Citizen journalism and the Indian media structure

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Abstract:
The direct participation of audience in journalism through blogging, cellular telephones, social networking sites and so on has drawn much attention and seems to be challenging the hegemony of mainstream media to a certain extent. All around the world, the democratisation of media space is taking place. In India also, common citizens are persistently indulging in voicing the voiceless and bringing into light issues that traditional media frequently ignore. They are seeking to contest the narratives of conventional media, which are largely controlled by corporates and often become the pawn of them, proving that common people are no more mere helpless bystanders. In the times of increasing commercialisation of traditional media content, through citizen journalism, ordinary citizens are trying to provide space to change-oriented content, and gainsay the portrayal of the societal issues of mainstream media. Taking this into account, this paper seeks to present a perspective on how citizen journalists are heading towards making Indian media space democratic and inclusive. This article also focuses on the citizen journalism practice becoming an empowerment tool for the marginalised and its contribution in making media resources and privileges accessible to the suppressed and downtrodden population of the country.

Keywords: Citizen journalism, new media, traditional media, democratisation

Introduction
The increasing penetration of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which are a set of technological tools through which we can manage information in ground-breaking ways, in the everyday lives of citizens has profoundly changed the overall existing structure of power and dominance. The most affected by this growing use of ICTs is the institution of media. Within the media, ICT have given birth to ‘new media’. ICTs have made it possible for the citizens to connect to media in new and innovative ways. Social networking sites and mobile phones have contributed significantly in making the media more accessible to common citizens. ICTs have also enabled common people to produce journalism by themselves and this remains a very significant feature of them. This engagement of common citizens in journalism through ICTs has given rise to ‘citizen journalism’.

Citizen journalism has emerged as an alternative form of journalism, which has added a new dimension, and a very intriguing and significant one, to traditional journalism. Since a long time, journalistic practices have remained stagnant (Schudson, 2002). The same type of journalism has been practiced in India and in a significant part of the world, in which audience participation was close to naught. And voices have come out demanding a substantive modification in the customary practices of journalism so that the connection between the media and audience may change – essentially, audience should not remain mere spectators. What the new technologies have done is that they have provided the audience platforms to publish content independently, which has reduced audience’s overall dependence on traditional media and has challenged the longstanding agenda-setting role of conventional media.

The rise of citizen journalism has presented great challenges to the long-established, traditional and institutionalized media practices (Atton, 2003). It is increasingly trying to break down the
traditional norms of distribution of spaces within media houses and the existing relationship between journalists and the media. In addition, the citizen journalism phenomenon has also challenged the way issues are portrayed and covered in Indian media, to a certain extent, which is discussed later in this article. In Indian media, ownership of media houses is becoming a serious concern. Increasingly, Indian media are becoming largely concentrated. Media houses are controlled by few – and majority of them are corporates and politicians (see Newslaundy.com, 2014). On the issue of ‘media ownership’ going in the hands of corporates, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India says that “ownership restrictions on corporates entering the media should be seriously considered” (ENS Economic Bureau, 2014). Also, about Indian media, the renowned journalist P Sainath says, “The Indian media are politically free, but imprisoned by profit” (Ramani, 2011). The monopoly of corporates and politicians is on the verge of making the fourth pillar of the democracy an extremely exclusivist institution – journalists mostly come from elite classes and it is rare to find Dalits or other backward classes as the head or be in the decision-making body of a media outlet. Also, they are in the process of completely shutting down their doors for the poor and deprived of the country. In context of the above-mentioned perspective, this paper is an endeavour to explore the possibilities of democratisation in Indian media which day by day is becoming the captive of a few. This article is also an attempt to explore some of the main challenges that citizen journalism has presented to the traditional media in India. An effort is being made through this article to comprehend how citizen journalism is increasing people’s participation in the media and how it is increasingly empowering common citizens to seriously challenge the existing structure of media in India. Through focussing on these perspectives, the focus, though, is entirely on understanding the possibilities as to how citizen journalism is heading towards making Indian mediaspace more democratic.

Citizen Journalism in India
Historically, India has been the home of a great and vibrant press and has produced journalists of the likes of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi. Newspapers and magazines were used as tools in the days of freedom struggle to oppose the British colonialism and support the struggle for independent India. Now, with new technologies coming, press is not the only player in Indian journalism. Radio, TV and Internet have joined the Indian media landscape and have made it more diverse and strong. The latest and quickly spreading media technology is, however, Internet. Internet usage in the country is yet to catch up with Western levels, an exponential growth is being registered. According to the latest findings of Internet and Mobile Association of India, internet usage is up by 32% from October 2013 to October 2014, that is the country has approximately 278 million internet users (IAMAI, 2014). All of them are certainly not exploiting the opportunities offered by internet, a good number of people are using the platform to debate issues and express their view as well as to highlight issues that are normally sidelined by mainstream media. The first instance of intensive ICTs-based citizen journalism, however, came into light in India during the ceaseless raining of July 2005 in Mumbai. In the time of incapacitating rains, people recorded videos and sent out messages to news websites and TV channels. Rediff.com became the prominent news website to which people sent information regarding the torrential rain. Footages recorded by citizens were also broadcast on TV channels like AajTak and STAR News. Next year, in 2006, the first citizen journalism website, Merinews, came into existence which boasts “Power to the People” as its gaol. Since then, some more citizen web portals have been started, like MyNews, The Viewspaper, Inewss, and several others.
Some TV channels have also initiated broadcasting citizen-journalism-based shows. CNN-IBN, a major Indian English television news channel, devotes an entire show, The Citizen Journalist Show, to citizen journalism, in which common citizen from distant part of India are seen with their news reports and videos. A similar type of program named ‘Speak Out India’ is also carried by another English news channel, NewsX. And these programs mostly cover issues that would have not made into mainstream media had these citizen journalists not addressed and highlighted them.

**Citizen journalism and democratisation of Indian media**

Citizen journalism is based on the premise that every citizen is a journalist. Since this form of journalism normally happens outside the conventional media institutions, common citizens execute the task of collection and dissemination of information. And some consider those common citizens as ‘non-professional’ journalists who were audience of the traditional media so far (Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009; Quinn & Lamble, 2007). These non-professionals, however, are often credited with putting relevant stories on a platform from where a vast number of audiences can know about that. But what forced or encouraged the people who used to consume news, participate in producing news? Bowman and Willis (2003) say that “The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.” And Indian media, in the few years, have witnessed a considerable growth of citizen-generated content, which continuously offer a perspective different from the increasing thematic and homogenous content of traditional media – coming from different corners and sources, wide ranging in scope, bringing reliable and germane information, reporting the problems of poor and marginalised and resulting in bringing, at times, positive changes. To describe these in more detail, it is necessary to discuss some success stories and initiatives of citizen journalism. Let’s look at the three radical and prominent examples, though there are many more citizen journalism platforms that are thriving in the country.

**The exciting journey of ‘CGNetSwara’**

Launched in February 2010 by ShubhranshuChoudhary, a former BBC journalist, the CGNSwara project was a distinct initiative as it was a voice-based platform, accessible via phone. This operates in a way that to submit a news story, the Swara number has to be dialled. The call is instantaneously returned on that number to record the report. To listen to the content available on the Swara website, which is absolutely free for everyone, again the Swara number has to be dialled. The forum also has a website and the content is also posted there.

Initially, Swara was limited to the state of Chattisgarh and was known as Chattisgarh Net Swara. Five years down the line, ‘Chattisgarh Net Swara’ has been rechristened as ‘CGNetSwara’ and the platform is now also available in the Central Gondwana region of India which includes the state of Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. And this platform has been widely used by the alienated population to voice their grievances. A cursory look at the website content explicitly indicates the heavy number of day-to-day problems of common people, as well as atrocities committed on them by authorities, which would have gone unnoticed if this forum was not available. Over time, this platform has also made some influences and has brought some positive changes. Like, a report against a forestry officer on Swara culminated into initiation of an enquiry against him which ultimately found the officer guilty.

Currently, the CGNetSwara team is looking out at the possibilities of making this forum a pan-India one.

**The ‘Muktapeeth’ experiment**

Muktapeeth is a weekly supplement of the regional daily of Sakal, headquartered in Pune, India, and is published in Marathi. Unlike the supplements of other newspaper, Sakal did a new experiment...
and decided to depend on readers or common citizens for the generation of content of Muktapeeth. This has resulted into encouraging citizen-generated content and providing them a platform to express their views on issues that concern them. And this weekly got incredible response and has emerged as a success. This experiment of Sakal powerfully connects the newspaper to its readers, and encourages common citizens to participate in a dialogue, and has come out as a voice for the problems of them, writes Khamkar (2008) in his study of Muktapeeth. Khamkar (2008) also quotes a lady in his paper who casually said a government officer that she will write about the delay he is deliberately making in processing her work in Muktapeeth. And this resulted into the officer swiftly doing her work.

**PARI (People’s Archive of Rural India)**

Launched in December 2014, PARI is the brainchild of the well-known journalist and media critic PalagummiSainath. Though, it’s a new entrant, PARI has attracted a lot of attention, perhaps because of it being entirely devoted to rural India, the first of its kind in Indian media. It boasts itself as a ‘living journal and an archive’ of the rural India. The site is free to access and invites common citizens to ‘write, shoot, report’ about the ‘everyday life of everyday people’. The objective is to report stories of those who are entirely put aside by traditional media. Though professional people from different backgrounds have helped in setting this platform and contribute to run this website, the website greatly encourages common citizens to capture stories of rural India and comes as an easy and convenient platform for them, as PARI has no restrictions and accepts accounts in all formats – photographs, write-ups, videos, audios.

The difference between citizen journalism and conventional journalism is of structure and motive. While traditional journalism has increasingly become a business, citizen journalism is engaging and providing voice to the voiceless. Also, conventional journalism is about being selective and making money, whereas citizen journalism is about being impartial and appreciating common welfare. What is also common in the above-mentioned examples is that they give a perspective on how these platforms capture the stories of the heart of India, that is rural India, which is systemically being ignored by conventional media.

The point to underscore here, however, is that platforms like PARI, Muktapeeth and CGNetSwaraj are open to everyone, unlike the conventional media. To understand the state of the functioning of media, their reactions to collective issues and their rapport with people should be examined earnestly. On both grounds, Indian media is facing serious difficulties. A clear tendency to disregard democratic representation of people can easily be found in their content. And their ownership, and the existing trend in media ownership, also does not evoke any indication of a democratic model. On the contrary, the citizen journalism approach seeks to provide space to the marginalised and aims at being sensitive to the issues and requirements of them. The participation of common citizens in the generation of media content ensures that everything is not presented to the audience through the eyes of a few.

**Challenges and Limitations**

With all the good and fascinating characteristics of citizen journalism noted, it is also significant to underline that citizen journalism has its limitations, and before it can take a big stride, it will have to tackle several challenges. Major among them is the limited internet access available to people. This has the potential to hamper and limit the reach of citizen journalism since internet plays a vital role in the dissemination of citizen news reports. In India, illiteracy is also a major challenge. In the case of citizen journalism, illiteracy affects it in two ways – unable to read or write and unawareness of the functioning and operation of new technologies.
There is also a worry about citizen journalism often involving unethical journalistic practices. This comes from the prevailing perspective that normally citizen journalism is carried out by people who hold no prior knowledge, training or experience of journalism. The demonstration of responsibility—handling sensitive issues properly and abiding by the laws—is another factor that appears to be a key concern, since explicit videos of molestation and naming the rape victims on social media sites and blogs have appeared in the past.

Conclusion
This paper has sought to describe how the overall structure of Indian media is being affected and challenged through citizen journalism. It discusses how with new technologies creating new opportunities, common people now have the power, like never before in the history, to produce news in different ways, facilitating the progress of platforms that bolster people’s participation in media which eventually results in the growth of citizen journalism. Also, that increasing participation in media is ensuring that journalism focuses on the issues of poor and marginalised, rather than being the mouthpiece of the rich. This carries the potential of making citizen journalism both powerful and popular in a country like India. Considering that citizen journalism brings distant voices—adding diversity in media reports, fosters alternative perspectives and contributes to democratic representation, it probably is the best hope of curbing the flourishing undemocratic conventional media practices, or begin functioning parallel to them and start inclusive journalism.

References