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IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Journalism has been defined as the “*activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information*” but the advent of social media and the internet has made journalism to be more contextualized, disseminated, and co-produced by the reporter and the receiver. Social media journalism is now the emerging and popular trend of collecting, producing, distributing, and consuming news and information on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others which are in addition to the conventional news platforms of radio, print, and broadcast. These media focused on research and content while the new concept of social media journalism emphasizes on form and production. The origin and the journey of social media journalism, its specifications, pros and cons, applications and the future prospects are both interesting and important to discuss to chart the overall probabilities in the field of journalism which is now on the junction of convergence between the producers and the consumers of news.

The Concept of Social Media Journalism

Social media journalism is the modern way of collecting, producing, distributing, and developing news and information. As the name suggests, social media plays an important role in this form of journalism, which is faster and responsive, but inaccurate and often developed out of mass opinion, rather than truth and facts. Social media journalism, therefore, encompasses a variety of web-related applications, technology and platforms used by media reporters, agencies, and even unemployed and unprofessional bloggers, writers, etc. to develop content on various topics and share these on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and so on.

Social media journalism is, to a great extent, similar to online journalism which is the online version of traditional journalism. Online journalism has the conventional news agencies and reporters working full-time or part-time to report top news and stories on the online news sites of

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typical news agencies like the New York Times, The Economics, etc. It is, however, to be noted that the degree of professionalism, operationalization, and accuracy in online journalism and social media journalism are on the opposite ends of the continuum. Social media journalism includes platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, LinkedIn, etc., online content-sharing sites such as YouTube, online discussion forums, micro-blogging sites like Twitter, and search engines like Yahoo, Google, Baidu, and so on. Social media is also used by global population which may or may not be an expert or even a learned person in journalism.

As such, while expert and specialized reporters and professional journalists who are associated with a news agency or a professional institute may also be using social media journalism as one of the modes of information sharing for immediacy benefits of social media platforms. In all other cases, it is the general public which expresses its views, opinions, beliefs, perceptions about certain topics and situations and it is widely spread through the social media features of like, comment, post, share, and news-and-story feed which results in unprofessional social media journalism. Alejandro (2010) conducted a survey of social media usage in news gathering and reporting for a sample of chief editors in different parts of the world. The survey revealed that most of the respondents agreed that social media is a valuable tool in driving traffic to the news site, branding, and breaking news.

History and the journey of social media journalism

News consumption in the satellite era was totally different and it is now characterized by news gathering, production and dissemination through Web 2.0 tools that offer creativity, personalization, openness, and many-to-many conversation. Journalism and conversation are converging with the interconnection of bloggers and readers who are increasingly using the social media and micro-blogging tools for a number of functions and activities. If the conventional journalism and media is to be considered, it was limited to a geographical boundary with typical publishing processes using a printing press. There was a limited circulation of the printed newspaper, magazine or other evening flyer. In the case of broadcast too, the equipment and the installations need to transmit the signals to other places was pretty costly and labor-intensive which made it limited to a number of households, region or territory.

The cons of traditional media gave rise to the modern social media journalism. The traditional media was one-way and had no public voice integrated in the process of seeking, disseminating, or interpreting news.

Traditional media was also supposed to be imposed or forceful at times because the public was made to see the adverts and news, even if they did not want to. There was no feedback opportunity or the possibility of word-of-mouth which made even incorrect news to be perceived and believed to be true by the public, only because the public had no means to verify the news. These fallacies in the traditional media coupled with the newly identified scope and benefits of the internet and social media platforms gave rise to what is known as ‘social media journalism’ today.

The new model of social media journalism connects users to a global and free platform of accessing, publishing, and spreading content where even the devices are smart. Social media journalism makes an individual capable of being a news agency if he has a camera in hand, this new form of journalism promotes self-publishing and creative expression of one’s thoughts which when reaching to a large group of people becomes news. This social media journalism is challenging the notions that traditional media is authoritative and objective as the interconnectedness of the multiple media, their openness and bulk usage, and its integration into mainstream journalism are changing and making news to be more open-sourced and non-linear in nature (Beckett, 2008).

The conventional journalism process was marked by a lead or a hint of a story to be further investigated into and developed into a full-fledged article/report by the journalist. Today, the news or information is already lying somewhere in the social media news space and the journalists are to find a different angle to present the story to beat competition and stay relevant in the market. The stories under social media journalism are not outlet-driven but people-drive and may be second, third, or even fourth-hand through some Facebook post, Tweet, or blog share.

Social media journalism has primarily involved from the concept of ‘trending’ on social media platforms which gives an idea to the journalists as to what is being liked by the public and which news or stories would be popular. Social media journalism requires journalists to be on their toes and find real-time information. More importantly, social media journalism offers information in bits as soon as it available and the journalists are not supposed to wait for the story to be completed, else it will be termed as ‘unresponsive and slow’ in social media journalism jargon.

Specifications and Aspects of Social Media Journalism

There has been a lot of research and study on the emergence and the dynamics of social media journalism as it is seen today. A social media survey by ING News Netherlands (2015) revealed that more than 50% of

the journalists now use social media as the primary source of information and data gathering because social media platforms help them gauge the public's opinion and perspectives on diverse topics. The survey also revealed that almost half of the respondents agreed that they instantly post/publish news on social media as it gives the facility to edit it later, while 20% of the respondents were against this practice and argued that news should always be published after verification. In the cross-cultural perspective, the same survey results revealed that the German Journalists consider the social media information to be unreliable while their American counterparts find social media as a reliable source of information.

Harper (2010) further asserts that Facebook and Twitter are the most common tools used by journalists and editors, with the former dominating the news space on social media. Bunz (2009) highlights that the trend of blogging in traditional news scape has caught up fast with news reporters and media journalists who add that social media is a useful tool to reach out to the audience and make way for citizen journalism. Johnston (2016) explains that this tectonic shift in the traditional journalism segment has been brought about by user-generated content (UGC) and the 'digital first' race which pressurizes reporters and journalists to be multi-skilled at using the various facets of social media to their advantage.

“Being capable of processing user-generated content and being able to navigate social media platforms which audiences inhabit are becoming core skills which journalists need to possess and maintain” (Johnston, 2016) is the current need of the hour and a senior-level command given to the journalists these days which makes them engage in social media news collection and navigation process for images, stories, information, and details. While it may be considered that user-generated content is replacing journalism, it is actually making conventional journalism to be more diverse. There is the advent of new tools, more positions such as Twitter correspondents, compressed news cycle and other strategic and operational changes featuring the current social media journalism.

Social media journalism is also supposed to be enhancing the socialization aspect for journalists who are increasingly using this mode for beat reporting and looking for new and unique stories. Augmented audience and better distribution are cited to be the major changes brought in by social media journalism. As for the journalists, they are freer and more equipped with the desired resources to get engaged with specific audiences, perform their roles, and enhance content creation. Adornato (2016) asserts that in the modern newsrooms, social media is one of the

decisive factors when choosing which information and news to cover based on the social media popularity and the mass opinion about it.

Social media, therefore, is an 'add-on' to the conventional journalism as it adds an extra layer of information to the already available information. This added layer is the layer of people's beliefs, popular opinions and public perspective which the journalists use when drafting and delivering their stories and news. Social media has converted the public from being the consumers of the content to becoming the creator and publishers of it. Social media mars the geographical boundaries in the process of socialization and hence, social media journalism enables people to create global online communities to share information, facilitate relationship building, and democratize news content (Pradhan & Kumari, 2018).

Pros and Cons of Social Media Journalism to the Society and People

The advantages and disadvantages of social media to the society and the people can be understood by discussing its specific pros and cons with respect to its various aspects like social media journalism for reporting, citizen journalism, and the overall effect of social media on journalism, and so on. These categorized pros and cons of social media journalism are discussed as below:

⇒ Advantages and Disadvantages of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism refers to the participatory medium which social media journalism has provided to the society at large. Now every individual is capable of producing and disseminating information which may be his personal belief or a story of his neighborhood. Hudson (2017) opines that this form of journalism, facilitated by social media has provided an active voice to the people wherein the public is now open to assess and evaluate the news and information presented to it and even make changes or add new information or different perspective to the same news. Earlier, the public was forced to believe in whatever was presented to it, as it did not have the power or the medium to check the facts or challenge the information's authenticity or source validity. Social media journalism and citizen journalism in particular has allowed the audience to assume the role of a critic, a co-producer, and a disseminator too.

The biggest advantage of citizen journalism through social media is witnessed when the underprivileged and the local communities are able to raise their voices, take active part in the public decision making process and bring political and economic reforms, only because social media journalism has provided them the opportunity to be a part of the bigger

picture and affect changes in their broader political and economic context. These local communities are now able to attract the attention of the world towards their poverty, unemployment, lack of education, denial of human rights, and other social issues that have forced the global media and the business world to take note and provide ways and means to tackle these inequalities. One of its apt examples can be seen in the Syria-Iran war when multiple Syrian refugees and their families posted videos and plea Tweets, asking for support and global attention to rescue them. This made the world aware of the grave situations they were in and led to an awakening amongst different cultures for better harmony and coordination.

Despite these advantages, citizen journalism also brings with it certain pitfalls. The first of these is the illegitimacy or the lack of authenticity associated with the personal accounts of citizen journalists who may manipulate information to achieve higher ratings or popularity on social media. This fake or false news may further be manipulated by the like-minded and it may be dangerous in the long-run as such rumored news may result in violence. There may be citizen journalists using the tactic of deceit to attract attention and sympathy and may result in the loss or wastage of resources that could have otherwise been utilized in a more useful manner. While a minimal deceit is justified, more of it may lead to political, cultural or economic clashes that may jeopardize global peace and harmony.

⇒ ***Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media Journalism on the Function of Reporting***

It is not surprising that the modern journalists are increasingly using social media tools and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap chat, and others to remain abreast of the latest happenings around them and get their hands on interesting and unique stories and news to present to the world. This form of reporting adopted by the modern journalists is more individualistic, open, and prone to speculations. On the positive side, the social media and the other micro-blogging platforms offer the unique advantage of second-by-second update of changes in a news or story which can be effectively captured by a professional journalist and turned into a mature story for the society.

The most interesting benefit of using social media tools like Twitter and Facebook is the opportunity to get hands on small, real-life, and mostly unknown stories of the common man which are an insightful read for the public. Facebook, on the other hand, helps capture public opinion which is critically essential at deciphering the pulse of the society at the given

moment and working upon some urgent as well as optional issues, such as terrorism, political corruption, education reforms, and so on.

On the negative side of the social media reporting is the dilemma of speed versus accuracy which most modern journalists are trapped into. With a vast pool of information and details being added to it every second, it is almost impossible for a reporter or journalist to verify the actual source of information or hold himself back to let the story complete before disseminating it on social media. In a gross mistake by the London's Telegraph, the fake profile of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir's Bhutto's son- Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was used to take some quotes on Islam and post it on social media pages (Maderazo, 2008). The identification of the fake profile and its usage by a legal and reputed news outlet turned into a massive social media joke and the credibility and reliability of the agency was at risk.

There is a clutter of information, links, posts, videos, and other details on the internet which may make a journalist lose his thoughts and patience and unconsciously, resort to unethical course of action when prioritizing speed over accuracy. There are top management pressures, obligations to remain updated and competitive, desire to succeed, and other inner and outer battles which may serve as the breeding ground for ignorance, denial, or the lack of common sense for journalists trying to find truth from the indefinite clutter on social media.

Even more, there has been so stiff competition in the media and journalism industry today that even the established and reputed news agencies and houses are willing to risk their legacy for accuracy and credibility for being the first in publishing breaking news on the internet. They are willing to include falsified facts and incorrect information, only to be on the top and have increased market share, thus promoting the breach of ethics and professional integrity at large.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of “Social Media” on Journalism

The mainstream or traditional journalism has been made more dynamic, accessible, open, and collaborative with the help of social media. Traditional journalists and reporters can no longer force the public to believe in stories and news they have presented and there is the emergence of open-sourced journalism. Social media has made journalism to cross boundaries which were earlier not possible with print and broadcast techniques. The world has become smaller and the society is aware of the latest and minutest details on what is happening at every nook and corner

of the world. People can take part, reveal any falsified statements, question the news agencies, or make them present the truth with the help of social media. While social media has been this helpful, it has some negative impact too on journalism.

The social media platforms and the internet are now bombarded with news and there is so much information that it is almost next to impossible to find out fake news from the real one. Sometimes, even fake news by a citizen journalist may be taken up by a professional and legitimate journalist and developed into a story that may hamper the journalist and his agency's efforts at establishing and maintaining credibility and reliability with the audiences. Angelo (2019) asserts that the presence of a news agency or reporters on multiple social media platforms is also important as the same information or news from the same source should be seen by the public, otherwise it easily comes to the notice of the society for discrepancies and damages the degree of trust between the news agency and the public.

Twitter and Facebook which are the most common and popular social media platforms have made the journalists dig in for breaking news from interview sources and personal tweets of celebrities and eminent personalities in various fields. Sometimes, these journalists even copy those personal tweets or make comments on it which becomes news from their news agency's or public account. Citizen or anonymous sources are now rampant on social media which may break news, even before it gets officially confirmed, for example, the death announcement of Whitney Houston- a popular singer (Lin, 2012).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Digital Journalism

Digital journalism refers to the use of the internet and social media platforms for information sharing and marketing as well. The pros of digital journalism have been faster, responsive, real-time and updated access to information across the globe which makes the public more informed and aware and well-equipped to take important decisions on public welfare matters. The advent of interactive media like forums, discussion boards and others have supplemented this benefit by making the public engaged in the process of critical thinking and sharing their opinion on the topic. With the help of digital journalism, there are more eyewitnesses, better evidences and proofs, and enhanced awareness on diverse topics that have improved the overall social fabric and the government's view of responsibility towards the people at large.

On the other hand, typical news agencies, print newspapers and magazines and other businesses are facing loss of readership, subscriptions, and other revenue-earning sources, thus directing them to bankruptcy. It has made the individual more centered on his personal beliefs by following like-minded people and getting prone to be easily influenced by illegitimate, unethical or immoral thoughts posted and shared by others with malicious intent. These malicious sources have led to an increase in criminal and illegal activities as people are spreading and believing in fake and falsified news and getting over-confident or over-excited. True journalism has been hampered by digital journalism as anyone can get any false detail to a piece of news and make it popular. By the time the fallacy is detected, it is already in the conscious/sub-conscious mind of the reader/s and it is easier for the criminals to influence people with this change of opinion and the incorrect frame of mind.

Overall, social media has a number of benefits and challenges. In terms of benefits, the instances of criminal prosecution, awareness of laws and their respective implementation has increased in the last few years as social media journalism has spread awareness and freedom of expression. The domain of education has been revolutionized as students are able to learn from different parts of the world and there is better learning and collaborative knowledge management that is making students more skilled, advanced, and culturally sensitive. The social fabric in general has improved as people can now chat and communicate with their near and dear ones in real-time and get updated about events and happenings.

The employment rate has also increased as social media journalism has led to the emergence of several new job types, positions and earning opportunities in an entirely new virtual sector. However, most of the print jobs in traditional journalism have been lost and there is a flurry of vacancies for people in social marketing, digital experience, use of search engine optimization, and other technology-related skills than conventional journalism or media education and degree. This marks a tectonic shift in the way journalism education is seen because the desired competences, skills, and abilities of candidates are now focused on their internet-handling skills, virtual networks and ability to manage social clutter, and experience in writing engaging stories in the fewest of words.

On the contrary, the readership on traditional media has declined due to widespread social media journalism. The lack of authenticity, validation of source, and accuracy in facts are the major drawbacks of social media journalism which the traditional media offered to the public. Possibilities of misinformation, misunderstanding, fake news, false news, rumors,

deceit, etc. are very high in the case of social media journalism that are capable of creating conflicts, violence, and other mishap in the society. The excessive use and penetration of social media in the lives of people has made the addicted to getting news and information from the internet, thus making them less likely to read articles, newspapers, or stories for verification. As such, people easily believe in false news and take unethical or immoral decisions that affect their relations. This habit of using social media for recreation, adventure, journalism, news and others has reduced the overall productivity of people as they use the internet for the whole of the day and fail to utilize other resources.

Examples and Applications About Social Media Journalism

There have been multiple examples of how social media journalism has surpassed immediacy, responsiveness, and accurate information sharing. The instances of Iran-Syria war, fast criminal prosecutions of rape culprits in India and others demonstrate how social media journalism has been useful and helpful in catching the social evil and serving justice to the people. While there have been examples of social media benefits, there are also the instances of social media shortcomings and immature applications of its tools that have led to serious consequences for the people, organizations and the society as a whole. In 2008, a citizen journalist for CNN reported that Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple had a severe heart attack and that he has been rushed to the hospital. The source of information was unknown, and the story spread too fast on social media to be controlled in time. As a result, the stocks of Apple Inc. were negatively impacted, and the investors were afraid of losing their leader.

This made Apple's US stock reach the lowest and it only recovered when the false news were removed from social media. In another social media journalism incident in 2010, Lady Gaga was falsely reported to have suffered serious leg injury and the news spread globally through tweets and Facebook shares. Later, the official label of Lady Gaga announced that it was untrue, and the story was discredited later. By the time this was done, there had already been damage to Lady Gaga's public image and the popularity of her official label.

The Future of Social Media Journalism

The future of social media journalism is both bright and filled with suspicion and anticipations. Known as the 'fifth estate', the major issue associated with the unprecedented rise of social media journalism is the lapse of ethics and the breaches in professional integrity and the loss of trust in the profession of journalism. It is both obvious and agreeable that

if the readers have lost their trust on one medium of journalism, they are more likely to condemn and abandon the other media sources for journalism as well, thus extending this loss of trust to the multi-media journalism industry which actually thrives on the confidence of the public. There have been various examples where jobs are being cut in this industry, number of non-certified citizen journalists are increasing, membership revenues are declining, students are no longer interested in pursuing full-fledged journalism degree and courses, and there is an overall decrease in the number of registered news agencies and media institutions. This marks a crisis situation for the entire industry.

The overall definition of professionalism and its core are at risk with social media journalism as propaganda, misinformation, fake news and deceit as the cons of social media *“have become a truly global problem; extending beyond the political sphere to all aspects of information, including climate change, entertainment and many other issues”*. There is the lack of authority and governing laws and regulations for the citizen journalists that have made social journalism to be the irresponsible and corrupt face of journalism. There have been cases in the Middle-East nations where the government has curbed the citizens’ rights to freedom of expression, their right to communication, and their right to access information. Thus, in the future, there is the risk of public not believing in the profession of journalism at all, be it print, broadcast, or even social media, only because of the lack of regulation and the development of a code of ethics to curb the fallacies associated with its use.

The widespread and lightning speed adoption of social media for journalism was facilitated by the fact that there was an unfair agreement between the government and the traditional media outlets. This lack of trust paved the way for the emergence of social media journalism and makes it obvious that the subsequent migration to alternative media and journalism platforms would be faster if the current rate of loss of trust, faith and confidence continues. Social media has almost eliminated the role of an editor to mediate the relationship between the news producer and the news consumer. In such circumstances, the traditional roles of gatekeeping, interpreting, and news gathering, and dissemination has been shifted from few professional and experienced ones to the large number of unprofessional and inexperienced citizens who play with the profession at their whims and fancies. The essential role of gatekeeping in this profession, as such, has lost its significance and the accountability for fair news coverage because the number of gates has gone out of control.

There is the growing discontentment against citizen journalists who are making improper and uncontrolled use of their autonomy and freedom of expression. But the question arises if the professionals used their degree of autonomy properly that gave rise to the current situation? The professionals in the traditional media were bound with too many restrictions that the citizens had to take control in their hands. Thus, the problem lies in the structure and the application of knowledge and expertise by the professionals in making rational judgments in journalism. This makes it apparent that the solution to the problem and the future of journalism through social media lie in the collaboration between online and offline journalists in a more open and participatory manner with clearly established rules, regulations, and code of conduct. The mainstream news agencies should focus on accuracy and credibility than the volume or the speed of news to exploit the bigger benefits of social media.

The current face of journalism has lost the essential values of objectivity, impartiality and accountability. The modern citizen journalists are posting and publishing any information without restriction or moral guidance and the professional publishers choose to remain silent to not risk their reputation. This poor quality of journalism is further eroding the tenet of democracy that was the foundation for true journalism. Citizens, in the wake of excessive and unfiltered news are getting more anxious, frustrated, inactive and apathetic, instead of being more informed, self-conscious and self-responsible. The future of social media journalism is bleak and full of unethical challenges such as lack of editorial and fact-checking, invasion in privacy, increase in violations pertaining to plagiarism and copyright regulations, loss of accountability and logical and moral coverage of news, increase in rumors and deception, and hidden conflicts leading to violence and criminal activities.

The current weaknesses in the social media journalism domain are both a wake-up call and an opportunity for the entire profession of journalism to emerge as more trustworthy and credible by being more relevant, transparent, and value-driven in the sense that people get true facts about stories and events and they are made more informed and logical than apathetic. The role of ethics in journalism is paramount and it will continue serving as the sustainable practice and the role model of establishing trust, confidence and faith in the public. The professional journalists' interpretations and mainstream journalism verification and validation are necessary at the five levels, namely individual, routine, organizational, extra media and the ideological. Social media journalism, in contrast, is free from these layers and hence, every citizen is free to add his

interpretation on any topic or news. There should be more focus placed on the establishment and the development of global laws and constraints that help create a universal set of values, principles and mode of practice for both online and offline journalists.

Self-regulation, practice, conscious, common sense and collaboration would be the keys to sustainability and ethics in social media journalism for the future. There may be new models proposed but the fundamental notions of respect, dignity, privacy, and accountability would remain the same. Education and awareness on the role of journalism, along with increased interest of students in this profession would help increase the number of certified and professional gatekeepers. This will in turn help reduce the clutter of misinformation, deceit, and other fallacies that are embedded in the core of social media journalism. Last but not the least would be the governing role of the political institutions or the government that helps create job opportunities and vacancies in the mainstream media and also frame appropriate laws, policies and regulations for news collection and dissemination by citizens.

The future of social media journalism may be turned brighter with better employment prospects if the blurred line of ethics and sustainability are cleared and the mainstream media and professionals are granted greater autonomy in exercising their rights and putting their verified perspectives before uncertified citizen journalists do so. Having these action steps and policy reforms would stand to eliminate the pitfalls and ethical dilemmas in social media journalism and open up a whole new world of opportunities and better information sharing for all.

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