

STRUGGLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS: OPINION STUDY OF MEDIA EXPERTS AND ACADEMICIANS IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

With the swift growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Social Media Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter etc., have been providing vast information to the public. Citizens started using Social Media networking sites as a tool to share the incidents around them which were inaccessible to the views of mainstream media in Tamil Nadu. The process of citizens involving in such kind of journalism activities is called as Citizen Journalism. The Citizens who involve themselves in the process of Citizen Journalism are said to be Citizen Journalists. This study tries to understand the various challenges faced by Citizen Journalists while involving themselves in such journalistic activities. This study analyses the opinion and perspectives of the media experts and academicians about the challenges faced by citizen journalists in Tamil Nadu. To find the challenges faced by citizen journalists in Tamil Nadu, the researcher has employed in-depth interview method among ten media experts and academicians in the field of journalism.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Social Media, Mainstream Journalism, Journalists, Citizen Journalists, Threats, Professionalism, Fake News

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of the Internet has changed the way people receive and interact with news. And also, the ICT has given the opportunity for the common people to gather information about government policies without relying on newspapers and television news. People access the news and comment online, especially through social media. The internet breaks all the channels between the News Makers or News Providers and News Gatherers. This kind of process may be called Citizen Journalism. Citizen Journalism is the activity of a citizen, or a group or individual, taking an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The purpose of this participation is to provide the independent, reliable, accurate, broad and relevant information democracy needs. (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 9). In other words, Lou and Harrison (2019) state that “citizen journalism is a term used to refer to ordinary individuals who act as journalists during some part of the process of creating content for mainstream journalism coverage”. Various experiments around the world involve the participation of citizens in collecting, analyzing and producing news.

Many researchers and studies indicate that there are two significant obstacles that arise during the citizen journalism process. The first barrier is lack of fact checking before publishing the news. In the field of journalism, any news has to go through the process of fact checking because false information leads to fake news production. Which leads to the question of authenticity of the news? "Citizen Journalism is defined as the activity by which the general public creates non-professional content about current events and other news (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Blaagaard, 2013; Kaufhold, Valenzuela, & De Zúñiga, 2010).

The second barrier is the safety of Citizen Journalists. While gathering the news, Citizen Journalists are working at their own risk. When professional journalists face any threats, the organization they work for, will take care of them. But for Citizen Journalists, they have to face the consequences on their own. In a scenario of covering a political protest, if a professional journalist gets arrested, the organization where that particular journalist is working will back him up. On the other hand, if the same happens to a citizen journalist, that particular citizen journalist should face all the consequences all alone on his own. Besides the rise of social media caused the citizen journalists to cover incidents and keep the public informed, though they have to take risks. "If you never take risks, you'll rarely write a story of the consequence," said Grey Munno (2021), but on the other hand, risk will completely rely on the Individual who is covering the protest. If a citizen journalist is responsible for the spread of fake news, he/she has to look after the legal consequences, whereas in mainstream journalism, the respective media organization will have to face all the legal outcomes. This is because, in the process of citizen journalism there will be no gate keepers, no fact-checking process, so the responsibility for the content provided is purely on a particular citizen. In mainstream journalism, the published content is completely a product of the respective organization. Here I describe a few examples of citizen journalism which has created an impact in the society.

2. IMPACT OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

CGNetSwara is an online voice portal which allows the people in the forest of Chhattisgarh to report the local news in Gondi by making a phone call. The main focus of this initiative is to address the problems of the tribal communities. This project is to re-evaluate the potential of citizen journalism as a transformative and democratizing force.

3. CNN-IBN

Among the mainstream media organizations, CNN-IBN, the English broadcast television news channel, was the first one to initiate citizen journalism. In 2005, it gave a platform to citizens of India to articulate the problems around them. Later, this model was followed by the other news channels also. In 2007, CNN-IBN took user-generated content to a new level by airing the series, 'The Citizen Journalist Show: Be the Change' that invited the citizens to use the show and the power of the media to raise their issues.

Some of other initiatives in citizen journalism are Newmeback.com, Citizenjournalistofindia, and blogspot.com, Instablogs.com, Citizensreport.in, MeriNews, MyNews, Cplash, WorldSnap News, The Viewspaper, Purdafash and Inewssappreciate the participation of citizens.

These citizen journalism initiatives promote the activity of citizens involved in the process of journalism. However, the need for citizen journalism was understood during the Mumbai Taj attack in 2008. Mainstream journalists cannot present all the places wherever incidents happen. Initially, the incident came out through social media, as a citizen near the Taj Hotel captured the occurrence and shared it on their social media page. At first, Mainstream media broke the news using social media footage only. Later they send their reporters to cover the massacre. Plenty of footage of the happening of the incidents in real time was gathered from social media. And also during the 2015 Chennai flood, Ockhi Cyclone, Kanyakumari impact in 2017, the Jallikattu Protest 2017 in Tamil Nadu Chennai, citizen journalism plays a vital role in informing people about the Issue. All the above mentioned issues, the safety of the citizens who cover the issue is questionable? Here the data provided by the citizens present at that time may be false, but it can be rectified later. But the safety of citizen journalists should be at first priority.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 2019, Almutarie did a survey regarding Saudi the using Twitter to discuss economic issues more freely than possible in the mainstream media. The study reveals the danger of people using Twitter to discuss economic issues. The

author says that “Such use of Twitter is to spread fake news and rumors, as the accuracy of the information on these posts has been considered paramount” (Alumtarie, 2021). Citizen Newshounds have additionally been regarded as magnifying their reports, because of malicious causes or due to ignorance, in a way which, as Johnston (2015) claims, transgresses expert and moral standards. In Cammaerts' view, citizen journalists are vulnerable to state repression and online abuse, and one strategy to avoid this is self-censorship. And also, professional journalists recommend that CJ should be under the supervision of the Saudi Journalists Association, to prevent the spread of fake news. And it also has the power to penalize citizen journalists for spreading fake news.

Charlie Beckett (2009) in his study “The Ethical and Real hazards of citizen journalism”, explains the problems and hurdles faced by citizen journalists. He says that there will be no safety for citizen journalists in case of legal issues. If they produce any fake news which leads to any problems, then they have to face the consequences on their own. To avoid such inconvenience, citizen journalists should learn the ethics of journalism. They should always be aware of credibility. At the same time, the author noted, simply taking fake news/false information as enough evidence to defend citizen journalism is not ethical.

Colette Davidson (2017), in the research article titled “The Challenges of Citizen Journalism”, analyses the challenges faced by citizen journalists across the world. In this study, the author observed that the main challenge faced by citizen journalists is fact checking of the news they publish. Lack of fact checking before publishing the news may spread the fake news. At the same time, when covering crime scenes, safety becomes the biggest challenge for both citizens and professional journalists. But in the case of professional journalists, at least they have the support of the organisation they work for. Colette Davidson also explained the importance of Citizen Journalism by the Citing, the civil war in Syria where no mainstream media send reporters because of safety measures. The same happened in the issues of Yemen and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border war. In the Pakistan-Afghan border war, social media played a vital role. “Only citizen journalism has captured a lot of terrorist-related activity and then this news is picked up by the international media, says Dr. Riaz. Stuart Allan, Professor and Head of the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University says that “When things happen or there's breaking news, we expect citizens to be there and to be the first ones on the scene.”. At the same time, when covering crime scenes or reporting during a war crisis, safety becomes the biggest challenge for journalists.

Munno (2021) stated that “Citizen Journalism can play a really important role in making sure that the world as we know it gets sufficiently covered,” Munno said. It is said that Observing (not involving), abstaining (not your opinion) documenting (professionally) and sharing in the social media makes a citizen journalist. Munno believed that sharing unverified and unethical stories leads to legal liabilities. So he insisted, that one should check the following before publishing the social media content.

- Check for accuracy
- Should get permission from the person who published it.
- If any minor related issues are spotted, we should have to maintain privacy
- Avoid personal opinions
- Avoid defamation contents
- Do not get involved in invasion of privacy

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper has been diligently operated in a qualitative method which aims to find out the problems, challenges and issues faced by citizen journalists during the process of citizen journalism in Tamil Nadu. Here, qualitative research method is also adopted for the current study to develop new knowledge about the problems or to generate new research ideas in this domain.

In-depth Interview method is selected, because they are usually conducted one-on-one and are purely conversational in nature. During the interview, the interviewer aims to elicit detailed answers on specific topics from research participants. Interviews are an effective tool for gathering data on people's beliefs and motivations. Skilled researchers can ask useful follow-up questions to obtain more data on useful topics.

For the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 experts from the relevant domain. Among them, 8 are from the media Industry and 2 are academicians from reputed media institutions.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the in-depth Interview conducted with media experts and academicians, it is found that the most common challenges faced by citizen journalists are their safety concerns and lack of professional writing skills. On the safety concern, if they raise their voice against any issue(s), the citizen journalists get threats from those who create or are responsible for that particular issue(s). In most cases, they get offended by abusive words in the comments section, sometimes getting threatening phone calls etc. A lack of reporting and professional writing skills leads to disinformation or misinformation. People who report 'accidentally' or 'informally' are often taking a personal risk (Charlie Beckett, 2009).

7. GENDERS ISSUES

Gender issues that exist in all other professions are also there in journalism. Experts affirm that gender can be observed as a hindrance in the citizen journalism process. Before the popularization of social media, women speaking about social and civic issues were high. But nowadays, women discern social media platforms are not safe to express their opinions apparently. Family and society restrict women from sharing their views on social problems because of being verbally abused and also getting trolled for their physical appearances.

Compared to men, women face lots of challenges while involving the process of citizen journalism. If a women citizen journalist(s) shares about their opinion on a particular issue, they are getting personally criticized and sometimes their family gets it too. In the worst scenario, photos of women sharing issues, get morphed and get spread on the social media platforms. Also, they get trolled and receive threats. In order to avoid such unnecessary problems, women regret raising issues happening around them. In many cases, women citizen journalists stop talking about the problem half way after facing struggles. But one of the respondents said that women should face these kinds of threats and overcome all the barriers before. If women raise a voice against a particular issue, the reach will be high, she added. In a study, one woman from basia khiria in the village in Batiagarh Block of Damoh District in Madhya Pradesh reported that the crops were lost in this area after a hailstorm, but a survey had found a crop loss of 5%. When she reported about it on CGNet Swara, officials came back for another survey, and the crop loss was found to be 100%. As a result, farmers could get reasonable compensation for crop loss. (Santosh Kumar Biswal, 2019).

In contrary to this, there is no gender issue in Citizen Journalism, said by an Expert. He also added the issues are arising based on braveness. Citizen Journalists, either men or women, who are sharing information through social media, should not be afraid of anything if the shared information is true.

Through the interviews held with 10 experts, it is found that the citizen journalists face threats when they voice out any social issues related to social injustice, Caste discrimination etc. From the study, it may be concluded that, significant problem resulted from the majority of citizen journalist's ignorance of media Ethics while reporting. On the other hand, in order to meet up the business needs even mainstream news media, blend commercial elements with the news, which results in lack of professionalism

8. SPREADING AND PRODUCTION OF FAKE NEWS

Fake news is one of the pitfalls of citizen journalism. Lack of fact checking results in fake news, which is considered to be the major problem in citizen journalism. One of the experts felt that Citizen Journalists do not get information from proper sources, unlike mainstream Journalists. Information released by the government to the public is carried by mainstream media. Despite having an editorial board and ethical norms, news released by mainstream media outlets is occasionally misinterpreted. Since there are no rules governing citizen journalism or an editorial board in this case, there is a great chance that information may be misconstrued, opening the door to fake news. According to the suggestion of a few respondents, there is the need for a Citizen Forum in order to filter fake news. But at the same time, monitoring boards should not crush the freedom of citizen journalism. So a forum which is controlled by citizens themselves will be more beneficial. On the other hand, one of the experts who is an independent journalist clarifies that "our organization used to read in detail about the particular issue in and around it before publishing it as news. While doing that, we can

avoid the production of fake news". Whenever our media outlet finds any fake news or false information, we cross-check them for facts and inform the public. The ultimate vision of our media outlets is to open the view of the public regarding the issues.

9. THREATS TO CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

Citizen journalism creates a beneficial impact on society where the issue of common people are discussed and sorted out. Every citizen journalist should have integrity as a mandatory trait, an expert commented. While reporting injustices and grievances happening in society, there will be great possibilities for citizen journalists to face problems. During such a situation, citizen journalists should know how to overcome it in a legal way. Experts consider the Independent YouTube channels, which post news content consistently, as a citizen journalism activity. All the experts, from whom the researcher conducted in-depth interviews, expressed a common viewpoint that every YouTube channel constantly giving voice against social injustices happening in society is facing troubles in all possible ways.

One of the experts mentioned that Citizen Journalists who are raising their voice against the bribing activities in the system face lots of trouble directly or indirectly. One of the experts, owning a YouTube channel, got threats for sharing a particular issue and, followed by his channel, was blacked out for nearly one week. He, with the help of the legal professionals, handled the problem, and got his channel recovered. One of the experts expressed those citizen journalists consistently talking about political issues face lots of problems.

10. LACK OF PROFESSIONALISM

In mainstream journalism, follow up of news is observed as an essential factor which is quite difficult in citizen journalism practices. For example, if a citizen journalist reports an accident which happened on the way to his/her workplace. He/she may not follow-up the incident and the other details of the occurrence. They can just share the pictures or videos of the accident with a brief note about the incident. Then the details of the accident will be covered by the mainstream media and further follow-up of the incident. Regarding professionalism, one of the experts specifically underlined that the Citizen Journalism method might disclose insensitivity on a delicate subject without indenting. This is because the citizen journalists lack professional knowledge and media ethics. On the other hand, there is no proper ethical framework or structure for the citizen journalists to work. This will end up as a result of personal vendetta or blackmail politics, whereas in the mainstream journalism there will be checks and balances which maintain professionalism. They have to work within an ethical framework. And sometimes citizen journalists take the stand of personal vendetta, Blackmail politics.

11. CONCLUSION

Most of the experts opined that in Tamil Nadu, there is confusion between Participatory journalism, Social Media Journalism and Citizen Journalism. So it is high time to define Citizen Journalism.

With the members of the crowd-funding forum, a monitoring board has to be established. The Monitoring Board has been to work on the basis of the guidelines instead of censorship. As Citizen Journalism in Tamil Nadu is at a very early stage of its growth, suggestions given by the experts may be carried out for its progression in a positive way. At the same time, citizens should have some self-regulations which will earn them Credibility.

The problem indicated by the experts in citizen journalism is that citizens lack professionalism. In order to attain professionalism, an ethical framework has to be constructed and in this process citizens should act as a watch dog for the news given by the citizens. Most citizen journalists get confused between freedom of expression and individual opinion. Citizen journalists should always be aware of their role in society. Regulations by the monitoring board should be framed for the process of citizen journalism, experts recommend. And another statement put forth by the experts is that sometimes citizen consciously or without consciousness, spread fake news. The above challenges in citizen journalism can be rectified by the concept of monitoring boards. Citizen journalists can be made professional by giving proper training by mainstream Journalists. Regarding Gender Issues in Citizen Journalism, though women are progressing in a way far superior to men in the journalistic field, their growth in career has been pulled back by Gender Disparity.

But the most important and significant problem that is to be taken into consideration is the safety of Citizen Journalists and threats faced by them while covering sensitive and political issues. The monitory board should have at least two legal professionals who must ensure the safety of citizen journalists.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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