

The Influence of Citizen Journalism on Journalistic Professionalization: Impact, Obstacles, and Symbiosis

Zhou Deli, Zhang Dashi

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia

Abstract: The shift of media audiences to online platforms has expanded the role of citizen journalists, making it crucial to examine their impact on journalistic professionalization and challenges for symbiosis. Citizen journalism challenges the legitimacy of professional journalism across three aspects: expertise, duty, and autonomy. Professional journalists gain credibility from institutions and ethics, while citizen journalists provide immediacy, eyewitness accounts, and alternative perspectives, particularly valuable in authoritarian contexts where traditional media is restricted. Although the roles of the two overlap, differing role perceptions remain a major obstacle to symbiosis; professional journalists emphasize interpretive and authoritative functions, while citizen journalists focus more on mobilization and grassroots engagement. Further tensions involve independence and credibility, as citizen journalism is often seen as subjective in democracies but vital under authoritarian regimes. While citizen journalism cannot replace professional journalism, it can supplement it. Despite obstacles such as authority, role perception, and press freedom, both forms can evolve symbiotically to strengthen news reporting.

Keywords: Citizen journalism; Professional journalism; Journalistic professionalization; Symbiosis

DOI: 10.62639/sspjiss04.20250209

1. Introduction

Understanding how citizen journalism has influenced professional journalism and how it can challenge the concept of professionalization, requires investigating the idea of journalistic professionalization. The term refers to a measure of the extent to which journalists collectively adhere to “the system of shared norms, rules, and practices” that guide their work (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2019, p. 107). However, defining journalistic professionalization presents challenges, especially given the variations in its development across countries. Factors such as political landscapes, economic conditions, and cultural nuances play a significant role in this differentiation. Moreover, professional journalism encountered formidable challenges due to the rise of social media and platforms. Notably, the rise of citizen journalism has been a pivotal catalyst in this transformation (Jena, 2022). Traditional professional journalism is top-down, presenting finished news products, while citizen journalism is horizontal and ongoing exchange of information, always evolving and being refined (Jurrat, 2011; Mythen, 2010). To reflect on the future trajectory of journalism, it is vital to consider both the empowerment that citizen journalism brings, and the indispensable value offered by professional journalism. The argument is that although citizen journalism can never be professional journalism, it can supplement it, especially in authoritarian nations. This is demonstrated by professionals' actions differing from those of citizens in terms of expertise, duty, and autonomy; citizen journalism adds valuable information to professional journalism by promoting public engagement in a news cycle; the symbiotic relationship between citizen journalism and professional journalism is ready to expand but faces challenges: Citizen journalism challenges journalistic authority, differing perceptions of journalistic roles, and constraints on press freedom. However, if citizen journalism is truly integrated with professional journalism, press

(Manuscript NO.: JISS-25-9-62018)

About the Author

Zhou Deli (1983-), Female, Changchun, Jilin, Master, Research Interests: communication and media, public relations, AI, robots and technological determinism.

freedom will become a restricted freedom.

2. Legitimacy in Journalism: Distinguishing Citizen from Professional Practice

The reason why citizen journalism can never be professional journalism lies in a differing legitimacy across three realms. Örnebring (2013) mentioned three core reasons explaining why professionals' actions differ from those of amateurs, by holding expertise, duty, and autonomy. Expertise is the specialized skill or knowledge that a professional possesses. Professional journalists, for example, can filter information, selecting news that matters and turning it into comprehensible stories for the audience (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2019). In contrast, the stereotype of citizen journalists suggests they lack such skills and do not exercise editorial judgment (Örnebring, 2013). This is because citizen journalism often refers to the actions of everyday citizens reporting news and events through less credible media outlets such as blogs, and social media (Lindner et al., 2015). Hu argued that citizen journalism predominantly covers the superficial aspects of news events (2021). For example, citizen journalism is open to anyone with access to personal communication technology, allowing them to engage in journalistic activities at any time, including direct or fragment-sharing incidents (police brutality), offering eyewitness accounts of incidents, and uploading videos, etc. Nip (2009, as cited in Wall, 2015) also suggested that citizen journalism is deemed too fragmented to offer a clear understanding of significant news occurrences. For instance, in the Tianjin explosion in China, citizens shared images and videos of the mushroom cloud, the burned cars and injured individuals on social media (BBC, 2015; Jiang et al., 2015). However, deeper investigative facts, such as the precise number of casualties or the underlying reasons for the explosion, and hidden truths like potential corruption or societal impacts, often require professional journalism (Hu, 2021). Moreover, a distinct feature separating professionals from amateurs is the adherence to a code of ethics. Professionals follow this code because journalism is not just a job but a societal duty (Örnebring, 2013). This adherence to ethics is part of a collective system. Hu (2021) argued that although citizen journalism brings immediacy, it can also spread rumours and misinformation, making it unreliable for fully understanding risk events (2021). This meets Jurrat's perspective, in which one direct pitfall of citizen journalism is its risk of inaccurate information, with no guarantee of author accountability for the content (2011); and when unverified content is presented as news, it can have serious consequences. An example is the 2008 CNN iReport claim about Apple CEO Jobs' health, impacting the stock price until debunked (Jurrat, 2011). This highlights the risks of publishing unchecked and anonymous sources. Furthermore, for journalism, autonomy leans more towards institutional backing rather than individual freedom. Professional journalists operate within recognized media institutions (BBC, The New York Times), which are perceived as reliable, while citizen journalists are often seen as solo entities with less credibility (Örnebring, 2013). This is because citizen journalists often lack formal training and can produce biased or unverified content. Many view themselves as activists, not journalists, which might make them feel less bound by professional ethical standards. Therefore, Hu believes that the rise of citizen journalism will not impact the standing of journalistic professionalism (2021).

3. The Supplementary Role and Value of Citizen Journalism in Professional Journalism

Citizen journalism can supplement professional journalism by providing first-hand sources, especially during crises, and fostering public participation in the news cycle. Citizen journalism drives public engagement, playing a crucial role in providing timely and diverse perspectives on significant events. Citizen journalism involves not only content generation for platforms like blogs or independent sites but also public engagement in the news cycle, which includes activities like posting on social media, sharing and commenting etc. (Goode, 2009, as cited in Kim & Lowrey, 2014). When emphasizing the role of amateur reporters, citizen journalism positions these individuals as active contributors to society, especially in environments where media freedoms are limited (Cottle, 2014, as

cited in Zeng et al., 2019). In authoritarian settings, citizen journalism acts as a political counterweight against dominant powers (Reese & Dai, 2009). This political role becomes especially prominent during crises, particularly in China. Again, using the August 2015 Tianjin explosion incident as an example, where a series of blasts at the city's port led to the death of multiple individuals and injured hundreds (BBC., 2015a). Following the explosion, the credibility of official news and government agencies as authorities in verifying information was questioned by Weibo users. Prevalent suspicions focused on the number of casualties, health and environmental impacts, and the local government's mismanagement (Zeng et al., 2019). This is because the local authorities often under-report or even hide information to reduce potential repercussions they could encounter in crises (Ma, 2005). In this context, unofficial sources like citizen journalism may be viewed as more trustworthy by the Chinese public than official channels. This is because citizen journalism broadens the spectrum of news sources, enhancing the quality of information shared regarding risk events (Mythen, 2010). For the Tianjin explosion, Weibo users not only provided first-hand accounts but also fostered public engagement, a large amount of reposts and positive comments, to ensure authentic information and transparency fact-checking (Zeng et al., 2019). In other words, beyond the direct sharing of information on media platforms, another form of citizen journalism is the one taken by commenters on Weibo, who were surprisingly effective, often gaining more trust than official channels like police and mainstream media (Zeng et al., 2019). Similarly, in the UK, the Guardian leveraged audience participation to expose MPs' unethical expenses, with a surge in citizen commentary, making citizen blogs as essential news sources (Bruns, 2008). This shows that online versions of citizen journalism provide avenues for engaging interaction, dialogues and debates about these risks, and promote diverse voices and perspectives (Murdock, 2006, as cited in Mythen, 2010; Wall, 2015). This ensures the public gets timely news updates and first-hand information. This is especially true in authoritarian nations, where immediate accounts and visuals captured by regular citizens frequently serve as the sole evidence available, which can potentially influence international political perspectives (Jurrat, 2011). For example, in the 2009 Iranian election, with foreign media banned and local outlets state-controlled, the world learned of on-ground realities mainly through citizen-uploaded content (Okeowo, 2022); the globally shared video of student Neda Agha Soltan being shot by the government-backed Basij militia sparked international discourse (Jurrat, 2011). Compared to mainstream outlets that merely replicated print content online, initially with limited engagement, the rise of citizen journalism spurred change. Especially in authoritarian settings, citizen journalism acts as a vital counterweight to official media, particularly during crises, where it challenges government credibility and provides trustworthy information to the public, ultimately influencing international political discourse.

4. Obstacles to Symbiosis Between Citizen and Professional Journalism

The relationship between citizen journalism and professional journalism can be symbiotic but faces challenges, including traditional authority, journalistic role perceptions, and journalistic freedom. Deutsch Karlekar and Radsch (2012) emphasized that the symbiosis between the two is set to evolve with improved internet and social media access. There is also a growing sentiment that citizen journalists should align with traditional media institutions for credibility, although this shift could potentially restrict journalistic freedom (Örnebring, 2013). As Lindner et al. (2015) noted, citizen journalism seemingly challenges but often overlaps with mainstream media, as many citizen platforms have professional journalists in its structures and traditional outlets incorporate citizen content. Bardoel and Deuze (2001) believe that blending the functions and expertise of professional journalists with the citizen potential of citizen journalism has emerged as a productive form of journalism. Gans once stated, "The news may be too important to leave to the journalists alone" (1980, p. 322), in today's social media landscape, where news is ever-present, shared, and constantly flowing. However, as a grassroots and non-professional form of journalism, citizen journalism operates under a distinct set of norms, values, and rules, that differ from professional journalism, this challenges their symbiotic nature.

One of the obstacles to the symbiosis between citizen journalism and professional journalism is the challenge to the traditional status of journalistic authority. This refers to the influence held by journalists and journalistic entities which enables them to present their understanding of reality as factual, honest, and politically significant (Sjøvaag, 2011; Anderson, 2008). When citizen journalists enter the journalism arena, though praised as a reform challenging traditional journalism (Carr et al., 2014), they initially faced resistance and even disparagement from legacy media practitioners (Wall, 2015). Some established journalists feel the need to define what distinguishes them as professionals (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Many professionals in the field criticised citizen journalists from the public for lacking professionalism, editorial oversight, and for lowering journalism's quality (Örnebring, 2013; Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010; Mncina, Letsie & Nkhi, 2023). In response, mainstream news organisations try to incorporate it, and call it user-generated content, such as the BBC primarily using it as a foundation for its reports while maintaining editorial control (Wall, 2015). Simultaneously, in response to the growing trend of public participation, some media outlets established specific segments for citizen journalism. But there was a clear division between professional content and that of citizens. Additionally, professional journalists' reluctance to change their ways or share their platform with outsiders. From the perspective of citizen journalists, research suggests a variety of reactions: some value their interactions with mainstream media (Robinson & DeShano, 2011), while others feel taken advantage of when their involvement is not genuine (Borger et al., 2014). This highlights the challenge of mutual intolerance or a lack of acceptance between citizen and professional journalists, because citizen journalists' perceived role conceptions are not fully aligned with those of professionals (Chung & Nah, 2013). Audience reactions also vary, with some being sceptical of mainstream media and trusting citizen journalism more, others perceiving professional journalists as superior (Nah & Chung, 2012).

The second obstacle to the symbiosis between citizen journalism and professional journalism lies in their differing role perceptions. Citizen journalists' role perceptions are not fully aligned with professionals; the roles are related yet distinct (Chung & Nah, 2013); for example, the interpreter role (explaining and contextualizing news) is central to professionals but far less important to citizen journalists. This indicates that although roles overlap, citizen journalists differentiate who is responsible for particular functions (e.g., mobilizing citizens or providing eyewitness accounts). In addition, community news audiences consistently rated professional journalists higher than citizen journalists (Nah & Chung, 2012), even though they value both citizen and professional journalists as important community members. This suggests that in areas such as information dissemination, interpretation of public issues, and mobilization of citizens for community activities, audiences are more likely to recognise the roles played by professional journalists than by citizen journalists. This is because professional journalists are institutionally supported and bound by established norms of credibility and objectivity. From another perspective, however, this also suggests that citizen journalists may hold greater freedom to empower individuals and to share information that might otherwise be suppressed.

The third obstacle of citizen journalism symbiosis with professional journalism, involves questioning the independence of the former. Deutsch Karlekar and Radsch (2012) noted that in certain democratic countries, citizen journalists are seen as biased or subjective and depart from the traditional norm of objectivity. Conversely, in some authoritarian countries, citizen journalists serve as the primary source of information. Similarly, Moyo (2014, as cited in Wall, 2015) found that many citizens journalism in Western democracies have been assimilated into professional journalism; and Moyo insisted that citizen journalism should be associated with social movements while remaining with a deinstitutionalized and de-professionalized character. Citizen journalism plays a crucial role in reporting firsthand information, especially during crises when traditional journalism may be subject to government control. This implies that the characteristics of citizen journalism, including de-professionalization, decapitalization, and deinstitutionalization (Humilton, 2000, as cited in Atton, 2009), inherently contrast with the requirements of professional journalism. The latter requires compliance with a set of shared norms, rules, and practices guiding the conduct of professional journalists (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2019). These intrinsic differences create a distinction

between the two forms of journalism. If citizen journalism shifts itself aligned with professional news institutions, it could potentially limit journalistic freedom.

5. Conclusion

There is a perception that citizen journalism might replace traditional journalism due to its growing quality and financial pressures traditional journalism suffer. In this context, the wary scepticism of professional journalists towards citizen journalism gradually gave way to a grudging acknowledgement, followed by a measured adoption (Wall 2015), that is citizen journalism supplements mainstream news rather than replaces it. This can be demonstrated by the three realms of legitimacy, which are expertise, duty, and autonomy. Although citizen journalism cannot be professional journalism, it works as a supplement to professional journalism by providing timely sources and fostering public participation during crises. Additionally, citizen journalism can be assisted by professional journalism in some democratic countries, while in authoritarian nations, citizen journalism plays an important role as it provides the primary source of information, citizen journalism challenges authority and informs the world when traditional media is under government control. In this way, professional and citizen journalism can be symbiotic. However, there are still obstacles that both professional and citizen journalism need to overcome due to professional journalists' hesitant acceptance to citizen journalism and citizen journalism's non-assimilability characteristic. Despite these differences or obstacles, if journalists' roles and the characteristics of the profession continue to evolve positively, citizen journalism and professional journalism can complement each other, collectively boosting news reporting and dissemination.

References

- [1] Anderson, C. W. (2008). Professionalization of journalism. *The international encyclopedia of communication*.
- [2] Atton, C. (2009). Alternative and citizen journalism. In *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 285-298). Routledge.
- [3] BBC. (2015, August 13). *China silences netizens critical of "disgraceful" Blast coverage*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-33908168>.
- [4] BBC. (2015a, August 14). *China explosions: Fires still burning after Tianjin blasts*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-33924501>.
- [5] Bruns, A. (2008). The Active Audience: Transforming Journalism from Gatekeeping to Gatewatching. I Peterson, Chris & Domingo, David (red) Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production.
- [6] Bardoel, J., & Deuze, M. (2001). 'Network journalism': converging competencies of old and new media professionals. *Australian journalism review*, 23(2), 91-103.
- [7] Chung, D. S., & Nah, S. (2013). Media credibility and journalistic role conceptions: Views on citizen and professional journalists among citizen contributors. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 28(4), 271-288.
- [8] Deutsch Karlekar, K., & Radsch, C. (2012). Adapting concepts of media freedom to a changing media environment: Incorporating new media and citizen journalism into the Freedom of the Press Index. *ESSACHESS Journal for Communication Studies*, 5(1).
- [9] Gans, H. J. (1979). Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News. *Newsweek, and Time*. *New York: Pantheon*, 42, 48.
- [10] Hu, N. (2021). The transformation of journalistic authority and expertise in three specific dimensions: Telegraph, tabloidisation and citizen journalism. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 4(11). <https://doi.org/10.25236/ajhss.2021.041114>.
- [11] Hanitzsch, T. & Örnebring, H. (2019). Professionalism, professional identity, and journalistic roles. *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315167497-7>.
- [12] Reese, S. D., & Dai, J. (2009). Citizen journalism in the global news arena: China's new media critics. *Citizen journalism: Global perspectives*, 1, 221-231.
- [13] Robinson, S., & DeShano, C. (2011). 'Anyone can know': Citizen journalism and the interpretive community of the mainstream press. *Journalism*, 12(8), 963-982.
- [14] Jiang, S., Ford, D., & Mullen, J. (2015, August 13). *Massive blasts rock Chinese city of Tianjin; 44 dead, hundreds injured*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/12/asia/china-port-explosion/index.html>.

- [15]Jurrat, N. (2011). Citizen journalism and the internet. *Open Society Foundation: Washington*.
- [16]Kim, Y. and Lowrey, W. (2014) 'Who are citizen journalists in the Social Media Environment?', *Digital Journalism*, 3(2), pp. 298–314. doi:10.1080/21670811.2014.930245.
- [17]Lindner, A. M., Connell, E., & Meyer, E. (2015). Professional journalists in 'citizen' journalism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 553–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2015.1012530>.
- [18]Mythen, G. (2010). Reframing risk? Citizen journalism and the transformation of news. *Journal of Risk Research*, 13(1), 45-58.
- [19]Okeowo, A. (2022). Advancing accountability for human rights violations through citizen media-an African perspective.
- [20]Örnebring, H. (2013). Anything you can do, I can do better? Professional journalists on citizen journalism in six European countries. *International communication gazette*, 75(1), 35-53.
- [21]Wall, M. (2015). Citizen Journalism: A retrospective on what we know, an agenda for what we don't. *Digital journalism*, 3(6), 797-813.
- [22]Schudson, M., & Anderson, C. (2009). Objectivity, professionalism, and truth seeking in journalism. In *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 108-121). Routledge.
- [23]Kim, Y., & Lowrey, W. (2014). Who are citizen journalists in the Social Media Environment? *Digital Journalism*, 3(2), 298–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.930245>.
- [24]Zeng, J., Burgess, J., & Bruns, A. (2019). Is citizen journalism better than professional journalism for fact-checking rumours in China? how weibo users verified information following the 2015 Tianjin blasts. *Global Media and China*, 4(1), 13–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436419834124>.