Enhancing citizen journalism with professional journalism education

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Conceiving the citizen journalist as a counterpart or even an antidote to the traditional journalist may have been alluring at one time, but these two public communicators have more in common than not in today's media environment and clearly benefit from each other's existence. This article will begin by briefly describing what separates the citizen journalist from the traditional journalist – at least in popular perception. In reality, these descriptions are at best generalizations and the characteristics used to describe one or the other type of journalist are likely to overlap at times.

Traditional journalists work for an established media organization like a newspaper, magazine, television station, or even a news website. Some may refer to them as being on the payroll of the mainstream media, which today is largely a corporate entity whose public service mission is balanced (their critics might say compromised) by an obligation to profitability. Beyond the structural characteristics of the workplace, many traditional journalists have been professionally trained in journalism programs.

If they formally studied their craft at an accredited journalism program in the United States, they most likely would have learned about the history of their field and current journalistic standards relating to reporting and writing for the media. They would have studied media law, media ethics, and about the tools and technologies that journalists use to communicate with their publics.

The citizen journalist is often conceived as an engaged member of the public who has something to say but chooses to do so outside of conventional or established media channels. In the mid- to late-1990s, the slogan "anyone can be a publisher" – thanks to relatively affordable and easy-to-use hardware, software, and networking capabilities – captured the imagination of citizens wanting to do what journalists do but on their own terms, not as employees of corporate newsrooms.

Thanks to advances in technology, citizen journalists could set up shop just about anywhere you could fit a personal computer with an Internet connection. This space might have been someone's bedroom or living room, or in the office of a neighborhood non-profit organization. The citizen journalist did not have to have a journalism education, show up for regular work hours, or meet routine deadlines. What he or she needed was passion, motivation, a desire to communicate, some resources to set up show, and time.

At some point, these two pillars of public communication emerged: the traditional journalist and the citizen journalist, the latter characterized as a maverick phenomenon free from corporate reins and stylistic rules. More than a few traditional journalists, however, worried that their "wannabee" counterparts lacked an understanding of journalism conventions or attention to the ethical and professional standards that have evolved over past century in the field of mainstream journalism.

Despite their differences, citizen journalists and traditional journalists share many things in common – the most obvious being their desire to communicate about topics that they feel are worthy of the public's attention. Both care whether their words are being read or heard; otherwise, they would be no different than private diarists. They both benefit from and presumably endorse a culture of free speech, including the right to criticize government and its office holders without fear of punishment or retaliation. And both can influence the way people think, feel, and behave by exposing the public to stories that move or impact them in one way or another.

One definition of "citizen" is someone who is entitled to the rights and privileges of a free person. As such, the term "citizen journalist" is an empowering one and carries a certain political weight since citizens have power and influence in a democratic society. However, since citizen journalists may not have formal journalism training or work for an established media organization, some in society may question their

credibility or qualifications to report the news. This may be an elitist point of view, or an honest attempt by news consumers to determine whether information presented to them can be trusted. Who is the source? Where do they come from?

In this article, the term citizen journalist refers mainly to people who have not had any journalism training but identify as a kind of independent reporter with access to a communication medium such as a website, blog or video channel. Two closely related questions will be addressed: 1) How might citizen journalists benefit from traditional journalism training? 2) How should traditional journalism programs use its time-tested curricula and pedagogy to both influence and benefit from the evolving practice of citizen journalism?

Historical context

In some ways (but not others) the history of journalism in the United States is arguably a reflection more of citizen journalism than professional journalism. Editors and journalists in Colonial America and in the early years of nationhood did not go to journalism schools or formal training programs; they were literate men who wanted to have a voice in what was going on around them.

Of course they did not work for newspaper chains or media conglomerates, as many traditional journalists do today. Their operations were not massive and complex, at least not until the twentieth century, and their readership was relatively small due to limited distribution channels and the relatively small size of their cities where most of the literate population was likely to live. Rather, the early journalists set up a small shop and went about the business of finding and reporting news (as well as sharing information beneficial to trade and commerce) for a relatively narrow but influential segment of the population.

Until the emergence of the penny press in the big cities around the mid-1830s and beyond, one could say these early journalists targeted their newspapers and pamphlets to niche markets, not broad segments of the population. These publications provided their readers with things to think and talk about, drawing them into communities of deliberation. Folkerts and Teeter (2002) write, "During the 1740s and 1750s, newspapers became indispensable tools for public political debate" (p. 34).

Despite journalism's contribution to democracy-building leading up to the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and beyond, the role of a journalist in American society was not well-defined. That was to change in the early twentieth century as formal training in journalism led to an evolving set of standards and conventions meant to inspire professionalism and earn public trust.

Journalism education past and present

Although newspapers have existed in the United States and in the American colonies before that for more than 300 years, the formal training of journalists is a much more recent phenomenon, a product of the twentieth century. Prior to that, journalists learned their trade through apprenticeships and informal channels. Some journalists worked their way up from being errand boys. It wasn't until 1908 that the first college of journalism was established in the United States, at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Within a few years, Indiana University and Columbia University in New York City established their journalism programs, followed by other institutions of higher learning (Hedges, 2008).

"Increasingly," one journalism researcher observed, "schools and departments of journalism within American universities and colleges would be the sources of journalism education in the twentieth century" (Winfield, 2008: 317). Today there are more than 400 schools and departments of journalism in the United States, about a quarter of which are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education on Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC).

Many journalism programs, whether ACEJMC-accredited or not, have similar core offerings: 1) basic and advanced news writing courses; 2) media law; 3) media ethics; 4) and possibly a course on the tools and technologies of journalism. Other courses may be offered as electives. Internships provide the opportunity for learning in the field.

Journalism programs have existed for more than a century to train future journalists. In the past these journalists would go on to work at newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and other media where a trained journalist's knowledge and skills were needed. With the advent of online news, the journalist's domain extended to the Internet and World Wide Web, especially after the mid-1990s.

Connecting the bifurcation

The rise – or some might say return – of citizen journalism is generally a good thing. It suggests that there are people who care enough about a subject or issue that they are willing to put the time, energy, and resources into researching and publicizing it. In an era when many communities are disappointed because of low voter turnout, lack of civic engagement, and decreasing interest in public affairs, the fact that there are those who are bucking this trend provide hope for maintaining a functional democracy.

As with traditional journalism, there are different qualities of citizen journalism. Some of it is outstanding and can provide, for example, frontline reports by citizens at a breaking news event where traditional journalists are not present or not present in sufficient numbers. Some of it provides excellent analysis of hot topics or focuses on stories and perspectives the mainstream media have ignored.

But when citizen journalism fails to incorporate elements of good journalistic practice into its reporting – elements such as accuracy, verification, fairness, evidence-based statements, proper attribution, and so forth – journalism as a whole can be tarnished. Of course the same can be said of traditional journalism when it violates its own professional standards.

The challenge of citizen journalism is that it does not (yet) have a comparable code of ethics that professional journalists and news photographers have and that which, when practiced, help bolster claims of professional integrity and credibility. And perhaps herein lies the opportunity: Journalism programs can enhance the quality of citizen journalism by offering educational opportunities (e.g. classes, workshops, seminars, etc.) to members of the public who are not interested in working for an established news media organization but prefer to work independently, doing enterprise reporting on subjects of their choosing and establishing and controlling their own channels of distribution (e.g., websites, blogs, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) These citizen journalists could be college students who have no interest in majoring in journalism but would be interested in learning certain aspects that journalism that can enhance their experience and effectiveness as citizen journalists.

Beyond college students, there are members of non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and other community-based entities that might be interested in citizen journalism education. The benefit to the academic unit would be a broader base of potential students to recruit from as well as bragging rights about service to the university and the community. Fees could also enhance revenues, which the college will likely smile upon.

The benefit to the citizen journalist – assuming this person is not already a professionalyl trained journalist – is the ability to accumulate more knowledge and skills that can make his or her work a valuable and public service. That might also be accomplished without any formal journalism training, but a hundred years of evolving pedagogy in the field of journalism have certainly resulted in some useful strategies for teaching effective and ethical communication and, on a more practical level, how to reduce the chances of being sued for libel, slander, and invasion of privacy.

As newspaper companies fold and television news programs face increasing competition from the Web as a provider of news content, students may question the viability of a traditional journalism degree. But if

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traditional journalism schools were to re-invent themselves, or just a part of themselves, as "journalism and convergent communication schools" or something along those lines, their curricula and targeted student population could better reflect the dynamic and innovative ways that the media environment is evolving both nationally and globally. Citizen journalists might see these reinvented programs as their allies and facilitators, as well as contribute diversity to the community of public communication professionals.

That "everyone can be a publisher" is a wonderful concept for democracy and for those in the "right to communicate" movement. Although the slogan is not particularly accurate (since not everyone in the world has access to or can afford the tools that enable widely distributed communication), the symbolic point is well taken. We live in an era where a teenager can easily set up a blog on WordPress, shoot raw video footage on a smart phone, edit together a video story (along with still photos taken with a digital camera) in iMovie, post that video story on YouTube, and link to that YouTube video from the blog for anyone with an Internet connection see.

It is true that just about anyone with the resources and technical literacy can go out into their communities and do their own reporting and distribution on whatever topic or issue moves them to communicate more broadly about it. However, the ability to do all these things and much more does not necessarily mean being able to do it well – from a technical, aesthetic, ethical, legal, or other standpoint.

The citizen journalists' "mini-course"

What might a series of classes geared to the prospective citizen journalist look like? It would be similar, in parts, to what traditional journalism students experience, except without the constant inference that the knowledge and skills conveyed are intended for application in traditional news organizations. It would start with a discussion, not a lecture, of the importance of truthful, ethical writing, and proceed with a description of different ways of writing stories – without getting too bogged down with the minute details of the Associated Press Stylebook, as might be the case in a conventional beginning journalism class.

Knowing AP style may be an optional side pursuit for a citizen journalist, but if he or she is not writing for the mainstream media and has no intention to do so, such conventions may be irrelevant and just turn a passion for writing into a drudgery of rule-learning. The more important learning outcome is clear, concise, accurate reporting.

Professionally trained journalists are taught to pursue the truth and report it – one of the standards for ethical journalism espoused by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) – and this should be observed by any individual identifying himself or herself as a journalist. The SPJ guidelines are as applicable to the *New York Times* reporter as it is to the maverick journalist covering City Hall and using her home basement as her "newsroom."

The other SPJ guidelines for ethical reporting are to minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable. Journalism students learn these standards, one would hope, early on, as part of their initiation into journalism education, as should probably anyone entertaining the notion of writing non-fiction for public consumption.

A relevant overview of media law would also be an essential part of the mini-course for citizen journalists since knowing what newsgathering and reporting activities are legal and illegal can help a citizen journalist avoid unnecessary litigation. Defamation (slander and libel), privacy, and copyright infringement would be covered, as would be access to government information, the use of confidential sources, and the journalist's newsgathering conduct.

The Accrediting Council on Education on Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) maintains a list of core values and competencies on its website that it would like accredited journalism programs to have as part of their student learning outcomes. This is a helpful list that can inform the mini-course planning for Citizen Journalism 101 (or whatever it is called), but it is more realistic for a two-year

journalism curriculum than a mini-course in citizen journalism. Nevertheless, some of these learning outcomes – which can be found on the ACEJMC website at http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/STANDARDS.SHTML – would likely be germane to citizen journalism education as well.

Faculty for the mini-course can be recruited from the existing faculty as well as the community, in particular a few individuals practicing the kind of citizen journalism that a traditional journalism program would consider exemplary. Team teaching possibilities – maybe one "old school" and one "new school" – could lead to some dynamic and enlightening classroom discussions.

Enhancing and invigorating democratic principles

Citizen journalism and traditional journalism have co-evolved from the same spirit of journalism that has contributed to the overthrow of tyranny and the institution of democracy in many different parts of the world. Today, each has something to learn from the other; each has the potential to enhance the other's quality of work. In recent years, citizen journalists, at risk to their own safety or life, have reported what was going on at ground level when traditional journalists were prevented from doing so. Traditional journalists abroad then publicize these reports, which benefit established media organizations and, by extension, their respective audiences.

Citizen journalists provide traditional news organizations with tips, story ideas, and news content they might not otherwise have access to. As partners or allies to traditional journalists, citizen journalists who are motivated by public service can play a meaningful role in enhancing and invigorating democratic principles. As we know from cases in journalism history, government, big business, and other bastions of social power tend to operate more judiciously under the watchful gaze of vigilant citizens or consumers.

Traditional journalism programs, with some modification to their curriculum and mission, can play a critical role in connecting the bifurcation between these two pillars of democracy. Citizen journalism done well can play an important role in invigorating journalism in general, leading to a future where many voices through many channels help keep the dual principles of free and responsible speech alive and well.

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