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# CITIZEN JOURNALISM IS AS OLD AS JOURNALISM ITSELF

// An interview with Stuart Allan

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Professor Stuart Allan from Cardiff University in the UK is one of the leading scholars in contemporary journalism studies. He has made a significant contribution to the development of this research field, having authored or edited seventeen books to date (many of which have been translated into multiple languages), as well as a wide range of journal articles and book chapters. He is a co-founder of the peer-reviewed journal *Journalism Education*, and serves on the editorial board of ten journals, including *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, and *New Media & Society*.

Although he is a man of many interests, Allan's personal scholarship in journalism studies revolves around four themes: 1) journalism and democracy, where his attention has focused on the evolving role of the journalist in public life (Allan, 2010, 2012; Carter, Branston, and Allan, 1998; Fowler-Watt and Allan, 2013); 2) online news, with a particular interest in citizen journalism and what he terms citizen witnessing (Allan, 2006, 2013; Thorsen and Allan, 2014); 3) the changing nature of war, conflict and crisis reporting (Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Matheson and Allan, 2009; Zelizer and Allan, 2013); and 4) science journalism, with a special interest in how it is evolving in digital contexts (Allan, Adam and Carter, 2000; Allan, 2002; Anderson, Petersen, Wilkinson and Allan, 2009). Further research interests include journalism and human rights, media history, photo-journalism, and young people's civic engagement with digital media.

Interwoven throughout these four themes is Allan's commitment to contributing to a wider set of debates – both within academic and professional contexts – regarding how best to improve the quality of journalism as a public service. While this commitment enables a degree of coherence to emerge across these themes, it is Allan's fascination in documenting and critiquing the evolving forms, practices and epistemologies of the reportorial craft that seems to propel him forward. His recent authored book, *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis* (Polity Press, 2013), explores the spontaneous actions of ordinary people, caught-up in crisis events transpiring around them, who feel compelled to participate in the making of news. In bearing witness to what they see, Allan shows how they engage in unique forms of journalistic activity, generating first-hand reportage – eyewitness accounts, video footage, digital photographs, Tweets, blog posts – that frequently making a vital contribution to news coverage. Currently, Allan is researching and writing an alternative historiography examining the rise of visual war reportage from the 1840s up to the digital era. Here an important focus is the contribu-

tions of ordinary citizens – that is to say, amateur war photographers, including soldiers themselves – in shaping what is documented, how and why.

The problem of how best to define citizen journalism, as well as its current (and historical) development, is the main topic of the interview below, conducted during Allan's stay in the Czech Republic in October 2014. He was hosted by the Institute of Communication Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague.

**One might say that citizen journalism is simply journalism made by citizens. Is the definition of citizen journalism so easy?**

Thank you, this is a good place to start. Let's remind ourselves at the outset that journalists are citizens as well. In other words, in considering what counts as citizen journalism, it is helpful to consider what counts as citizenship for journalists. These are the sorts of definitional complexities that tend to be glossed over by stereotypes, both celebratory as well as critical ones. We need to think carefully about what happens when people are labelled as amateur or citizen journalists, both for them and for journalists' self-perceptions about their roles and social responsibilities. Quite a lot of this labelling is happening within news reporting itself, of course; it is often journalists who are referring to their fellow citizens as citizen journalists. How, when and why they do this is rather interesting, in my view, and worthy of attention.

At the same time, we might also explore who is actually using the phrase citizen journalist to describe themselves and what they are doing; that is, we might ask, who has a personal investment in upholding the notion of citizen journalism? How does it advance their interests or priorities? It is my impression that it is a relatively small number of people who think of themselves in this way, even if they might be otherwise engaging in activity that we might describe as journalistic. Often these definitional tensions prove significant where bearing witness is concerned, which is why I have been differentiating "citizen witnessing" from citizen journalism in my recent work.

**Citizen journalism is usually described as a phenomenon of recent years, which is strongly related to the expansion of the Internet. However, is it really something new, or did some kind of practice which can be described as citizen journalism exist before we started using the term?**

I think were you to conduct an etymological search to trace the origins of the phrase "citizen journalism", you will see that it enters journalism's vocabulary in the aftermath of the tsunami in south Eastern Asia in December 2004. That is when the term really starts to claim its purchase in terms of discussions and debates about what seemed to be a new phenomenon being ushered in by the internet at the time; that is to say, ordinary citizens taking it upon themselves – in the absence of journalists at the scene – to engage in journalistic activity using digital technologies.

Here, though, I would suggest that the notion of citizen journalism is really as old as journalism itself. Centuries ago, as a general conception of the journalist gradually began to gain popular currency, there were some individuals otherwise engaged in related types of activities who found themselves excluded from its definition, who were not allowed to call themselves journalists. Definitions, as we know, are both inclusionary and exclusionary. So right from the early days of something recognizable as journalism, you can trace a diverse array of different ways of laying claim to being a journalist, many of which revolve around amateur involvement in newsmaking.

Now, from today's perspective, we have the benefit of hindsight. We can look back and see early examples of what we might currently call citizen journalism, long before the term itself became part of a journalistic lexicon. Examples I have written about include Abraham Zapruder's 'home-movie' of US President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas in 1963. Zapruder succeeded in capturing vital film footage that none of the journalists on the scene were able to take. A further example concerns the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in 1991, this time involving an ordinary citizen with a camcorder who was able to document what police violence looks like up close for the world to see. More recently – but still before the term citizen journalism – the September 11, 2001 attacks saw ordinary citizens making crucial contributions to news reportage. Various described as “amateur newsies,” “personal journalists,” “do-it-yourself reporters,” and the like, they represent yet another memorable example of how citizens, in the right place at the right time, secured visual evidence that engendered powerful insights with profound implications for public life.

### **How would you describe citizen journalist and what is his or her motivation to take the task?**

I have been using the phrase “citizen witness” to describe people who find themselves on the scene of a crisis event – an accident, disaster, conflict or even in a warzone – who have the presence of mind to try to document what they're seeing. They may be at the scene purely by chance, or perhaps purposely so, but in any case strive to record what's happening from their perspective or vantage point. It might entail capturing an image or video on their mobile telephone, crafting a tweet, or posting something on their blog or Facebook page, amongst other possibilities. Guiding their practice, to varying degrees, is likely to be a compulsion to share, even if a sense of journalism is rather far from their minds. I think that the desire to connect with distant others – friends, family, colleagues, members of the digital communities within which they participate, and so forth – is a very powerful motivation. Some may see this as being consistent with a civic duty, feeling obliged to be an eyewitness to something that is transpiring in the absence of journalists. It is this sense of witnessing that is crucial though, in my view, regardless of whether or not the person involved self-identifies as a citizen journalist.

Of course, there are people who do think of themselves as citizen journalists, who consciously and purposely perform a journalistic role. By way of example, they might live in a community where the local newspaper has ceased to publish for financial reasons, thereby depriving the community of sufficient news and information. Individuals taking it upon themselves to step into the breach may find themselves spending their free time one evening attending, say, a local council meeting, sitting there for two hours listening to a debate about car parking restrictions amongst other local issues. Afterwards, they might go home and write up a news story or two on their personal blog or community website, perhaps including an image or a video recorded at the meeting, in order to alert everyone to what's happening. And, in so doing, they're contributing to a broader discussion amongst fellow citizens about their council's actions. No doubt others will weigh in on the comment pages, or perhaps in a community forum, with their views and opinions, or alternative facts and perspectives, and away we go. Local deliberation over issues that matter to a particular community, transpiring with a degree of transparency, and thereby accountability, made possible by a citizen journalist.

**So would you say that what is described as citizen journalism in public discourse – in which the term is predominantly related with some special events – should be better called citizen witnessing?**

Well, the example of the individual self-identifying as a citizen journalist that I outlined in response to the previous question is going to be relatively rare in comparison with the more typical situations. That is to say, more commonly the citizen witness comes to the fore on a spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment basis. In all likelihood, they didn't plan or anticipate such a role in advance, but find themselves suddenly performing it under unexpected circumstances. Here we need to draw a further distinction between the person who happens to be a bystander to an event and casually observes it, perhaps offering a passing impression, and the person who elects to bear witness. In the case of the latter, bearing witness entails a moral commitment, in my view, where one endeavours to document what is transpiring the best one is able (truthful testimony), and thereby strive to uphold an ethical responsibility to others. So we have different degrees, or I would suggest registers, of witnessing aligned with what Michel Foucault termed 'regimes of truth' within a given society. Not all citizen witnesses are necessarily truthful, of course, which complicates easy definitions.

**How do news organizations and editors cope with citizen journalists? How do they approach it?**

This is precisely the challenge that journalists and editors continue to ponder. Most have formal procedures in place, but nevertheless continue to experiment with different strategies to verify the accuracy of citizen contributions and to find creative ways to use it to effectively supplement their news coverage. Your question uses the word 'cope,' which was the initial attitude – it was all about trying to contain or manage citizen content by keeping it at arm's length from 'real' reporting – but now I think it is more likely to be regarded in positive terms. The smarter news organizations, in my view, try to forge innovative, collaborative relationships with their readers, listeners or viewers.

This sense of partnership is part of a larger, dramatic shift that has taken place over recent years, and is still working its way through in practical terms. It has not been easy for news organizations to accept that now, when a major event takes place, the first person on the scene documenting what is happening is likely to be an ordinary citizen. Moreover, he or she will be likely sharing their content – their personal reportage – with others, possibly via YouTube, Twitter or other social networking sites, before the professional journalist has even arrived at the scene. Not surprisingly, then, the more traditional sense we have of the journalist as the 'people's witness' is frequently being recast by people taking responsibility for their own witnessing, with or without the involvement of the news media.

This doesn't mean there isn't a role for the journalist. Far from it. It means that the role is evolving, inviting new questions about how news organizations can sustain mutually beneficial, co-operative relationships with citizen witnesses on the scene. It's about rethinking a journalistic role previously defined on the basis of being first with the news to embrace, in turn, alternative conceptions revolving around investigation, delving deeper to secure facts and insights, situating them in appropriate explanatory contexts, and providing interpretations of their larger significance. I like to see it as part of a broader democratization of our news media.

**When working with content provided by the citizens, the editors should bear in mind that citizens are not educated journalists. Thus, their stories might not tell the whole truth. How can editors verify that information from citizen journalists is true and what are the dangers of using this kind of content?**

Every news organization will probably tell you that there have been instances, despite their best efforts, when citizen content they thought was authentic turned out to be unreliable. It's more likely because the person who shared it with them was mistaken about its provenance, rather than deliberately trying to peddle misinformation, but it does happen. A sensible maxim in newsrooms holds that any story that is too good to be true is most likely untrue. Journalists and editors are under pressure to be constantly improving their strategies to independently verify the credibility of the material they are gathering from members of the public, many going to great lengths to double-check its quality for fear of the ensuing reputational damage should they gamble and get it wrong.

This is not a new phenomenon, of course. News organizations have always had people coming in off the street, writing letters or ringing up on the telephone (or, even better, passing over documents in brown-paper envelopes) purporting to share vital information of newsworthy significance. A major difference now is the remarkable speed at which this happens, as well as the sheer volume of material that arrives every day. Journalists and editors face intense pressure to make swift decisions, sometimes before the facts have been fully determined. Resisting the rush to judgment can be difficult, especially when a scoop or exclusive is hanging in the balance, but the better news organization will slow down long enough to get the story right. Independently verifying citizen content takes precious time – such as checking out the GPS data when an image is sent to them, or finding a way to contact the person who sent it in, asking questions in order to really pinpoint the location and circumstances – but reportorial integrity is at stake.

Some citizens contributing material are seeking to advance their own agendas, for better or for worse. It may be an aid worker who wants to draw attention to the plight of people in desperate conditions, a first responder documenting the bravery of an emergency rescue crew, an activist or whistleblower hoping to remedy an injustice, or a combatant revealing the horrors of the battlefield, amongst other possibilities. And, regrettably, there are those instances when citizen contributions amount to propaganda, lies, or gross distortions of the truth sent to a news organization with malicious intent. Sifting through this content with a curatorial eye is not easy at the best of times – it can even be vicariously traumatic for the person performing this role on behalf of the news organization – but it needs to be done, quickly and conscientiously. At the same time, the news organization has a duty of care to the citizen sharing content with it. Such individuals may be placing themselves at great personal risk in order to help cover an event in a crisis situation, without the benefit of journalistic training to know how to stay safe. So the responsibility goes both ways.

**Do you have any examples when editors failed to verify information gathered from citizen journalists?**

Every time I have the opportunity to speak with editors and journalists about these issues, I usually get a grudging acknowledgement that mistakes have been made, although specific details don't tend to be forthcoming! Mistakes will happen, so the important thing is to learn from them, and try your best not to make the same mistake twice.

Easier said than done, of course, especially in the heat of the moment. In the immediate aftermath of the South Asian tsunami in 2004 and early 2005, there were a small number of occasions when images in circulation were later shown to have been taken at a different disaster years earlier. I remember the same problem occurred following Haiti's earthquake in 2010, amongst other examples. Tell-tale signs that a news organization isn't entirely confident in what they're using can be revealed with captions saying 'this amateur image purports to show...' or via qualified attributions such as 'eyewitnesses at the scene claim to have seen...', and so forth. In these and related ways, a given news organization distances itself to some extent, which may prove beneficial to help preserve its credibility should the veracity of apparent facts eventually come unravelled.

Not all news organizations see this as their responsibility, though. A case in point is CNN's iReport.com, which relies entirely upon its members to crowdsource material and double-check its veracity. The last time I looked, the site was clearly acknowledging that news items were not being edited or fact-checked by CNN before posting; rather, responsibility for the quality of the reporting rested with the iReport community. And it works remarkably well, in my view, despite the occasional lapse in judgement (which is almost always very quickly corrected). Users of the site proceed with caution, but presumably find it worthwhile nonetheless.

All of us should retain a healthy scepticism for everything we encounter online, comparing and contrasting different viewpoints, trying to read truth claims against the grain, so to speak. Our trust needs to be earned by news organizations every day.

**Considering all problems citizen journalism might bring to news organizations, press is still willing to publish such content. What extra quality or added value does citizen journalism have?**

Following the London bombings in 2005, I was working on a project that involved me visiting a range of newsrooms to observe and interview journalists and editors at work. Several of them assured me that citizen journalism was just some kind of passing fad that would soon disappear. They seemed confident in their predictions that the public would soon become bored with it (a similar sort of speculation concerned the imminent demise of 'reality TV' at the time, and it's still with us). Flash-forward to today, and I think it fair to say people remain intensely interested in citizen reportage. Why this is so is worth trying to figure out.

From the news organization's point of view, it is the case that it is much cheaper to monitor and process citizen material than to actually employ their own network of journalists to gather news independently. Citizen imagery, in particular, is very popular with audiences, many of whom seem to prefer it in certain circumstances to that produced by photojournalist – and this has serious implications. Content that is popular and relatively inexpensive is going to be almost irresistible for a news organization, especially one more worried about bottom-line profitability than public service. When it comes to explaining why some people seem to prefer citizen imagery, we need to conduct further investigation. Recently, I have been doing some research along these lines with Dr Chris Peters in the Netherlands. We conducted qualitative opinion surveys with young people in Canada, the Netherlands and the UK to explore such questions, and while the findings are preliminary, they seem to highlight a paradox of sorts. That is, many of the participants in our study recognised that professional photojournalists are much more likely to generate better quality images in keeping with objective news reporting, but nonetheless feared

that such imagery was less truthful than that provided by ordinary citizens who accidentally found themselves on the scene. Citizens were credited with producing imagery that was more honest or authentic – despite often being shaky, poorly composed or out of focus – in part because it was unapologetically subjective rather than trying to be objective. This seems counter-intuitive in some ways; rather fascinatingly so, in my view.

Here I hasten to add that I am speaking in fairly general terms, but there are real tensions with respect to how professionals are perceived in relation to amateurs. It should encourage journalists to think about how their publics regard them, and whether some of their more familiar conventions (which risk seeming contrived in the eyes of some) may need to be subjected to self-reflexive critique with a view to making improvements. Citizen journalism poses thorny questions that warrant answers, especially when young people today, in particular, relate to news so differently than previous generations. I think the long-term implications for journalism will be significant.

**The most common product of citizen journalism are photographs or video recordings which are usually much less time consuming than written articles or analyses. How do you perceive the position of “written word” in citizen journalism?**

This question is intriguing. I am inclined to agree that citizen journalism is becoming increasingly image-centred, or such is my perception at least. The centrality of the blog has certainly fallen away, when it was previously regarded as the key genre for citizen journalism as recently as five years ago or so. Some people even speak about the death of blogging. Although I think that such talk is premature, it does seem to be the case that Twitter – in effect a form of micro-blogging to be fair – is a much greater priority for most people inclined to contribute to newsmaking. There is little doubt that it is much easier, and less time-consuming, to send a series of tweets offering impromptu eyewitness observations or images than it is to produce a more detailed blog post. I wonder sometimes whether this emphasis on immediacy, often for its own sake, is not indicative of how online news is developing in general.

In the early days of online news, I wasn't the only one assuming that it would follow a newspaper-based model of the news report. I recall the excitement amongst journalists who thought, finally, they would have enough space to really explore stories in depth (the size of the available news hole not being a problem where the internet was concerned). Nowadays, though, I am struck by how many news sites fashion their reports in ways that are more closely aligned with a broadcast-model. That is to say, stories are that much shorter to minimise scrolling down, more impressionistic in their treatment in order to be suitably timely, and typically accompanied by an image. Given that some news stories require complex details to be adequately explained, a deeper analysis of facts to go beyond superficial observations, and prove difficult to illustrate with imagery, will they be less likely to be covered? I fear this may be the case. Similar concerns were expressed in the early days of television news, and rightly so, as it turned out. It is not too late to re-envision online news, though, and re-centre it along a more rigorously journalistic model.

**In many cases, citizen journalism is strongly dependant on the quality of civil society – which is very weak in most post-Communist countries. What do you think is the future development of citizen journalism in such countries?**

I would like to think citizen journalism continues to develop in very positive ways, and the more I learn about what is happening in different countries, the more convinced I am



that this is the case. To the extent ordinary citizens feel compelled to involve themselves in newsmaking – whether it be as contributors or critics – it can only be a good thing for the health of civil society. This is not to deny that problems sometimes arise, but the value of encouraging everyone to think of themselves as active citizens – rather than as passive consumers – is transformative in its potential. I think it is consistent with a wider, albeit uneven democratization of our media, making news organisations more accountable to their publics and, we hope, more proactive in defending the public interest to challenge powerful political and corporate elites. The ideals of the press as a fourth estate continue to inspire many journalists, but examples abound where citizen journalists – broadly representative of a fifth estate – have succeeded in turning these ideals into realities.

**Professional journalists are no longer the only holders of information and citizen journalism may put professionals under pressure. What would you say: Has citizen journalism somehow changed the norms and practices of professional journalism?**

Yes, these norms and practices have been dramatically, and decisively, transformed. Again, speaking in general terms, journalists often tended to be rather insulated from their readers, viewers or listeners. This is no longer so. Virtually everything a journalist produces, in principle at least, can be subjected to very close interrogation by members of the public, who will be forthcoming in sharing their commentary and critique. Journalists, as a result, have to take care with what they say and do, knowing that any slip or mistake is likely to generate emails, tweets or challenges in the blogosphere. Most welcome this kind of interaction with their audiences, so long as it is respectful, recognising that it encourages them to be better at their jobs. The wiser amongst them realise that there are real advantages to be gained too, not least by finding ways to tap into the useful knowledge and expertise of fellow citizens in order to enrich their reporting.

Thank you for posing such thought-provoking questions. I shall continue to mull them over in the days ahead, and hope these responses will help to prompt lively discussion in Czech journalism studies.

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