

Media Ethics and Public Journalism

Aditya Kumar Shukla and Ashish Sharma
Assistant Professor,
Amity School of Communication, Amity University, Gwalior.

Abstract

As we know till 20th century, traditional journalism was more passive than active. Publics were supposed to consume news through various outlets made available to them via media houses like newspapers, magazines, radio and so on. There was very little participation on part of us, the publics. But with the rise of digitally networked technologies in 21st century such as the Internet and mobile phones is reshaping reporting across the continent. Public journalism, also called civic journalism, has been drawing the attention of media people in India since several articles reviewing the topic were published. Public journalism is not only a way of reporting but also a way of thinking, a philosophy regarding democracy and the relationship between media and democracy. It says that journalism is an indispensable element in the process of democracy, and that journalism must help publics participate in the process to solve problems facing their communities. Public journalism movement is most interesting in the sense that it causes us to reflect on the meaning of freedom of expression, because the movement suggests that freedom of expression is not a negative freedom, which means that no regulations are imposed on expression, but a positive freedom in which people are free to participate in the decision-making process of their communities. Public journalism, or participatory journalism as it is alternately labeled, is the act of a public or group of publics involved in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and other forms of information. Instantly they are also criticized by career-journalists due to lack of their training and orientation toward the standards, ethics, norms, and practices of professional journalism. This leads journalists to say that public journalists don't uphold the traditional journalistic value of objectivity when working on a specific subject and only professionally-trained journalists can understand the ethics required of news editors and reporters. This paper analyzes the ethical issues involved in public journalism as it overlaps with many ethical concepts of Journalism and mode of operations.

Key words: *Public Journalism, Social Responsibility, Ethics.*

Introduction

History of Public Journalism

“A journalist is the lookout on the bridge of state. He notes the passing sail, the little things of interest that dot the horizon in fine weather. He reports the drifting castaways whom the ship can save. He peers through fog and storm to give warning of dangers ahead. He is not thinking of his wages, or of the profits of his owners. He is there to watch over the safety of the people who trust him.” —**Joseph Pulitzer, 1904**

The public journalism movement emerged after journalists themselves began to question the predictability of their coverage of such events as the 1988 US presidential election. Those journalists became part of the public, or civic, journalism movement, a countermeasure against the eroding trust in the news media and widespread public disillusionment with politics and civic affairs. Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, was one of public journalism's earliest proponents. From 1993 to 1997, he directed the Project on Public Life and the Press, funded by the Knight Foundation and housed at NYU.

Initially, discussions of public journalism focused on promoting journalism that was "for the people" by changing the way professional reporters did their work. A study done for the Pew Center and the

Associated Press Managing Editors found that “45 percent of all editors surveyed say that their newsrooms use the tools and techniques of civic journalism. Sixty-six percent say they either embrace the label or like the philosophy and tools, suggesting that there are even more practitioners.” According to Leonard Witt, however, early public journalism efforts were, “often part of ‘special projects’ that were expensive, time-consuming and episodic. Too often these projects dealt with an issue and moved on. Professional journalists were driving the discussion. They would say, “Let’s do a story on welfare-to-work (or the environment, or traffic problems, or the economy),” and then they would recruit a cross-section of publics and chronicle their points of view. Since not all reporters and editors bought into this form of public journalism, and some outright opposed it, reaching out to the people from the newsroom was never an easy task.” By 2003, in fact, the movement seemed to be petering out, with the Pew Center for Civic Journalism closing its doors. Public participation - such as telephone calls into the running broadcasting - might also be seen as a part of it. However, new internet technologies gave birth to a new form of this movement.

What is public journalism?

Public Journalism is the act of non-professionals, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires (**Bowman & Willis, 2003, 10**).

The power of technology has given ordinary publics the power to become journalists, and be part of the new genre of journalism termed as public journalists. Public journalists are basically the audience, viewers or readers, who too want to contribute to their stories and concerns in the society they live in and take pride in recording events and sharing with others around the world be it entertainment or latest political issue or just an incident. Public journalism is also known as public or participatory journalism (**Baase, 2008**). Public journalism has further been described as the individual "playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information." In their report *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis write further that "the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires." According to Joyce Nip, public journalism, sometimes called online public journalism, can also be defined as a process in which people were entirely responsible for gathering content, along with envisioning, producing and publishing the news product. Public journalism embraces all the social media platforms such as Face Book, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace and the Blogosphere. All the content generated from these social media platforms alongside comments from the audience and message board postings, pictures and video uploads constitute what is now known as the User Generated Content (UGC), which is a feature closely associated with the public journalism concept. A good example is the opening up of most traditional media websites allowing traditional journalists to interact via comments and feedback using public journalism platforms. The BBC and The Guardian of London have fully embraced in different ways the institutional form of public journalism and its practice is widespread in the traditional media to different degrees. Public journalists can be accidental journalists, advocacy journalists and grass root journalists. Ross and Cormier 2010 provided further insight into these different forms of public journalism. Advocacy journalism according to them is “one that adopts a viewpoint; journalism with an intentional and transparent bias although it must be distinguished from propagandist reporting”, while accidental journalists are people caught unexpectedly in the middle of an event and who then make use of the social networking websites to broadcast their material.

Public journalism is very much a social development, produced and shaped by the “former audience”, according to Dan Gilmore. Coverage of disaster is mostly a race against time. It’s a fact that journalists are not always present or when incident or disaster strike. Their job is to put together the occurrences

using images, videos, and eye witness accounts. Dan Gillmor says public journalists can help “capture the moment, not the aftermath”. Public journalism should not be confused with civic journalism, which is practiced by professional journalists. Public journalism is a specific form of public media as well as user generated content.

Review of Literature:

Public journalism is the act of publics “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information”, according to the seminal report *We Media: How Audiences are shaping the Future of News and Information*, by Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis. They say, “The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.”

In a 2003 Online Journalism Review article, J. D. Lasica classifies media for public journalism into the following types:

1. Audience participation, such as user comments attached to news stories, personal blogs, photos or video footage captured from personal mobile cameras, or local news written by residents of a community.
2. Independent news and information Websites (Consumer Reports, the Drudge Report), Full-fledged participatory news sites (Ohmy News, Ground Report),
4. Collaborative and contributory media sites (Slashdot, Kuro5hin, News vine, Human Times)
5. Other kinds of "thin media." (Mailing lists, email newsletters).
- 6) Personal broadcasting sites (video broadcast sites such as Ken Radio).

New media theorist Terry Flew states that there are 3 elements "critical to the rise of public Journalism and public media": open publishing, collaborative editing and distributed content.

Schaffer (2006) observed that public journalism was emerging as a form of ‘bridge’ media, linking traditional forms of journalism with classic civic participation. He argued that public journalists were occupying civic spaces, where professional journalists would only squirm. As many as 98 per cent of the respondents in a web survey stated that the emergence of local news websites with content built from community members was a good thing, even though it may not all be the kind of journalism and finished stories one may see in a newspaper.

Schultz and Sheffer (2009) argued that media outlets have ceded almost total control of the content and distribution process to public journalists, who are motivated more by self-expression and a desire to change public opinion than they are by traditional journalism. A survey of public journalists was conducted to assess what, if any, impact they are having on traditional news values, such as balanced reporting, double checking facts and ethical reporting.

The beginning of Public Journalism in India

Conventional media players have variously experimented in Public journalism by offering ‘letters to the editor’ pages. Nowadays, getting viewers to engage actively in the collating and presenting of news on television is becoming a standard feature of many news channels in India. CNN-IBN is one of the first news channels in India to use the concept of "public journalist," whereby any person can send in a report that is aired in a separate section. On public hoardings the 24x7 English-language channels CNN-IBN invites viewers to be a ‘public journalist’ in the news enterprise. ‘You see it. You report it’, is how one of their advertisements phrases it. Viewers with well-documented stories send in video reports and images on local issues, or on local repercussions of national issues to their Public Journalism account on the channel’s website IBNlive.com.

On the news channel NDTV, text messages from the audiences are forcing courts to re-open long-standing unresolved criminal cases and expedite the delivery of justice. Every evening at prime-time, the news and analysis programs India 360° and Face the Nation on CNN-IBN solicit public opinion on an important issue of the day, and the audience obliges with a steady stream of text messages. While the program anchor engages in a lively discussion with the invited commentators, the viewer can read opinions 'sms-ed' by a nation-wide public at the bottom of the screen.

Merinews: India's first public journalism news portal. It is a people's news platform of the people, by the people, for the people, providing power to the people and empowering democracy. In the year 2007, the site won the prestigious Webby Award, which is likened to the Oscars of the web. The CEO and Editor-in-Chief of merinews.com, Vipulkant Upadhyay is keen in making this medium more powerful, thus meaningful by expanding public's participation in the political process. Merinews has launched a campaign, Public's Manifesto – 2067, for next 60 years. The objective is to create a roadmap for the nation's future. It is running a campaign to create a public's manifesto for India's next 60 years - a blueprint for the future of the nation - which is also meant to reinvigorate public's participation in the political process. Merinews has managed to generate a significant level of contributions for this project, also including participation from some politicians and senior bureaucrats. Some other startups also exist (or have failed by now) - for example, Instablogs.com, which mainly sources content from the AP newswire, or Purdaphash.com. There is also a growing trend towards Community Radio where common people get a platform to express their unheard voice. Thus, public opinion now finds easy and instantaneous expression in the form of public journalism.

Few examples of Public Journalism in India

Bhagalpur is a small town in the state of Bihar. A Public Journalist captured, in his camera, how a man accused of snatching a chain was brutally beaten first by the mob and then by the police, who even tied him to his motorcycle and dragged him for a distance. The visuals caught the attention of the nation and media pressure coupled with widespread condemnation of the open abuse of human rights forced Bihar government to act against the policemen involved. Another story by a Public Journalist was the headline of the entire news network. The story about the stripping of over 1000 men in the village of Boraj, near Ajmer, shook the conscience of the whole nation. The local elected body, the village Panchayat, had asked the men to strip to establish whether any of them was involved in the rape of a 35-year-old woman from the village. Another story, by a Punjab based Public Journalist, exposed theft from trains that ferried oil. Many children, men and women filling their buckets with oil were shown and as a result many guilty officials lost their jobs. When Uttarakhand was devastated by Tsunami, then it was difficult to do reporting. At that time entire media was totally depended on the information and posts by the citizens who are trapped in the Tsunami. Citizen struck in the area were the only source of getting information out of the disaster hit areas, the power of public journalism was displayed with citizens updating information on various social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Photos etc.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Public Journalism

Public journalism has been around since the communication began. New Technologies have and all will continue to allow public journalism to develop and become even more prevalent in society issues of credibility and accuracy. Public Journalism is totally different from other kind of journalism because it has a different style of writing, different thinking perspectives, different background and a different voice. Now with the help of technology everyone and anyone can express themselves and share their own views with others. Bowman and Willis (2003) identified that the intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide ranging and relevant information that democracy requires.

The idea of citizen journalist works best when people understand the journalistic ethics. In the absence of formal training or education it becomes a challenge for the main stream media to keep a track on hoe

the news is reported and views taking shapes through alternate media. With internet is providing the platform, we see millions of stories being posted and published by the citizens online. But out of them only few stories are being noticed. These stories can provide dangerous mis information and fuel damaging rumors because it wasn't appropriately checked and researched as there is no one there to censor them. This thing happened in Egypt during the Arab Spring, when protesters turned them into Public Journalist.

Salawu (2011) asserts that the model of citizen journalism is interactional because it emphasizes the two-way communication process between the communicators. In other words, we can say that communication goes in two directions, i.e.; from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This circular process suggests that communication is ongoing. He also believes that the model is equally transactional because the process is cooperative: the sender and the effectiveness of communication. In transactional model, people build shared meaning. What is essential in all this is that citizen journalism is participatory. In this audience is no longer passive.

Criticisms

There is a lot of risk involved with the citizens assuming the power to report. Within no time YouTube videos or a twitter account go viral and wild claims all over the world with no accountability. Potential false news reports are just one of the many possible ramifications of sourcing news from anonymous sources. The news could be factually correct, but have flaws like blatant disregard of ethics, lack of objectivity, impartiality and balance. There could also be a hidden agenda or opinion sugarcoated as fact or a libelous or defamatory statement that puts subjects in the story in bad light. In mainstream media, a process of verification and checks called gatekeeping can weed out any such inaccuracies and biases.

"The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information. And it's doing just that on the internet". Public journalists may be activists within the communities they write about. This has drawn some criticism from traditional media institutions such as the New York Times, which have accused proponents of public journalism of abandoning the traditional goal of 'objectivity'. Many traditional journalists view public journalism with some skepticism, believing that only trained journalists can understand the exact attitude and ethics involved in reporting news

Conclusion

The response from major industry players to public journalists remains unsure. Some see public journalists as an additional news source, some liken their work simply to letters to the editor; some see public journalism simply as a new buzzword which can be exploited in marketing their own products. Others uphold the need for professional journalism and deny that untrained public journalists could do the work of professionals, but also acknowledge the rise of public journalism as an alternative to their own products, and the choice which publics now exercise between these alternative options. India is the largest democracy in the world and we all know democracy is based on the voice of the common publics. Participatory journalism in India will definitely help in bringing this voice to the world over. Such a concept will revolutionize the entire media in the country. It will influence how news is reported in the traditional mainstream media. It will become a powerful tool for every Indian to report the news that touches their lives. Public journalism will help in addressing issues that affect common people.

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Web Resources

1. <http://www.esakal.com/sixsigma/html/historysakal.html>
2. www.merineews.com
3. www.indiantelevision.org