a threat. The investigation of Almutarie (2019) into the use of Twitter by Saudis to address economic issues more freely than was possible in the traditional media revealed that the main danger of using Twitter in such a way was the spreading of fake news and rumour-mongering, as accuracy of information on these posts was seen as paramount. These posts were perceived as serving the public interest by enabling public debates and the exchange of information about crucial economic issues that affected the livelihoods of Saudi citizens. However, Cammaerts (2008) notes that, although new technologies are usually heralded as forces for democratization, this is not necessarily always the case, as social media (social media) do make resistance possible but exists in a "twilight zone" between public and private matters. Consequently, in Cammaerts's view, citizen journalists are vulnerable against repressive states and online abuse, and one strategy for avoiding this is self-censorship. Therefore, when considering the issues of censorship in a specific context such as the KSA, it is important to investigate the role played by self-censorship in the light of the religious and social taboos of Saudi society. Although Temple (2013) concentrates on CJ in the West, he addresses the globally-relevant issue of whether CJ empowers

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citizens, and concludes that although it has not achieved this function of empowerment yet, it does have the potential to, and at the very least that the increase in audience participation has led to a better 4 understanding of journalism and to higher levels of media literacy. He subscribes to the definition of journalism by McNair (1998) and identifies three key elements that define it: truth, newness, and authorship. Temple notes that CJ is hardly new or restricted to online media, as there are plenty of instances from the past when "ordinary citizens" published commentaries or accounts of events in the form of pamphlets and journals. Such CJ also has a long history of being eradicated by powerful elites who either prosecute this type of journalism or supplant it with less radical mainstream media. For these reasons, Temple is skeptical about the idea that social media can provide a platform for the "return of radical, alternative and influential local journalism" in spite of the potential that digital platforms seem to have (2013). He also notes that traditional media are "colonizing" digital platforms used by citizen journalists, that some governments act to limit radical sites and content, and that there is concern about the quality of CJ, with "professional journalists regarding user participation with suspicion and its filtering, editing and moderating as essential to preserve their traditional ethics and news values" (2013). The study by Almutarie (2020) revealed that there was a major concern among Saudi citizen that the information purported by CJ on important issues (such as the national economy) needs to be credible, and several interviewees had suggestions as to how this might be achieved. The professional journalists interviewed believed that CJ should be under the aegis of the Saud Journalists Association, which was formed by the Saudi government in 2004, whereas the columnists and public figures generally favored regulation from a non-governmental organization that could monitor content and had the power to penalize citizen journalists who spread fake news. The desire for CJ to be closely monitored suggests that the empowerment of citizens is felt as less of a priority than the risk of spreading disinformation. Temple (2013) also expressed the concern that citizen journalists do not represent all strata of society and are often highly educated or trained in journalism. This was indeed shown to be the case in the study by Almutarie, which looked at CJ produced on Twitter by economics experts. However, as Temple notes, the fact that audiences can interact with citizen journalists and create content themselves does constitute a form of empowerment.

Populism in Citizen Journalism

Populist citizen journalism is a phenomenon through which the logic of populist media may be analyzed. It occurs when media institutions tolerate populist messages from their audiences, often in the form of comments on their media channels [6]. Aalberg et al. (2016) believe this tolerance to be hypocritical, as, while media organizations and institutions commonly ban instances of populism at the editorial level, they enable its dissemination (and the dissemination of racist conversations) within their blogosphere, possibly to increase their channel's viewership and the profits from associated online adverts. The network media logic suggests that the connection between populist leaders in citizen journalism and their followers operates without intermediaries. Hence, new content is free from filtration by journalists or gatekeepers [6]. The online media environment is conducive to the rotation of traditional opinion leaders, thereby facilitating the public's perception of citizen journalism as a one-step movement of communication [7]. Similarly, the horizontal yet pervasive nature of citizen journalism facilitates a wide circulation of populist material with potentially significant impacts. This form of viral diffusion, even with various restrictions in the echo-chamber environment in which political opinions are substantiated and amplified, creates a community which shares the same belief system, which is later used to determine consecutive media content [6] Although the income obtained from the KSA's land tax (commonly referred to as the "white lands tax") is earmarked for development projects, some Saudi citizen journalists have dismissed it as a way of controlling market forces and collecting revenue [7-8]. Other citizen journalists consider it to be beneficial to urban development, because of the rise in regulations about using land efficiently and planning sustainably. However, research suggests that this would necessitate investment by shareholders from sectors other than

urban development. [9]. Populist citizen journalists writing about the "white lands tax omitted mentioning other significant market inefficiencies, such as share prices fluctuating dramatically in response to announcements in the media. As a result, citizens were led to believe that the white land tax would only benefit the development and real estate organizations, since the KSA was likely to experience a major rise in demand for development very shortly. Such one-sided news prompted many landowners to sell 6 their land to developers soon after the land tax was enacted, in order to avoid having to pay the tax [10].Bullock (2010) believes that populism plays an important role in Arab politics, even though the Saudi traditional press regards populist citizen journalism as unsophisticated and reliant on the emotional and didactic tone of Arab politics; the only references made to populism are to use it as an insult against opposing political parties and aimed at undermining their future plans [6].

Techno-Sceptic Viewpoints

Many researchers think that citizen journalists are likely to face unique challenges when using social media or blogs [11], as it is difficult to verify any useful social media post without invoking experts; this may increase the probability that false information is published. This problem notwithstanding, many organisations exist in the Arab world that can support best practices by offering advice and professional coaching. An example of such an organisation is the Aswat digital platform, which citizen journalists in the Middle East can access and which provides analyses, verified dialogues, and informed opinions about current events. In this sense, Arab nations have made progress in making their citizen journalists better trained and more responsive to the need of their audiences for transparency on social media [12].Digital information can be easily manipulated, and this poses another significant challenge. Jackson (2019) suggests that currently there are authoritarian governments and secret services that intentionally spread false information. Furthermore, research by Nabi (2009) and Naaeke (2011) highlights how the international media focus on violent events in Muslim and Arab nations, much to the annoyance of many Arab bloggers (in particular those in the KSA), who object to how Muslims and Arabs have become targeted internationally and how this has sometimes resulted in economic boycotts [13]. This indicates that although citizen journalism facilitates user interaction, it has sometimes resulted in serious problems, as any news reporting—regardless of where it comes from or who published it—can significantly influence social and political perspectives [14-15] 7 Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) reviewed studies that explored the role of social media in the Arab Spring, and concluded that social media took a different role in each of the countries involved. They also observed that social media played a different role in each country not so much in terms of what technology was used, but in terms of how that technology was used [16]. In the Gulf States such as the KSA, although there was a lot of activity on social media, protest levels were low [17]. Conversely, the high levels of protest in Tunisia and Egypt came not as a result of the access to social media, but as a result of specific political grievances. It is important, then, to explore the role of social media in the light of a political understanding of the Arab Spring; social media are just a channel of communication, and by itself it is not sufficient to explain unrest—the origin of which is rooted, rather, in hardship, corruption, and repression [18]. Wofsfeld et al. (2012) suggest that a "contextualist approach"—which is to say, an approach that emphasises how political, social, and economic factors affect the role of SM in collective action—must be adopted In the study by Almutarie (2020), the hashtags which are economic issues from 2015-2016 were contextualized by explaining the economic and political context, i.e. the economic crisis in the KSA and the government's response to it, in which CJ on hashtags in the sample arose. Also of crucial importance was the lack of a platform for discussion in the traditional Saudi media, and a need by Saudi citizens to get information about the economic issues that were deeply affecting their lives.

The Emergence of CJ in the Arab World

In the Arab world, CJ first came to prominence in 2003 in the aftermath of the US and UK offensive in Iraq against Sadam Hussein. Hamdy (2009) notes how this conflict prompted various bloggers to provide updates on the

situation—the most prominent of whom was Salam Pax, an Iraqi architect. Increasing numbers of individuals soon took to using blogs as platforms for delivering their opinions on various subjects hitherto considered taboo in Arab society, including sensitive political, social, and economic issues such as human rights, police brutality, and sexual harassment. Examples of citizen journalist blogs included Sabah's Blog, The Arabist, Sandmonkey, Black Iris, Ghalia's Cocktail Blog, and Baheyya. These blogs communicated mostly in English and typified the views of westernised liberals in the region. These citizen journalists used blogs to attract global attention to their cause, lobbying and 8 communicating with like-minded activists. They also acted as alternative media, providing information that their counterparts in the traditional media did not, due to censorship. However, as well as providing a view alternative to that of the traditional media, citizen journalists can also disseminate propaganda, especially during times of crisis. They can attract readers by using powerful visual material such as photographs and videos which can have more impact than text, with social networking sites such as Flicker allowing them to search for and store images or share them with others [19]. Improvements in the technology for writing in Arabic script further increased CJ in the region, as more individuals were able to start blogging in Arabic. Hamdy (2009) argues that this development was influential in widening the reach of citizen journalists to a domestic audience. One notable blog that instigated the wave of blogging in Arabic was Kefaya, a source of the movement, or the platform from which the movement sprouted for change that arose in Egypt after exposing police brutality there. Blogs also provided a platform for debate following the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, in 2005. Hamdy (2009) observes that citizen journalists in the Arab, like their counterparts in developed countries, often fail to regard themselves as journalists and are therefore do not feel bound by the ethical guidelines or press regulations that are applied to professional journalists. According to Hamdy (2009), social media platforms like Twitter provide citizen journalists with ways of discussing social problems and political issues such as the abuse of human rights, allowing them to attract international attention by these means. Ali (2012) notes, however, that in the Arab world, as in some Asian countries, citizen journalists have to deal with internet censorship and religious taboos affecting their activities. The Arab Spring marked an important period in the development of CJ in the Arab region. One of the most prominent features of this series of popular uprisings was the extent to which coverage of these events was dominated by social media and online platforms [20]. Although political and social injustices that had become systemic within the region provided the context for the Arab Spring, online news coverage played a catalytic role in the widespread revolution, with online platforms enabling participants to provide their own perspectives on local events. CJ could be seen as plugging the gap between the state and the traditional media institutions, on 9 one hand, and citizens, on the other. This proved vitally important, as, historically, citizen participation in discussions of political, social, and economic issues had been limited at best [21]. In Egypt, for example, state media outlets simply disseminated propaganda for President Mubarak's regime, so during the Arab Spring citizens used social media like Twitter and Facebook for anti-government campaigning. In Syria, where citizens were publishing news on blogs or Facebook, a website entitled Tahree Syria launched an initiative called "You are the editor", aimed at allowing young citizen journalists to report events online [21]. When citizen journalists used social media to report the Assad regime's killing of members of the opposition, their reports were taken up by mainstream media. In addition, CNN's iReport was used by citizen journalists to report on the latest events in Syria [22]. After analysing over 3 million tweets, Dozens gigabytes of streamed video content on YouTube, and thousands of blog posts generated during the Arab Spring, O'Donnell (2011) concluded that concluded that social media played a central role in shaping political debates at that time, helping to raise expectations that the revolution would be politically successful [23]. Another report, by the US Institute of Peace, focused on the uprisings in Bahrain, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, analysing Bit.ly links (short URLs used in social media like Twitter). It concluded that the political and social injustices created a climate of civil unrest, which culminated into uprisings due to the effect of social media. Associated Foreign Press, 2011. Numerous examples from the Arab

Spring highlight how CJ and reportage are capable of generating a political agenda with the power to influence public opinion and thought. The Arab Spring initiated the mobilization of news and updates using social platforms such as Twitter, and its immediate impact allowed information to spread quickly among citizens. To regulate this phenomenon and create a sense of credibility, the KSA initiated a process of authorization and licenses for journalists producing news or news updates, regardless of whether in print or on social media. Although the Arab Spring was one of the biggest events in recent years in the region, relatively few studies have fully quantified the role that social media played in this event and what this might mean for agenda-setting initiatives in CJ. This is especially of interest given 10 the aftermath of the Arab Spring, aftermath that includes events such as the humanitarian crisis in Syria that came in the wake of events after the revolt against Bashar Assad and the subsequent flight of thousands of refugees [24]. Arab regimes regarded the new internet and satellite technologies that emerged in the early 1990s as a threat to their control over the media, and initially attempted to block technologies [25]. Later, when these technologies spread throughout most parts of the Arab world, these regimes made attempts—which were largely unsuccessful—to impose censorship on them. The new media proved to be much faster than traditional media, as they are not hampered by bureaucratic processes. Platforms such as Twitter meant that ordinary citizens could post information about events as they unfolded. These developments have had a major socio-political impact on the KSA, a country noted for its conservatism [26].

User-Generated Content, Gate-watching, and Participatory Journalism User-Generated Content

The traditional media, such as printed newspapers and TV programs, have to adhere to physical restrictions—like the number of pages in a newspaper, or the duration of a TV program [27].. Consequently, journalists have to select which news are worthy enough to be printed or broadcasted, a process referred to as "gatekeeping" [28]. However, gatekeeping can occur not only at the input stage, when the journalist selects what news stories to write about, but also at the output stage (when editors select from these stories which are to be printed or broadcast) and at the response stage (when the editor chooses which audience responses—if any—to include) (Newman et al., 2014). Bruns (2011) believes that this last stage is not representative of a genuine conversation with the public, because the gatekeeping power is always in the hands of the editors. Bruns also believes that real participatory journalism has only recently emerged, mainly due to two factors: the increase in news channels through online publishing and collaborative models like social media, and the ability of users to connect directly with the people and organisations they are interested in and discuss issues with them and other users. This proliferation of channels and users' commentary on news events leads to a practice referred to as 11 "gatewatching", whereby it is the users who keep track of the news. In other words, it is the users themselves who decide which are the most newsworthy issues by monitoring information that passes through their favourite "gates" (i.e. social media platforms) and identifying the information they feel is the most significant and relevant to them [29]. These new "gatewatchers" have established a new type of gate, one that is also used by the media and other users and in which everyone acts as witnesses of current events [28]. This process assumes interesting connotations in non-democratic countries; for example, Gatewatching in Western countries is not seen as a problem, but some authors (like Almaghlooth (2013) think that it might be for countries like Saudi Arabia, where the State and the Royal family closely monitor the press. In the study by Almutarie (2020), citizen journalists expert in economics were able to add to the reports issued by government-controlled traditional media by responding to questions and comments by their followers on Twitter thus arguably serving the public interest more directly. Bruns suggests that: "user-led, crowd-sourced practices of news coverage and news curation which employ gatewatching approaches have often been described, somewhat incorrectly, as 'citizen journalism', [which] appears to imply both that what participants practice here is comparable and equivalent to mainstream industrial journalism in its conventional forms, and that the professional journalists working in

the industry are not also citizens" (2011, p.124). In this study, however, there was indeed a cross-over between citizen journalists and professional journalists who published on social media what they were unable to publish in traditional media outlets. Indeed, [30]. also suggests that there are now "more productive attempts to explore points of connection and cooperation between "professional" and "citizen" journalists, of which there is evidence in the study by Almutarie (2020). Finally, in gatewatching the stories serve as enablers for public discourse. In this sense, the response stage of the gatekeeping process assumes, in gatewatching, a central role (Bruns, 2011). The study by Almutarie (2020) demonstrated that this has been especially important in the Saudi context, as CJ has responded to the public demand for information, and commentary on central economic issues has granted 12 Saudi citizens a much greater ability to participate and respond than would have been possible in the traditional media.

Participatory Journalism and User-Generated Content

According to Rosenbaum (2011), in Arab countries user-generated content requires citizens to handle a lot of information from a range of sources, in order to locate, sort, verify, and store useful information, and to create a more relevant resource [31]. In view of these activities, user-generated content is often compared to gatewatching, as it encourages public involvement and can be found when information obtained from social media platforms is compiled. However, Liu (2010) notes that there is a lack of research into this phenomenon, in spite of the growing appetite for usergenerated content and the increase in opinion leaders in the KSA. Participatory journalism in the KSA is comprised mainly of blogs created by citizen journalists, many of which, like Arabist.net, often consist of breaking news, analyses, or detailed commentary. In contrast to more traditional kinds of user-generated content, these blogs provide support and the use of feedback-generating systems so that other audience members can add information in the form of Facebook updates or tweets (Almaghlooth, 2013). User-generated content is a way for young people to keep abreast of what is going on with their online communities, as well as the more radical roles played by social media in rallying support and feedback in the KSA during the 2011 Arab revolutions and protests.

Conclusion

A review of critical approaches to citizen journalism in the Arab world reveal that in order to make a critical appraisal of CJ it is important to understand the context in which it occurs. This context changes over time due to the influence of socio-cultural, political, and economic factors. Particular attention needs to be paid to the influence of populism and gatewatching, as well as to censorship that may occur at any stage and level, including citizen journalists self-censoring themselves. Another important consideration is the status of the citizen journalists themselves, and the levels of journalistic professionalism that they are demonstrating. It is recommended that, given the fluid nature of CJ, more research be conducted in other contexts in order obtain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence CJ, and to assess its impact

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