South Asian Citizen Journalism
A Content Analysis of News Diversity

Nareshchandra Rai
Department of Communication, Media & Marketing
Robert Gordon University
Aberdeen, United Kingdom

Abstract
With the rise of internet literacy across the world, ordinary people are increasingly participating in the news media more than ever before. Early speculations about the influence of citizen journalism imbued the practice with an almost messianic ability to save both journalism and democracy. Whilst these suggestions were influenced by a small amount of data analysis, mainly from Western countries, they were encouraging and demonstrated the potential of citizen journalism offering the voice of the voiceless. Analysing the coverage of citizen journalism news published on twenty-four sites from the member countries of South Asia, this paper discusses citizen journalism from a comparative perspective. The results show that the largest amount of news coverage is political news (24%) and fiction and literary work (24%), followed by general news (20%), and sports and entertainment (10%). On the other hand, the coverage of crime news — a popular news subject in the mainstream media in the West — and war and terrorism make up less than 3% of the total news.

Keywords: citizen journalism, journalism, news content, news media, South Asia

INTRODUCTION
With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, we are witnessing a rapid broadening of ways in which ordinary people communicate with each other. In other words, ordinary people are increasingly practising citizen journalism, often creating and distributing news information on a global scale. In fact, they are able to do essentially what professional journalists do — produce and distribute news information in many forms, from podcast editorials to reports about council meetings on a blog [or a website] (Cheri, 2014).

Bowman and Willis (2003) define citizen journalism as the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news information. They suggest that, by publishing news articles on the Internet, citizen journalists are able to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires. This may mean that citizen journalists not only provide news and information on important issues, but also play the role of a watchdog by monitoring the performance of the government and politicians, often providing alternative views and addressing issues largely ignored by the traditional media. As a result, the rise of citizen journalism is changing the mode of journalism. Thus, some big media organisations, including The BBC, are providing opportunities for news consumers to participate in the news media (Thurman, 2008).

Whilst the role of citizen journalism has been firmly established, with some citizen journalists, in particular bloggers, gaining high profiles after September 11 and during the 2003 Iraq war (Lih, 2004), citizen journalism practices vary from region to region, or even from country to country. Contrary to the common perception in the West that citizen journalism allows ordinary people to take on the role of the media, offering a more diverse array of perspectives, citizen journalism in South Asia functions as an alternative media, where both citizen and professional journalists often discuss their agenda from the alternative perspective.

Thus, the pattern of citizen journalism news in South Asia is different from elsewhere. This difference is due partly to news practices as well as media regulations, including the editorial censorship adopted by South Asian countries (Rai, 2015). In addition, citizen journalism in the region has not yet matured to the level of the West, and thus the South Asian population has not fully realised the potential of the phenomenon. This paper discusses citizen journalism from the perspective of South Asian countries, focusing mainly on four dimensions, namely citizen journalism as a news organisation, ordinary people as citizen journalists, news practices, and news values.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AS A NEWS ORGANISATION
Citizen journalism sites from South Asian countries exhibit facets of both an alternative and mainstream media. More specifically, on the one hand, they identify themselves as independent news providers, rejecting the notion of professional codes and the ethics of traditional journalism. In contrast to the dominant form of news sites, which simply reprint news content from their paper edition, citizen journalism sites aim to pioneer their own category as an alternative media, in which the mode of delivery is the Internet. In addition, they aim to survive on voluntary contributions from their network of journalists from all different parts of the world.

On the other hand, although the sites self-identify themselves as voluntarily-run independent news providers, some of the traditional structures are still necessary for their continued
online existence, such as the registration of the sites with a government department. They also place some limits on contributors, for example, contributors are required to comply with journalistic guidelines when submitting news articles to the sites. In addition, they aim to generate revenues through the sales of advertising on the Internet.

**ORDINARY PEOPLE AS CITIZEN JOURNALISTS**

South Asian citizen journalists come from a wide range of backgrounds, from politicians aiming to promote their political views to aspiring journalists wishing to enhance their existing knowledge and skills. Overall, two main categories of citizen journalists emerge from South Asia — a news-provider group and an advocate group. Citizen journalists in the first group are motivated to provide coverage of news that is perceived to support citizenship. For these citizen journalists, providing the coverage of news on a wide range of news issues is a social responsibility. In addition, they aim to provide breaking news and subsequent news developments on the news events in question.

Citizen journalists in the second group come from activist backgrounds and therefore their involvement in the news media is either to advocate for social and political changes or to achieve satisfaction through the expression of self in the news media. Thus, citizen journalists are mainly politicians or political activists. For these citizen journalists, journalistic practices are one mode of civic engagement rather than the act of providing independent news. Some citizen journalists in this group are retired professional journalists who use citizen journalism as a platform to promote their views.

**NEWS PRACTICES**

The empirical findings from the study of South Asian citizen journalism demonstrate diverse news practices. As citizen journalism predominantly takes place online, knowledge and skills about the Internet is essential for citizen journalists to practice journalism. However, such specific technological knowledge and skills required for citizen journalists depend on what types of format citizen journalism sites support. For example, some of the sites facilitate several different types of news contributions, from text to audio, images, and video, allowing citizen journalists to focus on the content formats with which they are familiar. On the other hand, other sites prefer the text format only.

Interactive news activities, such as posting comments about news articles, are one of the most common practices in South Asian citizen journalism. Citizen journalism sites encourage newswriters to engage in news discussions through comments, perhaps with the primary aim of building relationships and establishing public discourse on contemporary issues. In addition, supplementary materials, such as images, are widely used to enhance news articles.

Another interesting feature is the use of social-media services, mainly Facebook and Twitter. By providing the social-media platform, where people are able to interact with each other, sharing knowledge and experience, citizen journalism sites from South Asia encourage readers to participate in two-way communication, e.g. exchange of information among people in their network.

**NEWS VALUES**

The study reveals that citizen journalists give the highest priority to political news, perhaps due to the continuing political instability, poverty, and unemployment in the region. It is surprising that the least priority is given to war and terrorism news, despite growing threats from terrorist groups, such as Islamic militants. Similarly, citizen journalists also give national news the highest priority, discussing news issues that are occurring in their own local community. But whilst news articles about the outside world are frequently published on sites, citizen journalists pay the least amount of attention to what is going on within other South Asian countries. A lack of investigative journalism is evident in the coverage of news — only a few of the sites provide investigative types of news articles. Instead, opinion pieces are regularly published on the sites without any sources.

Another interesting finding is the publication of fiction work, although fiction writers may often provide fabricated personal accounts on a topic, which may not be considered as news articles (Kurland, 2000). By writing fiction articles, citizen journalists in South Asia aim to express their experience and opinions about their life and society. This means that citizen journalists see the fiction work as a way of telling their stories. Thus, it may be suggested that a defining of citizen journalism in South Asia includes fiction as well as factual reporting and opinion.

**A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM NEWS**

The majority of citizen journalism sites from South Asia aim to establish themselves as an independent news organization. As a result, citizen journalism continues to be a tool for a diversity of people to construct political discourses, thereby shaping the public sphere, although it has by no means become an institutionalised aspect of journalism in any of South Asian countries. The study demonstrates that citizen journalists from South Asian countries provide news content on a wide range of news subjects. The main subjects include: people and society, politics, business, health, education, sports and entertainment, science and technology, war and terrorism, religion and culture, and other. The other includes the work of fiction and non-fiction literary work.

The most popular category is political news (24%) and other (24%), followed by general news on people and society (20%). Other popular news subjects include sports and entertainment (10%), business (8%), and science and technology (5%). Interestingly, the coverage of crime news —
a popular topic in mainstream media in the West — makes up only 2% of the total news. The coverage of war and terrorism makes up the least at 0.5%.

It is also evident that the coverage of citizen journalism news is presented in four main types: straight news (35%), news analysis and features (15%), essays and opinion pieces (25%), interviews (1%), and the rest makes up fiction and literary journalism. Similarly, 61% of the total news is coded as national, followed by international (14%), and transnational (1%) whilst the rest makes up literary work.

The study demonstrates that citizen journalism exists in all of the South Asian countries, including those involved in widespread conflicts, such as Afghanistan. However, the coverage of citizen journalism news differs from country to country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the analysis shows that the larger and more developed countries provide the majority of news stories. More specifically, India dominates the coverage of news by providing 53% of the total news content. Sri Lanka provides the second largest number of news content (16%), followed by Pakistan (14%), Bangladesh (5%), and Bhutan (5%). Afghanistan, the Maldives, and Nepal provide less than 3% each. It is also evident that citizen journalism sites from South Asian countries encourage feedback from its readers, making use of social media with links to Facebook and Twitter. Whilst the majority of sites make use of hyperlinks to implement references to their news stories, they rarely quote each other's sources.

On the whole, citizen journalists from South Asia come from a wide range of backgrounds, from politicians aiming to promote their political views to aspiring journalists wishing to enhance their existing knowledge and skills. The majority of citizen journalists are driven mainly to the news media by a sense of social responsibility and a wish to inform the public about the current affairs of the country as well as the world, although they remain in a marginalised role. However, citizen journalism in South Asian countries aims to address issues largely ignored by the mainstream media, and it is this news quality that may continue to enhance the public sphere, giving a voice to the voiceless and performing the critical role of a watchdog in the region, where the mainstream media is often accused of ignoring a large proportion of population, including marginalised groups.

References


