

Introduction

New perspectives on citizen journalism

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the South Asian tsunami of 26 December 2004, the term ‘citizen journalism’ swiftly gained currency with global news organisations finding themselves in the difficult position of being largely dependent on ‘amateur’ photographs, video footage and eyewitness accounts to tell the story of what was transpiring on the ground in the most severely affected areas. Despite its ambiguities, the term was widely perceived to capture the countervailing ethos of the ordinary person’s capacity to contribute to professional news coverage, thereby providing commentators with a useful label to characterise an ostensibly new genre of user-generated content.

Keywords

Asia, citizen journalism, new perspective, special issue, user-generated

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Researchers interested in the emergence of citizen journalism in China frequently highlight one of its earliest formative instances, namely the spontaneous reportage of local people in the immediate aftermath of the 12 May 2008 earthquake in Wenchuan, which claimed approximately 70,000 lives. Several studies have shown how ordinary citizens on the scene began recording what had happened, providing precipitously ‘raw,’ often deeply moving, firsthand documentation of the devastation for both Chinese and international news audiences (Jiao, 2008; Li & Rao, 2010; Nip, 2009; White & Fu, 2012). In a period of openness contrasting with more typically restrictive governmental oversight – praised as ‘the dawning of a Chinese glasnost’ by some Western commentators (Hooker, 2008) – several self-identified citizen journalists were able to investigate and critique officials’ handling of the disaster, as well as inadequate building standards. Such reporting, however, did not completely evade outright censorship, with certain postings deleted from online bulletin boards and blogs. Further counter-tactics were also employed, as Nip (2009) points out, such as government infiltration of citizen-generated content – that is, paying for people to post in support of the local authorities’ assertions as a strategy to subvert opposition and manage this new, alternative form of civic engagement intent on improving transparency (Nip, 2009, p. 103). At the same time, the integrity of professional journalism was similarly subjected to concerted criticism, most notably for factual errors, the insensitive treatment of survivors, and for hindering rescue and relief efforts. Reese and Dai (2009) describe how China Central Television (CCTV) correspondent Na Xu was widely referred to as a ‘runaway’ when ‘she admitted live on camera that she was not at the front line of a destroyed middle school at Dujingyan but in a hotel in Chengdu, a hundred miles away from the quake zone’ (Reese & Dai, 2009, p. 227).

It is a telling feature of our digital times that instances of citizen reportage have become commonplace from one national context to the next in the years since, particularly where breaking news in a moment of crisis is concerned. Increasingly, it is the case that the person first on the scene – most likely with their smartphone at hand – will be an ordinary citizen, thanks in no small part to the growing ubiquity of cheaper, easier to handle digital devices, as well as the ease with which ensuing text and imagery can be uploaded and shared across social networking sites. Not surprisingly, a corresponding shift in public perceptions of crisis coverage has taken place, where the spontaneous contributions of individuals who happen to be present have become so routinely incorporated into professional newswork as to be almost expected. For varied reasons and motivations, so-called ‘accidental journalists’ – be they victims, bystanders, first-responders, officials, law enforcement, combatants, activists or the like – feel compelled to bear witness, actively engaging in diverse forms of visual, audio or written documentation to capture and relay what they see, hear or feel unfold before them. For news organisations gathering such material, not least where it is being shared across social media platforms, there remains the demanding work of independent verification and fact-checking to ensure due accuracy and credibility. Quick, impromptu assessments, typically made under intense deadline pressure, can be fraught with complications. Recognising and making good citizen journalism’s potential advantages for enriching reportorial opportunities necessarily entail remaining alert to any risks or possible dangers at the same time.

Precisely what counts as Chinese citizen journalism – and which qualifies to be included in its definition (and, equally important, excluded from its purview) – has recurrently proven

challenging to ascertain, with different evaluative criteria being brought to bear by everyone with a personal investment in sustaining their own preferred position. This observation holds true where scholars are concerned as well, of course, as we shall see on the pages of this special *Global Media and China* (GMC) issue devoted to ‘new perspectives on citizen journalism’. Before we turn to the individual articles, let us briefly consider the emergence of citizen journalism in other Asian contexts as a way to contextualise the ensuing discussion.

Citizen journalism in Asian contexts

It is hardly surprising that within Asia, a vast continent with a wide range of governmental systems, there is a myriad of inflections of citizen journalism. Little can be taken for granted where contrasting conceptions of ‘citizenship’ and ‘journalism’ resonate, sometimes in unexpected ways, within countries where political pluralism is often limited under authoritarian rule.

Let us start with India, the continent’s second largest country and, as the cliché says, the world’s biggest democracy. India diverges from others in many respects, not least its lively and chaotic system of governance. Its media landscape matches its polity in energy and tone – more than 400 television channels broadcast news and current affairs and 9,061 daily newspapers address audiences in about four dozen languages (Registrar of Newspapers for India [RNI], 2017). Unlike what has been seen in many countries, especially in the West, the Indian media are expanding at double-digit growth rates on the back of growing literacy and buying power. On the other hand, citizen journalism in its various avatars has struggled to establish a high profile, despite several significant citizen journalism initiatives over the last decade and a half. This is of course a function of the dominance exercised by mainstream media, but, more significantly, the fact that widespread access to high speed Internet is a relatively recent phenomenon. Official figures from the telecom regulator show that 511 million Indians had access to broadband in November 2018, but less than two years earlier, in December 2016, this figure was only 236 million (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2019). The rapid rise in numbers has been fuelled by 4G mobile connections and some of the cheapest data rates in the world. More than 95% of Indians currently access broadband on their mobile phones, with only a small fraction having access to fixed line broadband. Like other populations worldwide, Indians are keen participants on a variety of social media platforms, and this online engagement holds promise for citizen journalism as well.

One of the first notable attempts to give voice to the voiceless was Video Volunteers, a network set up in 2002 to produce and distribute short videos focusing on the daily lives and problems of underprivileged groups who are ignored by mainstream media. India Unheard, its news service that aims to feed mainstream news channels, now has 249 correspondents who have produced more than 6,000 video reports (Video Volunteers, 2019). MeriNews, which translates as MyNews, the first website dedicated to citizen journalism, was set up in 2006 (Allan, Sonwalkar, & Carter, 2007), and 2009 saw the launch of WAVE (2012), Women Aloud Videographing for Empowerment, an initiative similar to Video Volunteers. WAVE is now dormant, but CGNet Swara (2019), a mobile phone-based audio news service in central India catering to tribal communities that fall largely outside the footprint of mainstream media, has flourished since 2010. All of these have won multiple awards and recognition, but, more importantly, they have demonstrated substantive impacts on redressing grievances, access to services, helping citizens overcome bureaucratic hurdles, fighting corruption, enforcing basic rights, and obtaining justice. At the same time, almost every mainstream media outlet across print and television has made attempts to incorporate citizen voices in its output. Unfortunately, these efforts often tend to be treated as stepchildren within the

media; they are usually segregated from the output of professional journalists, are often packaged crudely, and vary widely in quality and impact.

On the whole, citizen journalism in India has probably had the most impact when it comes to everyday civic engagements in witnessing and 'sousveillance', that is, citizen documentation of the powerful from below (in contrast with the powerful's surveillance of citizens from above). Citizen reportage, not least short mobile phone videos in times of disaster and in the case of egregious violations of rights, has in numerous instances gained prominence and created a positive impact on the mainstream news agenda. Prominent examples stretch back to eyewitness accounts and images during the Mumbai attacks in November 2008 on Twitter and include cases such as politicians misbehaving in public, passengers being roughed up by airline staff, civilians being used as human shields by armed forces, and lynchings performed by vigilante groups. Widespread outrage on specific issues, such as official corruption or violence against women, is often voiced on social media and contributes to public campaigns for reform. At the same time, however, other viral communication can spread rumours generating widespread panic, in some cases leading to the forced temporary migration of large populations; hence, the difficulty of making generalisations, particularly when assessing the relative vibrancy of the public sphere.

Indian citizen journalists typically display a strong public service orientation and lean most towards objectives such as 'highlighting human rights violations' and 'solving livelihood- and civic-related issues' (Paul, 2015). A few lucky cases catch the attention of mainstream media, but, for the most part, as CGNet Swara and Video Volunteers have amply documented, citizen journalism efforts depend heavily on their own activism in following up cases with the authorities to create lasting impact. Professional journalists almost always ascribe low credibility to citizen journalists and think of them as 'agenda-driven activists who actually damage journalism' (Chadha & Steiner, 2015). In India, a meaningful partnership between citizen journalism and mainstream media has yet to emerge, although there are encouraging signs a gradual transformation is underway. Evidence of news organisations scaling up resources to facilitate a greater incorporation of citizen inputs, not least because such material is perceived to be popular with audiences and relatively inexpensive, suggests there is a growing recognition of citizen journalism's potential to recast news reporting.

A similar missing link can be found in Southeast Asia, although it is more for a different reason: the absence of the democratic life that India enjoys. Although being home to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, the watershed event that helped bring citizen journalism to the attention of the global media (Allan, 2013), Southeast Asia is not a place where one would expect citizen journalism to have an easy ride. By traditional Western standards, such as Reporters Without Frontiers' World Press Freedom Index, the political elites of this region are among the world's least willing to offer ample space for citizens to voice their independent concerns, let alone to have their own news platforms. Often in the name of political stability, ethnic unification, and religious harmony, they continue to resort to all classic measures – direct verbal/written threats, legal harassments, assaults on the economic survival of independent press, formal and informal control over media ownership, technological intervention (e.g. abolishing radio frequencies, erecting firewalls), and coercive forces – to stifle independent voices (Solomon et al., 2018). In that context, it is no surprise that the incorporation of citizen-generated content into Southeast Asian mainstream news output is not as vigorous as elsewhere.

That is not to deny that citizen journalism initiatives have enjoyed some degree of success in Southeast Asia. In fact, the region is a good case to see the resilience of citizen journalism in

difficult political spaces. In Indonesia, a long and still strong tradition of citizen journalism on radio has been enriched by blogs and social networks to add diversity to a media system owned mainly by a small, powerful elite. In Malaysia, where the media are under either political parties or government-friendly corporations, a long-perceived lack of journalistic pluralism has been a key factor in stimulating a steady growth of citizen reportage in the past decade or so. With half of the population being under 30 years of age, the increasing affordability of smart phones and other technologies leads Malaysians from all walks of life to use social media to bear witness, share information, or debate issues. In the process, citizen journalists bring alternative perspectives to the traditionally centralised mainstream media system with their firsthand audio, video and written accounts, grassroots analyses of socio-political protests, environmental concerns, human rights abuses, political corruption and so on. In 2008, Malaysiakini, one of the country's few independent online news ventures, took the lead in training hundreds of citizen journalists to produce thousands of news videos and articles for its website. Citizen Journalism Malaysia, a recent spin-off from this training initiative, claims in its self-introduction that it has 'paved the way for a journalistic revolution in Malaysia', with many of its citizen reporters having 'shaken political parties, highlighted community struggles, covered religious and ethnicity issues and other such stories which would not normally make it to mainstream media'.¹

Similarly, in Vietnam, the ruling Communist Party's tight grip on the media has been challenged by the autonomous growth and popularity of global social platforms over recent years – namely Yahoo! 360 in the 2000s (Nguyen, 2009), then Facebook and YouTube since 2010 (Grey, 2015). As of January 2019, according to We Are Social, 62 million Vietnamese (64% of the population) were active social media users, spending 2 hours 32 minutes per day on such platforms.² The sheer volume of social news and information, shared across emergent spaces of interactive dialogue and debate, exposes ordinary people's personal struggles. Further, examples abound where political secrets have come to light, controversial legislative actions were called into question, or street protests organised and co-ordinated to articulate dissent (such as nationalistic movements against China in sea border issues, for example). This has led the Communist Party to reassess its initial tolerance of citizen journalism in the 2000s, with some officials authorising fear-driven attempts to eliminate daring bloggers and to ban or block social media over the last decade. In the main, however, the government now formally recognises social media as part of the general media landscape, although it stops short of calling them a news and information system in its own right.

Citizen journalism, it should be noted, is not always seen in a negative light by the political elite in this region. Rather, it can be a positive and effective agent of change, so long as demands for reform are respectful of the same boundaries set for the mainstream news media. In practice, however, it frequently proves difficult to agree where such boundary lines should be drawn, with the result being numerous legislative efforts intended to make it riskier for anyone who wants to be a citizen reporter committed to political advocacy. In Vietnam, the Cyber Security Law, which came into effect in January 2019, is now used as a legal framework to threaten and silence critics as well as to tame global media companies such as Facebook and Google. It remains to be seen whether such laws will be successful in these respects, but with China's increasing influence in the region and reduced reliance on Western financial and technical assistance (Solomon et al., 2018), many regimes in Southeast Asia are now looking to China to find ways to handle the opportunities and challenges from social media, especially those that bear implications for their political survival. Like China, for example, the Malaysian and Vietnamese governments have introduced so-called 'public opinion agents' on a considerable scale, their purpose being to effectively police social web

platforms by countering those narratives deemed unfavourable to the state's interests. On that note, it is time to return to an examination of Chinese perspectives on citizen journalism and its relationship to wider political cultures.

Inside China

In turning to consider the Chinese context, it should be noted from the outset that the country upholds two contrasting governmental structures – the authoritarian system in the mainland and the democratic one in Hong Kong – which necessarily give shape and direction to citizen-led forms of newsmaking. Even in mainland China, it is possible to show how, when and why certain citizen journalism initiatives have flourished despite the constraints engendered under a tightly controlled public sphere.

An early remarkable example of Chinese citizen journalism took place in 2007, when the mainstream press directed public attention to onsite images and posts appearing on the blog of a local resident in Chongqing concerning a so-called 'nail house' – a household actively disobeying an official order to move out of a state-owned property to make way for a development project. The resident, a young blogger who was later described as 'the first citizen journalist in China', took a trip to the nail house and reported on how the occupants, a working-class couple, were desperately fighting developers from the construction site. His blog posts soon gathered half a million readers, many of whom held protests to save the couple's house and eventually compelled the mainstream media to cover the plight of the couple much more sympathetically. Since then, citizen journalism – in all of its variations – can be shown to have adopted a range of different strategies to open up deliberative spaces across online platforms. Its advocates have advanced alternative types of reporting, striving to illuminate calls for social justice for the disadvantaged, the need for environmental reforms to combat global warming, the monitoring of governmental responses to crises and disasters (as seen in the Wenchuan earthquake above, the Zhejiang high-speed train collision in 2012 or the Tianjin port storage house explosions in 2015) or to expose the long-hidden hypocrisy and misdeeds of the establishment (including the recent outpouring of Chinese #MeToo scandals that involve many powerful men).

Significantly, China has managed to stay relatively clear of the sweeping political impact of Western social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This is because it not only bans these networks but also fosters the rise to dominance of home-made social media platforms, such as WeChat and Sina Weibo. Such networks gradually replaced early, grassroots spaces for citizen journalism, such as bulletin boards and blogs, thereby containing its growing prominence in close alignment with state interests to a considerable extent. Where citizen journalism proves to be influential, officials can easily intensify state surveillance of the social web, keeping a vigilant eye on any challenge to the government line they deem to be excessive. Various laws and administrative regulations have been devised to allow for online citizen news to be filtered, as well as to deny citizen reporters the legal recognition and protection mainstream journalists otherwise enjoy (Yong, 2011).

That does not mean the state can be in total control, of course. While China-made social media are easily subjected to government orders and censorship requirements, their sheer size and communication speed can go beyond the ability of any censor to keep up. As Guo (2014: 336) observes from the case of Weibo, the country's most popular micro-blogging platform (with 446 million users in the fourth quarter of 2018³), 'information spreads more rapidly on Weibo than previous

communication tools because of the large number of users on Weibo and the relative ease of reposting messages'. There have been instances in which Weibo demonstrates the potential to promote counter-hegemonic voices calling for regime changes (Sullivan, 2012). In most cases, however, it seems Chinese citizen journalism is still within the 'tolerance threshold' of the regime. Consistent with such a view, however, is the recognition that self-censorship is not restricted to professional journalists, being a condition which their citizen counterparts must tacitly uphold as well. Such self-censorship often means sparing people who are very high in the power structure from criticism, or avoiding issues deemed to be too politically sensitive or controversial. Reports of power abuses and wrongdoings are likely to surface at local and provincial levels, rather than with regard to central government.

To a substantial extent, then, Chinese citizen journalism has gathered momentum, gained influence, and contributed to the outcome of public affairs in and through its impact on mainstream news agendas. Today, it has become common for the news media to tap into the power of citizen journalism, both as a rich resource of information and as an alternative avenue for field reporting (Xin, 2010). Tong's (2016) in-depth study of Chinese journalists suggests they are redefining their own professional identity as a result, both as a way to distinguish and defend themselves from citizen journalists and to adapt to the changes that the omnipresent eyes and ears of the public have brought to news production routines and standards. At the same time as embracing its benefits, however, professional journalists remain wary. In common with their counterparts in India and Southeast Asia, as noted above, they are protective of journalism as an exclusive domain, one where the norms and values of professionalism are consonant with quality, credibility and legitimacy. One Chinese journalist informed Tong (2016, p. 606) that citizen-generated content is often 'fragmented and incomplete', not necessarily because people deliberately lie but rather they are 'just biased' in relation to their personal priorities. In fact, most journalists participating in the study defended themselves as professionals on the basis that they work in a paid job for a mainstream media organisation, whose identity is associated with 'investigating, writing and publishing' news (p. 611).

This special issue

Taken together, the selection of articles presented in this special issue, 'New Perspectives on Citizen Journalism,' offers a diverse array of perceptive insights into the evolution of pertinent reportorial forms, practices and epistemologies in China over recent years. Each article affords a distinct vantage point from which to explore research questions formulated to delve beneath surface appearances in order to reveal the lived experiences of individuals situated across the citizen-professional journalistic continuum.

We first turn our attention to perceptions regarding the relative credibility of citizen journalism in China. Jing Zeng, Jean Burgess and Axel Bruns' article starts with a study inspired by the aforementioned Tianjin blasts, when the credibility of the authorities was challenged by information from citizens' posts. Their investigation showed that citizen journalism was credited with providing better, more credible information, especially when the voice of authorities is in doubt. In fact, Weibo's central control of its community verification system, which provides users with the ability to flag but no power to arbitrate false information, was found to be a factor limiting users' potential for collaboratively identifying and exposing such information.

Following this, Yan Wu and Matthew Wall's study explores how users of WeChat, China's most popular social media platform, interact with news and political discourse within a multi-layered but monitored space. Gathering data from focus groups with UK-based users of the app, they examined how their patterns of news consumption and sharing contribute to patterns of reception, interpretation and dissemination that can lend momentum to the voicing of citizen concerns and support for specific causes. Wu and Wall focus attention on the blurriness of boundaries between news and the agenda-promoting effects of the meta-voicing that is linked to users' online activities and conversations.

Next, the special issue features four studies examining the various aspects of the relationship between citizen journalism and the mainstream media and the broader political system of China. Yu Xiang's contribution to this issue focuses upon short user-generated videos hosted on three online platforms, Xinhua, Kwai and Pear Video. Using frame analysis, it finds that user videos tend to be largely entertainment-oriented and apolitical in nature. Like Luo and Harrison's analysis, this study finds that social media content does not exert an agenda-setting influence on governmental media platforms and indicates that citizen journalism in the form of short videos does not play a significant role in directly shaping news or political agendas.

A somewhat different picture emerges from Yumeng Luo and Teresa Harrison's next study on how citizen journalism impacts agendas not only in sections of the traditional media, but also in the policymaking process in China. They undertake a comprehensive quantitative analysis of issues raised in commercial social media, a government-sponsored social media platform, a commercially-oriented newspaper, a government-sponsored newspaper and the agenda reflected in policy proposals submitted at the National People's Congress in 2015. Their analysis shows that opinions expressed in online social media influence the agenda of commercially-run newspapers and, to some extent, the policy agenda, but not the content of government-run newspapers.

Moving the relationships between citizen and mainstream journalism from mainland China to the more democratic space of Hong Kong, the last two articles demonstrate a clear difference: such relationships are still yet to be negotiated for professional rather than political reasons. Florin Serban offers an account of the strategies of Hong Kong's professional journalists in accepting and dismissing citizen journalism. Given the special status of Hong Kong, especially when the conditions of press freedom have deteriorated, journalists are facing the challenges of the rise of public participation in journalism. Professional habitats are built when professional journalism wishes to differentiate itself from citizen journalism; however, the struggles at the newsroom level to either accommodate or to reject the amateurs are also shaped by public participation. Meanwhile, the journalistic response prompted by public participation can also explain the struggles of professional journalists in addition to the struggle to define their role vis-a-vis amateur journalists.

In the final study, Karoline Nerdalen Darbo and Terje Skjerdal explore an aspect that is common to many mediascapes – contests over the legitimacy of citizen journalism. They study the relative role perceptions of conventional journalists and citizen journalists in the semi-autonomous region by interviewing a sample of those who cover politics in both groups. Their focus on how professional boundaries are defined also provides indications of how these boundaries are shifting. While traditional journalists are sceptical of the professional values and standards of citizen journalists in Hong Kong, the latter contest this and instead claim legitimacy by subscribing to many of the same values, albeit within a different organisational context.

To close, then, it is the expressed hope of this special issue's editors and authors that its readers will be inspired to pursue research into citizen journalism. The articles presented here endeavour

to build on the small but burgeoning scholarly literature focusing on Chinese dimensions to these issues, extending it in new directions with fresh perspectives.

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Notes

1. See <http://cj.my/about-cjmy/> (last accessed on January 29, 2019)
2. See https://www.slideshare.net/HoangDungQuy/we-are-social-vietnam-2019-vietnam-digital-landscape-2019-report?qid=f55a0826-d33a-486c-a5c8-caaf0eab1af8&v=&b=&from_search=1 (last accessed on February 17, 2019)
3. <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/social-media-in-china/>

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