Democratization of Journalism in Oman through New Media

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Abstract:
Developments in technologies have resulted in faster communication among people across the globe. The news which used to take hours in the past now travels in minutes with the help of new media technologies. Even the common citizen can share their ideas or comment on the news with the help of blogs, social networking sites etc.

This study investigates the adoption of New media technologies e.g. Web 2.0, SMS, news apps etc, among youth in Oman to see the changing trend in journalistic practices. The methodology includes cross sectional survey with young people from Urban and Semi Urban areas of Oman. Using the theory of "Uses and gratification", the researchers have evaluated the role of New Media in the democratization process and how upcoming journalistic practices through new media are changing the nature of news in Oman.

Key Words: New Media, Citizen Journalism, Technology, Democratization, News, Oman.

1. Introduction: People all over the world depend, before the advent of the new media, on the main stream media for news and other media products. Whether they are in democratic, socialist, or developing countries, media products, especially news, are subject to be controlled by diverse forces ranging from the government of the day, powerful elites, advertisers, media organizations, to journalists themselves. Therefore in most cases the publics’ right to know what is happening in their societies and the world at large seems to be in doubt. Put differently people are denied access to a considerable amount of important information given the heavy presence of news gatekeepers.

In cases where there are no media restrictions, the mainstream media has not been capable to gather, package and disseminate information from all the corners and crannies of areas of their jurisdiction to the public. Many events pass on everyday without the public getting to know about them simply because there is no adequate coverage of such events. There is therefore a gap in what the public ought to know as a result of inadequate coverage or media content control.

New media has come to fill this gap. New media is breaking governmental, institutional, and self censorship of news production and dissemination. The boundaries that were created by traditional news gatekeepers and censors are hitherto dismantled by new media. New media has made it possible for the dissemination of information to people of diverse cultures, hues, creed, and ranks at an affordable price and at a supersonic speed. As O’Reilly (2005) puts it, the new media have the power to ‘radically decentralize traditional media hierarchy structures…..” Thus with the new media which include, mobile phones, social media, internet, blogs, citizen journalism etc, the traditional format of news gathering and reporting has given way to a dynamic format that allows users to take active part in news reportage by uploading user generated contents, as well as search, link and connect with one another across many networks. A case in point is the recent Arab spring where millions of people in different locations were mobilized through social media; a feat that the main stream media would not have accomplished in years.

Oman is a dynamic country with a decent media history. The evolving media system in the country is based on, as in other countries, the socio-political structures of the land. Given the fact that the Omani media is yet to attain maturity, it cannot but be said that owing to the twin challenge of immaturity and institutional control, events are under reported or in most cases not reported at all. In as much as media content regulation is according to the laws of the land, there seems, however, to be an
apparent presence of self censorship on the part of the journalists rather than government. Based on this, it is clear that information is not deregulated. As in other parts of the world where there is media content regulation and control, is the new media in Oman playing the role of democratizing journalism or news products or not? The intent of this study is to provide an answer to this question. Therefore this study will look at the role played by new media in Oman in regard to creating a wider access to news and other allied media products for Omani people.

2. Literature Review: In carrying out this study, the researchers embarked on review of related literature to the topic which yielded little or no material. It could be said that given that there is hardly any existing work pertaining to democratization of news in Oman, this study is novel, handy, and important. Literature review will be based on news democratization in general.

The recent Arab spring that took place in some countries in the Arab world has underscored the immense value of technology in democratizing journalism especially in countries where the media is either owned or strictly controlled by the government. The Department of Internet Studies, Curtin University Australia (2012) writes that the social media during the Arab spring played a gigantism role in organizing, communicating, and raising awareness about the uprising in the face of governmental repression and clampdown.

Writing on citizen journalism as a medium of news democratization, Allan and Thorsen (2009) and Lasica (2003) argue that unprofessional journalists adopt the stance of reporters and report news through blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness report on current issues. The import of citizen journalism, as Salmon et al (2010) contend is that ordinary people are able to report events that the mainstream media cannot report due to inaccessibility.

In a study on Weblog Journalism: Between Infiltration and Integration, Gallo (,……,) argues that in as much as weblogs have not and will not overcome the mainstream media, its advantage in news democratization is that it has created a real-time virtual feedback loop that breaks down traditional barriers between journalists and the public.

Robin Foster (2012) posits that what underscores digital intermediaries ranging from aggregators (yahoo), search engines (Google), Social media (facebook), and digital devices (apple) is that they create access of news contents from third parties to consumers using different software, channels, and devices. Their importance in creating access to news is staggering.

In a slightly different tone from the foregoing, Rodriguez (2007) is worried about whether people will be integral part of the information superhighway in the face of the ever changing journalism via technology. Rodriguez opines that given that many media companies have continued to unveil web pages to the tune that on-line, digital World Wide Web and cyber space have become media industry buzzwords, journalists therefore need to be fluent or competent in the language of computers.

3. Methodology and Procedure:

The research conducted was Analytical Research and the data was collected with the help of a questionnaire in a cross sectional survey. After that a critical analysis was carried out of the collected facts and figures.

3.1. Population

The target population for the study was the college students and professionals from different institutions from Nizwa and Muscat.

3.2. Sample

Sample of the study was composed of 129 participants and the sample was chosen using Purposive Sampling Technique in which the researcher selects a particular group or category from the population to constitute the sample because this category is considered to mirror the whole with reference to the characteristic in question (Kumari, 2008).
3.3. Variables

In this Research, following variables were selected.

- New Media as Independent Variable.
- Journalism in Oman as dependent Variable.

In this research, Uses and gratification theory was used to check how the audience uses digital technologies, e.g. Web 2.0, SMS, news apps, to fulfill specific gratification as this theory assumes that members of the audience are not passive but take an active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. The theory also holds that audiences are responsible for choosing media to meet their needs. The approach suggests that people use the media to fulfill specific gratifications. This theory would then imply that the media compete against other information sources for viewers' gratification. (Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. 1974)

3.4. The Objectives of the Study are:

- How new media is shaping the journalistic practices in Oman.
- How the upcoming journalistic practices through new media are changing the nature of news in Oman.

3.5. Scope of the Study

Omani people are exposed to various kinds of new media technologies for receiving news, and this study will help how they can be enhanced to boost democratization process in Oman.

4. Results and Discussion:

The survey respondents were made up of 47 per cent male and 53 per cent female. With regard to age, majority of the respondents representing 74 per cent were between 18 and 24 years, this is followed by those in the age range of 25 to 30 making up 19 percent, while only seven per cent of the respondents were between 31 to 36 years old. It was expected that the 18 to 24 aged respondents would be in an overwhelming majority given that the survey was among Omani college students and English speaking Omani professionals in the colleges. The respondents’ place of residence was almost at par as 51 percent of them indicated they live in urban areas, while 49 percent live in Semi-urban areas.

Gender, Age and Location distribution of Respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>31-36</td>
<td>7</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-Urban</td>
<td>49</td>
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In an answer to the question "What media would you prefer to read news?" 14% of the respondents prefer Print Media; however electronic media attracts more audience (34%). This could be because of the advantage the electronic media has over print media, namely- audio and visual components, speed, live coverage of events etc. It is also known that Oman does not have a reading culture; rather it is rich in oral tradition. However, in as much as print media does not enjoy large readership, it still plays a very important role in media consumption as 52 per cent of the respondents consumed media contents from both the print and electronic media.
From the data collected when asked how much time Respondents spend on reading news, it can be inferred that youth are news conscious despite the fact that 59 percent of the respondents spent only 30 minutes reading or watching news. When viewed intrinsically, it could be argued that the 30 minutes of watching news by the respondents is encouraging given that politically Oman is in the doldrums. More encouraging is the fact that 25 and 9 percents of the respondents read news for one and two hours respectively.

In response to the question "Which new media technologies Respondents prefer to use?, it is obvious that the internet is yet to be rivaled as the most preferred medium of news consumption as majority of the respondents representing about 63 per cent said they got their news from the internet. This supports the research conducted by Pew Research Center on "Trend in News Consumption (2012)" which states that internet enjoys a wide preference in news consumption. It is interesting to note that mobile phone is gradually becoming a major medium of news consumption as 19 per cent of the respondents relied on SMS to get news; while 13 percent depended on Apps for news and 5% said they use other technologies to get news.

The next question was related to the type of news which Respondents liked to read in which they were allowed to rank the news according to their preference and could choose more than one option. The highest trend was found in the Business News with a Mean of 5.2 while the lowest inclination was found in General News with a Mean of 2.9. Regional News got a mean of 3.4, Crime and Political with Mean 4 each; Entertainment 3.5, Sensationalism 4.2, Niche Oriented 3.4 and other news also had a Mean of 3.4.
What is perplexing in Table 4 is that respondents reacted positively to sensational news despite the fact that sensationalism may not be culturally suitable for the respondents. This goes to show the effect of globalization on the respondents who are mainly youths. This table again shows that what is consumed depends on the consumer hence the variety in consumption pattern.

21% respondents agreed when asked whether information they get from the news media is the same as from newspapers and television. The fact that 15 percent of the respondents agreed that the information they get from the main stream media and the new media are not the same testifies that new media is creating more access to news that would never be covered by the main stream media. However 64 per cent of the respondents were doubtful of the similar nature of news when compared from new media to the old media.

In an answer to the question whether Respondents got news alerts on their cell phone, 64% said "Yes" while 36% said "No", which clearly shows mobile phone is gradually, but forcefully becoming a potent medium of news consumption in Oman; that almost two-thirds of the population get news alerts from their mobile phones speaks volumes of the value of mobile phones in news consumption in Oman. Governments, advertisers, etc cannot ignore the value of the mobile phone when it has to do with reaching out to a wider audience.

The next question was, whether the participants wanted to follow up with an issue or topic in blogs or not? A good number of the respondents (47%) do not follow up issues or topics in blogs as one of the reasons could be that blogs are at infancy stage in the country. However it is note-worthy that despite the fact that blogging is quite a new phenomenon in Oman, it is rather growing (53%) at a fast pace, as many people are resorting to following up issues in blogs.
More than half of the respondents (53%) indicated that they would not express their feelings or ideas on the blog. This could best be described as self censorship which is in vogue in Oman. On the other hand almost half of the respondents (47%) agreed that they expressed their feelings and ideas on the blogs. This indicates freedom of expression in Oman especially in the new media which is not as controlled as the main stream media.

In an answer to the question of what kind of language participants preferred to use while commenting on news or creating their blogs on different internet sites? 55% said that they used “Formal” language, 33% used “Informal” and 12% used “Slang” language.

The use of slang and informal languages in the new media differentiates new from old media. While formal language may be a deterrent to using the old media, slangs and informal languages are encouraged in the new media, this makes it possible for uneducated people to participate and contribute to issues concerning them through the public sphere made possible by the new media.

The data collected, when respondents were asked whether they used new media technologies to report a local issue, underscores the importance of citizen journalism in the present dispensation. The data shows that an overwhelming majority of the respondents (70%) used new technologies to report local issues which are a better way to say that citizen journalism has carved its niche in Oman. How else can journalism be democratized other than this. In as much as citizen journalism has gained grounds in Oman, it is yet to be accepted by everyone as about 30 per cent of the respondents are yet to report local issues using new technologies.

One of the arguments against citizen journalism and some websites is that their contents cannot be verified hence in most cases they are seen as biased or lacking credibility and authenticity. It is noteworthy that 40 per cent of the respondents cared about the source of what they read from the new media. In other words the most of the Omanis who consume news through new media do not
compromise bad news. However there is need for caution as 19 per cent said they do bother about the source of the news, while 41 percent said they did not bother about content source all the time.

The responses to the question on whether participants trusted new media news or mainstream news, confirms the result of the previous table. Given that about 40 percent of the respondents cared about the content sources; it is only logical that 25 percent of the respondents should trust new media news while 10 per cent do not trust new media news, thus is supporting the 19 percent of the respondents who did not care about the source of the contents.

When compared to the main stream media in terms of freedom of expression, 55% of the respondents agreed that the new media has an upper hand given that the new media is not as controlled by the state apparatus like the main stream media. Thus the respondents find the new media very handy in expressing their ideas and feelings without going through the scrutiny the old media calls for.

The idea that more than two thirds of the respondents agreed that new media technologies can improve journalism in Oman cannot be divorced from conveniences of new media in journalism which includes speed, ease of use, mobility, convergence/multi task/ skilling, cheap etc. Of more importance is the fact that new media creates access to news more than the main stream media. The 32 percent of the respondents who disagreed that new technologies can improve journalism in Oman could be because of the sometimes unauthentic, unbalanced, and unverified sources of new media contents which can only give rise to grapevine journalism.

5. Conclusion:

“Where the press is free….. all is safe” (Berg and Lipscomb, 1904). Almost 200 years ago Thomas Jefferson wrote these words, and still today, a free press is one of the cornerstones of democratic societies (Terrorism and Media, July 23, 2008).

The Media in Oman is still in the developing phase. Though it is government controlled yet the fact remains that New Media technologies are playing a major role in the democratization process in Oman. Riz Khan in a interview to Oman Observer (Feb, 2013) said “if young Omanis want a true
place in the global community, then they have to be able to understand what’s going on outside their
country as well as what’s going on within” and which is only possible through social media as it
occupies a space in journalism and has become one of the major mediums for instant communication
across the globe.

The feedback of the Respondents, collected during the research clearly shows that the youth in
Oman are more news conscious than ever and are actively involved in reporting all kind of events
which interests them with the help of New Media technologies.

Although internet is not available in a lot of areas still it enjoys a wide preference over other
media used for sharing news and can be a great source for the journalists themselves to know about
public criticism and their opinions about certain news.

Web2 applications like face book and other social networking sites are most favorable
platforms among the Omani youth to post comments or write blogs acting as citizen journalists.
According to the youth this helps them to improve their journalistic skills and write with more
freedom.

However, increased participation of youth in sharing news can raise the question of news
credibility and can be a challenge to the quality of news and journalistic practices in the country; thus
they need to be more practical and rational when sharing news.

On the whole it can be concluded that despite the media gate keeping in the country, New
Media technologies are a way out to the democratization process in journalistic practices in Oman.

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