

## **CITIZEN JOURNALISTS: VOICE TO THE VOICELESS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard."

**Arundhati Roy.<sup>1</sup>**

Arundhati Roy's statement clearly proves the Marxist insight on the bourgeois which has the means of material production at its disposal and, thus, controls the means of mental production. Hence, this makes one the ruling one with the idea of dominance over the rest. These deliberately silenced voices are the marginalized groups of our society who are dominated by the powerful and the elites. The representation for the powerless, 'the other', is absent from the mainstream media. The media moguls do not consider the newsworthiness of such groups and try to subjugate them with their enforced ideology. It has, thus, become a need of the hour to seek an alternative for such media conglomerates which shift their loyalties with the power and profit.

**KEYWORDS:** Citizen Journalism, Glocalised Indian Journalism, Marginalised

### **INTRODUCTION**

Indian media, today, has attained the status of being upright and accountable despite several censorship levied since its genesis in 1780 by James Augustus Hickey. But it has unfortunately fallen prey to the commercialization for its existence. The struggle for survival has intensified with each media organization competing with the other not just within the same genre but on different platforms. The situation becomes murkier when the association of these agencies is traced to the large business conglomerates, which are believed to be working for the vested interests of politicians and industrialists alike. Karl Marx in German Ideology provided an insight by referring the powerful and the elites as "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production (or the idea/concept) ... hence of the relationship which makes the one class the ruling one, therefore, the idea of its dominance."(Marx and Engels, 1968: 21).<sup>1</sup> If the media tends to reproduce an exploitative relationship by propagating the idea of the elites, then the need to voice the proletariat also becomes a need for the hour. There should also be a machinery which provides an equal platform for the marginalised voices.

### **WHY DO WE NEED CITIZEN JOURNALISTS?**

Indeed, the fourth estate has always played a crucial role in bringing a societal change, but until this change occurs with the participation and voluntary efforts, the change would never be fruitful. The role of citizen journalists, thus, becomes crucial in bring about a constant change for the betterment of the society. It is a time when citizen journalism needs to be seen as an inseparable part of the civil society since this form of participatory media enable citizens to be an

active agent. But the way our media firms, imitating the global model, attempt to sensationalize news content for gaining TRPs seem to be the problematic issue. Eventually, it leads us in guessing what the REAL story is? Thus, how citizen journalists can be the game changer within the nexus of media moguls is something which needs to be analyzed. How they can reveal the real side of the story? Citizen Journalism empowers the audience to generate and receive the news content themselves, eventually, making them the active players than just being the passive receivers without any feedback mechanism. It does provide a public sphere and a neutral zone where information is easily generated, distributed and accessed. Digital media have provided a platform through social media for such an interface (feedback) – an arena for public debate which is free from domination and where all participants are equal. It strengthens the democracy by ensuring that the disempowered, marginalized and disadvantaged groups of our society have an easy access to provide and gather information.

Indian News Media Industry, since its inception, is known for building a national identity with an undue coverage of news focusing majorly on northern India especially in Delhi. Delhi is the 'political' capital with major issues churning in the center and decision-making done for the rest of the nation, has attained the power to control and dominate the entire nation on national media platform. These national news channels with Delhi centric news claiming to represent the nation are being broadcasted globally. Thus, the status of journalism in India is extremely Delhi-centric and limited to the country-locus issues of one region by neglecting other parts of the nation. There have also been concerns over the neglect and biased reporting on Kashmir and North-eastern states of India. It is also surprising to note how even after the rise of regional news channels to tap the niche audiences, the national broadcast media do not find the newsworthiness in issues from these parts of our diverse nation. In fact, these regions are more than just terrorism, armed forces and agitations. 'Captivating Kashmir', a cultural forum on Facebook and Instagram posts, photographs, videos and messages regarding all cultural events, natural beauty, talent and art from the land of paradise. This content is being shared by citizen journalists, photographers and enthusiasts who still hold a positivist approach by looking at Kashmir as a celestial land.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE CRAFT**

The mainstream media are presently struggling with the rising trend of bad news which has, in fact, widened the gap between the binary oppositions in our society. The practice of paid news in the media has brought several criticisms on the objectivity of journalists and journalism. Even on a commercial front with the desired positive changes, the global media, investors will soon start seeking association with regional players to serve the niche news media markets in India. Thus, the problem will only intensify more rather than shifting towards content neutrality. With globalization, the journalistic practices, technological upgradations and global media players entering the Indian market, the news content still remains localized (restricted to niche market) targeting the regional audiences. It is a time when such stories from small regions are brought on a global platform. The mainstream audiences thirst for small towns' stories, especially stories from various strata of our society which are unheard. The global media channels like Al Jazeera, BBC World, CNN and many more have started visualizing India through the lens of social change and development. Several analysts have noted that the audience of the mainstream media has now shifted to the new media which offers more alternatives and convenience. The flourishing trend of updating one's views and posting photographs has empowered the present social media generation and given them a power of freedom and gratification of being heard. Role of user generated content has shifted the audience of mainstream media to the Webscape with minimal censorship possible. In the near future, the Indian media, investors will shift their base from television to digital media for better returns. This will provide a better prospect

for enthusiasts who wish to narrate extraordinary stories which once was a domain of either documentary filmmakers or the journalists. But there is also a downside to this phenomenon. There have been cases where citizen journalists have made headlines for the wrong reasons. The debate on what is NEWS and whose TRUTH it is, has echoed in the media for years. It is not just something happened somewhere to someone, but rather is it newsworthy or not depends on who is being affected by it? We often do not verify or fact-check of what appears on social media by citizen journalists nor do the agencies scrutinize it before broadcasting. A case reported during early trading on Wall Street, when an anonymous Twitterati posted that Steve Jobs was rushed to the ER (Emergency Room) due to a major heart attack. This impacted the Apple's stock prices severely, bringing down the market shares to seventeen months low costing to approximately five billion US dollar's plunge in the market value. As the story gained momentum, CNN reported it without any verification at its end. Later, when a business blogger contacted the spokesperson of Apple Inc., the report turned out to be a mere rumor. Though the company recovered it loses, but the credibility of CNN in this issue was irreparable.

### **NEW MEDIA: RE\_DEFINING COMMUNICATION**

Lerner (1958) identified Industrialisation, Literacy, Media Exposure and Political Participation as the four indices for social change. To bring about a change in the society, people need to be mobile, empathic, and participatory. When people are mobile they are ready to look for something new and the empathy makes them search for something new. Participation, both political and social, leads to change. In fact, participation has to be at several layers of society. High media exposure is necessary to make people participative to change their traditional beliefs and attitudes. Mass media in India have reached the apostates stage where the beliefs of the people are being guided by the social media activists and bloggers. It is also interesting to note how social media has transformed media audiences from being just the receiver to the participatory content generators. Media audiences are mostly enthralled by the power and impact of social media. It is this characteristic feature which has inspired them to participate voluntarily. Modern society is, undoubtedly, a participatory society and it works by consensus. In India the problem arises at the level of participation, which is supposed to be multi-layered. There are many strata of our society which are not involved and are, thus, marginalized. Media exposure is unable to reach to these disadvantaged groups and a divide is evident despite media's pro-active role in India. New media, especially the social media and blogs, are today re-defining this level of participation in communication by giving access to anybody and everybody. Lenin's views upon the basic aspects of art while laying the foundation for Soviet Art was focused on the difference between the performance (or the construction) and the realistic art form. He believed that entertainment as a performative form is possible, but the rights of the working class and the farmers hold more importance for a society to grow. It is this proletariat which deserves the right on such great art. But on the contrary, the ideological state machinery builds a cultural hegemony by manufacturing consent. The media monopoly, today, has blocked the 'real' news and resulted in marginalizing the disadvantaged groups who are mostly unheard. Thus, the civil society expects a responsible approach from the media in covering news. The power configuration and the hegemony of the ruling class cannot dictate the working of the media anymore. Thus, the mechanism of 'Citizen Journalism' is the key to counter this powerful manipulative force which acts as a gatekeeper and constantly filters the news to maintain a status-quo.

### **CITIZEN JOURNALISTS: THE 'REAL' CANONS OF CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISM**

Journalistic practices have undergone a drastic change from 'camcorder cult' to the 'era of cell phone videography and photography'. Both constitute the element of immediacy which 'reality' demands. In 1929, Dziga Vertov explained the true essence of the term, Kino-eye or the mechanical eye, in his essay that appeared in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga*

*Vertov*. According to Vertov, “it means the conquest of space, the visual linkage of people throughout the entire world based on the continuous exchange of visible fact”. 'FACT' as emphasized by Vertov remains the core agenda of this article. Kim Bartley and Donnacha Ó Briain adopt the 'fly-on-the-wall' directorial technique for their documentary 'Revolution should not be televised' based on the failed coup to remove Hugo Chavez (Venezuelan President) from power in 2002. The documentary adopts a formula of non-construction to reveal the fact. Censorship has curtailed the power of media and has always tried to control it. But it is upon the media, whether to bow down before the pressure or sail through the tyrant winds. Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi with his cameraperson, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, despite being housed arrest managed to document his real life for the survival of his artistic liberty. The documentary, '*This is not a film*' (2011), shot on his phone after his equipments were confiscated narrates the story of a dedicated filmmaker who did not let the censorship curb his artistic freedom and creative temperament.

After the global media trend of 24x7 news format and a live news broadcast, the Indian media, too, has realized the importance of instant coverage on burning issues. To procure the latest content, media houses depend heavily on correspondents and stringers for covering the news stories. In the whole process of news reporting and coverage, citizen journalists play an important role in covering issues and areas which are often untouched and unreached by the agency reporters, correspondents and stringers. Citizen's eyewitness videography, photography and report write-ups contribute significantly during crisis reporting. 'Kino-eye' or the mechanical eye as term coined by the famous Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, has transformed itself and taken an 'avatar' of cell phone cameras which have come handy for citizen journalists. Citizen journalists in Syria, especially in Aleppo, feel that their camera is the only weapon to fight against the government's lies and propaganda. Syrian citizen journalist Faddi al-Halabi, working in Aleppo since 2011, in his interview to Salwa Amor from Middle East Eye yearns for his "country to have an honest and transparent news outlet that would relay what is happening on the ground on a daily basis."<sup>iii</sup> Thus, in a state where either the monopoly or the heavy handedness suppresses the free speech, the non-constructed video documentaries from fly-on-the-wall styled citizen journalists seem to be the only ray of hope. Despite knowing their bleak chances of survival under such circumstances, citizen journalists from Syria and several other conflict zones opt to stay back because they feel they cannot leave their own people to die there. Later, Fadi on his Facebook status also wrote that “I know very well that I will not survive this holocaust. I feel as though death is besieging me, as though I am a body without a soul, a heart without a beat...”, under the hashtag #Aleppoisburning. Analyzing a similar situation in the context of India, the marginalized have mostly been unheard. They are suppressed by the repressive power groups to maintain a status-quo. Unfortunately, educational institutions, today, have become the cradle for struggle to safeguard their public sphere. Saffronisation of academic institutions with suppression and discrimination of marginalized groups has led to a massive protest and uproar leading to several student movements in India. HCU, FTIL, NIT (Srinagar) and JNU have seen an alarming number of agitations which were covered by students as citizen journalists and posted on several social networking sites to gain support against the heavy handedness of the state's repressive control over their ideology and free speech. It is evident how powerful citizen journalists have become with just a cell phone in hand to stage a revolution. It is, indeed, the social media which have given power to bring about a change in the society.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, global media are relying on Syrian citizen journalists for news from the land. These individuals who are also questioned of their objectivity and unbiased reporting by several critics only deliver the documentary evidences from

ground zero. Opinionated or not, the coverage and reports are factual and visible, which cannot be denied. It is debatable, whether these are slanted or reflections of reality but ignoring the situation prevalent in Syria, the images posted from Aleppo can not be ignored or turned a blind eye. In times of postmodernism, we have attained a stage where online journalism has made us a part of a global village despite there being a digital divide in several parts of the world, including India. The virtual world of bloggers and citizen journalists is now challenging the news imperialism. Social media has become a powerful tool of awareness. There may be credibility issues in digital media, but allowing your audience to have diverse opinions is also important. We should agree upon the fact that everyone has the right to perceive the world through a different lens. It is only by monitoring stories and images from around the world, one breaks the limitations of one's own biases.

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## END NOTES

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