

## **The Rise of Social Media and Its Impact on Quality Journalism: A Case Study of the Sultanate of Oman**

**Moza Abdullah Said Al-Rawahi**

A lecturer at College of Applied Sciences- Nizwa  
Communication Studies Department  
Sultanate of Oman, Nizwa

[ibtisama2010@hotmail.com](mailto:ibtisama2010@hotmail.com)

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**Abstract.** One of the most pressing issues concerning media in the early twenty first century is the youths' news consumption and their behaviors as excessive online news consumers. There is no doubt, quality journalism in a modern social democracy is crucial for shaping public opinion and community consensus. Vehkoo (2009-2010) argues: "difficulties in defining quality are especially problematic because the issue of the quality of journalism is not merely a question of increasing the value of a product to consumers. Rather, quality is a central element in achieving the social, political, and cultural goals asserted for journalism in democratic societies." [1] However, it is worth to mention that there are no universal quality criteria for assessing how journalism may operate because it is culture-specific and relates to more socio-economic and education backgrounds. As a result, since blogging was first coined in 1997; there is a widespread argument whether citizen journalists could be considered journalists and what impact they may pose on traditional quality journalism (Boyd and Ellison 2007) [2]

Thus, this research-paper is going to draw the attention on the Sultanate of Oman case in order to emphasize that even in one of the most controlled, conservative and authoritarian media framework in the Middle East countries, citizen journalism speaks louder than quality journalism to bring the right action home, especially in 2011, 2012, 2013.

These years witnessed some political and social changes due to the latest Arab uprising, which lead the activists in this country to use the social platforms e.g.: Facebook, twitter, Whatsapp and blogs as channels to convey their messages to their governments and authorities. Interestingly, the role of citizen journalism and political bloggers redefined the frontiers of journalism by creating different layers of information and opinion, and they succeed in booming the freedom of speech, resulting in removing some ministers, improving the quality of education and the employment spheres, and eliminating corruption. However, within some contexts, it is widely witnessed that citizen journalists and political bloggers used to shift away from the traditional ethics of journalism, raising serious questions about freedom of speech, privacy and confidentiality, while causing some social chaos and unnecessary strikes.

## **1. Introduction: Power making by mind framing**

Throughout decades, communication; characterizing by the state and its culture, has been the major source of power and counter-power, of domination and social change. The norms and values in which societies are constructed determine how peoples think; the battle of the human mind is largely played out in the process of communication. According to a focus group from Communication department at Nizwa College of Applied Sciences, we noticed that prior 1965, the information flow in the Arab Gulf countries was particularly characterized by McQuail and Windahl communication theory (1981) and Paul Lazarsfeld communication model theory (1944). Both model teased out some of the complexities of media influence on attitudes and behaviors. The information flow in the Gulf countries was almost restricted into one step and audience were passive and not able to disseminate information unless if there were opinion leaders who may act as mediators. The mediators or opinion leaders not only pass on information or points of view to others, but in most often they act as barriers in transmitting messages; like the case of Kingdom of Bahrain, Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia.

However, after the Arab uprising in the Arab countries, citizens approached social media to engage in distributing news in all possible flavors over the Web. They are no more isolated, nowadays they become more proactive by making their own platform and they become more active in addressing some social matters, even more then journalists, calling themselves citizen journalists.

Europa Publications Limited (2003, p.54) mentioned that in many Arab countries, there was no freedom of expression, as well as no sufficient human rights. Many citizens were abused and experienced some sort of harassments and massive killings by the oppressive regimes. Consequently, this kind of leadership is responsible for the political uprisings, and unrests that have sparked the countries in the Arab world, notably in Tunisia, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Egypt[3]. "Basically, the fact that the objective of the uprisings that have been witnessed was to oust the dictatorial and royal leadership that was oppressive to people, means that people were fed up with this style of leadership, and thus opted to strike out since democracy in these countries was far from reach."(Khater 2009, p.43)[4]

## **2. The rise of mass self-communication: Quality Journalism Vs. Citizen Journalism**

The diffusion of mobile communication, the internet, digital media, and social media networks have promoted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous. Thus, the ability to monitor online site use is almost means what people are doing with the online media product than was ever the case with the print media, like newspapers and magazines. Thus, there is no single set of attitudes prevailing among young people toward online news consumption. However, with the technical era, media consumers tend to be more customizers and convenience users than loyal users. They actively engage with news items that suit their current interest; enjoying items that are short, concise and items that lead to gossip, light entertainment and 'offbeat' new. Customizers value accuracy, reliability and they are more critical of what they perceive to be biases in the mainstream news media. Unlike loyal users, customizers are well known by their active engagement in automating the process of pulling news from different sources. Accordingly, they would prefer to support more niche oriented news providers such as citizen journalists and bloggers than the mainstream news organizations,

which are perceived as conservative and resistance to change. The Arab network for human rights shows that the number of internet users has increased dramatically in the last few years; interestingly youths were the dominant users and they reached 58 million users. Also, the cell phone users exceed 176 million worldwide. Also, the Facebook users have reached 500 million in 2010; there were about 3.4 million users in Egypt, 3.7 users in Tunis and Morocco and 15 million users in the Middle East and North Africa. Citizens are already put themselves in the line. Bennett ( 2003, p.35) has identified the changes facilitated by new media technologies in the realm of political communication. He wrote, "mass media news outlets are struggling mightily with changing gatekeeping standards due to demands for interactive content produced by audiences themselves. As consumer-driven content progresses beyond chats and click polls, new possibilities arise for high-quality political information governed by more democratic and less elite standards. Technologically savvy activists are writing software that enables automated and democratic publishing and editing. Ordinary people are empowered to report on their political experiences while being held to high standards of information quality and community values. In the long run, these trends maybe the most revolutionary aspects of the new media environment." [5]

Due to the enhanced capacity of the internet, there has been arise of powerful new tools to adapt two ways interaction like blogs, messages boards, wikis and social networks. In most often, these tools are associated with social media and web 2.0 where the internet has become not only a tool of distributing information but also a space for fostering a new creative expression (the read-write web). The dramatic street protests following by the Iranian election in 2009 illustrated the most significant examples where the witnesses are taking over the news, changing the way media is produced, distributed and even consumed. Within some circumstances, citizen journalists and political bloggers operate to critique quality or professional journalism to function within more expressed values and greater transparency. This means, they are forcing a new transparency by checking traditional media and questioning their accuracy and standards. For example, sometimes, the nationalists citizen journalism have adapt the principles of media analysis to forcibly critique the performance of the professional journalism, particularly when it comes to sensationalism, negative conflict-based stories, unbalanced news coverage and how the nation is portrayed due to the unfair coverage.

On the other hand, many opponents have expressed fears about the negative ramifications that citizen journalism may pose on the quality and professional journalism. Although the new law on the media contained no mechanism to guarantee ethical standards, like the case of News of the World phone hacking scandal, it is worth to mention that audience participation outside traditional journalism poses even great challenges for the roles of quality journalism. Hermida and Thurman (2008) argue that: "Journalists tend to be deeply skeptical about how valuable or relevant user involvement is to their work, worrying that low quality content may displace their professionally produced work and result in degraded overall news environments" [6]. It is therefore argued that due to the increase numbers of audience participation in citizen journalism, practicing journalism has become widely possible and being a journalist has become even more difficult boundary to define. According to Sifry (2006), in 2006 the numbers of blogs worldwide surpassed 200 million and between one and two new blogs were created every second [7]. Newman (2009) claims "The Web 2.0 revolution has peddled the promise of bringing more truth to more people but every week a new revelation calls into question the accuracy reliability and trust of the information we get from the internet." [8]. However, in most often, we will find that many have welcomed citizen journalism and blogging because of their democratic and

autonomous nature, which would result in positive developments for the quality and diversity of news. Conversely, many argue that citizen journalists and political bloggers do not replace many of the things we expect from professional journalists, but instead they may create different layers for doing better journalism by covering more stories and engaging more people. Nevertheless, it is worth to mention that story detachment, neutrality in presenting conflicts within the story, an emphasis on description, solid editorial processes and adapting rigorous structure are some of the outstanding features that could not be practiced except by quality journalism.

### **3. Mass self-communication and counter-power in the Sultanate of Oman**

The relation between communication, technology, and power reflects power opposing interests, values and engages a plurality of social factors in conflict. Prior 1970, Oman was an isolated state having no relations with other Arab or Islamic countries and this isolation pervaded all aspects of Omanis' lives. However, when his Majesty has ruled Oman in 1970, he promised Omani citizens to proceed forthwith in the process of creating a modern government by eliminating all the unnecessary restrictions on Omani lives and activities. He therefore empowered the concept of freedom of speech by face to face interaction between him and Omani peoples without any boundaries to address their matters and concerns, mainly in the National Omani day. Yet, Oman is still a conservative country in addressing freedom of speech, compared with other countries and it mostly serves more as a PR and propaganda vehicle than a forum for genuine debate and analysis.

However, the emergence of mass self-communication offers an extraordinary medium for social rebellion and movements to confront the government, especially after the Arab unrest across North Africa and the Middle East. The internet provides a convenience platform for debate that serves as the most potent political weapon for citizens. Therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult for the government to manipulate or even hide information. Some have described uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain and Oman as Facebook revolution or Twitter revolution, referring to the social media web sites that facilitate much easier information. Social media networks such as Facebook and twitter facilitated the spread of information among people on the need to promote freedom of speech. The social Media sites made individuals, particularly the young population, active participants in their societies by creating such influential and informative platforms as avenue for bringing changes.

In Oman, a number of frustrated civilians, that see the limited amount of freedom of expression as an obstacle, tend to use "Sablat Oman", a famous Omani forum with a high number of daily visits, for making some real reforms. Citizens posted a number of articles and complain and they succeed in covering some issues in which quality journalism failed to address due to the media censorship and restriction, like the case of eliminating corruption and improving infrastructures. Initially, there were no positive responses from the government to their requirements. Then, Omani citizens tended to form some social movement and gathering in Sohar and some parts in Muscat by using the social media, like Facebook, Sablat Oman and Whatsapp, asking for their right, like improving the quality of life and getting better jobs. Thus, Oman government tended to quiet its citizens during the Arab uprisings by promising more jobs and reform. In this case, we found that the activists' action brought more changes than the local newspapers in term of increasing people's salaries, changing some ministers, improving the health and education sectors, providing more job opportunities mainly in the army forces. Though, it is apparent that although protests in Oman in the early 2011 came with a number of

political and social reforms, they become the main reason for tighten restrictions on freedom of expression because it is widely witnessed that citizen journalists and political bloggers shifted away from the traditional ethics of journalism, raising serious questions about privacy and confidentiality, while causing some social chaos and unnecessary strikes.

Since 2011 freedom of speech in Oman was under attack as increasing numbers of activists and bloggers were getting jailed for slander and dissent. On nine of September, a new official announcement substituted the 26 article regarding print media law, stating: "Prohibiting of publishing anything that might affect the safety or security of the state whether internally and externally and everything related to military and official documentation through the print media, broadcast media or even the internet without the permission of the competent authorities." [9]. The Omani government has tightened its grip on both Omani citizens and local media, especially when a group of activists had posted material on the internet commenting on recent developments in Oman, including criticism of actions taken by the authorities resulting in the repression of freedom of expression. Because of the new declaration, six defenders were sentenced to between a year to 18 months in prison, fined \$2600 and set bail of \$3900 for "offensive writings and violating information technology law" including insulting the Sultan, undermining the status of the state, and using the internet to publish defamatory materials, according to the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR) [10]. In the latest attempt by Oman's ruling party to quiet dissent, a court sentenced five people on Monday to 12 to 18 months in jail for using social media to slander the Sultan Qaboos Said Bin Al-Said. The five condemned, four men and one woman, have had their names and photos published publicly by the official Omani state news agency. They have the privilege of being identified by their initials and with their faces obscured.

Amnesty International has attacked the Omani government, urging them to overturn the convictions. "These sentences are the latest phase in the Omani government's orchestrated crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly, which has been under way since last year," said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International. Also, he added: "Criminal or other laws which provide special protection against criticism for public officials are not consistent with respect for freedom of expression," [11]

Thus, the topic of freedom of speech in Oman opens the door for an international debate whether what Oman authority did in 2011 was right or wrong. However, it is worth to mention that although there is no standard and universal code of ethics for exercising freedom of expression within media contents, accepted international standards allow press restrictions in extremely specific circumstances, such as cases of slander or libel against private individuals or speech that threatens national security. And this exactly reflect s what happen in Oman. Although Omani political bloggers and citizen journalists may result in positive developments for the quality and diversity of news because of their open, egalitarian and autonomous nature; they provoked some negative ramifications due to the lack of journalistic practices for ensuring acceptable levels of objectivity and freedom by slandering and abusing the Sultan Qaboos.

In addition, the spread of instant political mobilizations by using mobile phones and social media pose some undesirable consequences and breach the privacy of citizens. Recently, some Omani people used mobile phones for capturing inappropriate photos for the dead peoples in the roads accident and then upload them in the social media, like Whatsapp. For that reason, Oman government approached a strict procedure for stop that incidence by stating that anyone Photo accident or a crime will be Sentenced for one to three years and a fine of one thousand to 5 thousand Rials. From these examples, we come to the point that Oman policy does not tend to



restrict freedom of speech among its citizens and media but instead it tends to embrace peace and harmony, while emphasizing that everyone has the right to say whatever he/she want but at the right timing, place and manner.

On the other hand, if we consider the work of quality journalism, we will find that quality journalism in a modern social democracy is crucial for shaping public opinion and community consensus. Vehkoo (2009-2010) argues: "difficulties in defining quality are especially problematic because the issue of the quality of journalism is not merely a question of increasing the value of a product to consumers. Rather, quality is a central element in achieving the social, political, and cultural goals asserted for journalism in democratic societies." [12] Thus, it is relevant to mention that what is acceptable in one country may become offensive in another country. For that, the new law on the media contained no mechanism to guarantee ethical standards, because it is culture-specific and relates to more socio-economic and education backgrounds. It is therefore worth to refer that there are no universal quality criteria for assessing how journalism may operate. A clear example of this was what happened recently in the week newspaper in Oman. In August 29, 2013, The Week was accused for publishing an offensive article in its 546 issue about gay. The Ministry of Information and the Omani Journalists Association pointed that:" the publication of this subject is targeted the values of the Omani society coherent and abuse its position as well as insult its members and breach Oman unity. Also, it damages the reputation and dignity of Omani youth." [13]

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, moral reasoning based on the pervasiveness of the internet has provoked much of the debate in the field of journalism about whether the rise of political bloggers and citizen journalists are secure way for ensuring a sustainable 'quality' journalism or not. Hence, this research essay had outlined and discussed the rise of social media and its impact on quality journalism and freedom of expression within Oman context. Although Omani citizen journalists resulted in positive developments for empowering freedom of speech and improving quality of life; they at the same time provoked some negative consequences related to privacy and freedom of expression due to the lack of journalistic practices. Thus, it is noticeable that the issue of citizen journalism and freedom of speech in Oman is addressed wisely by implementing some new laws for punishing those who may cause some social, political and cultural damages.

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