

Dossier

Adapting Concepts of Media Freedom to a
Changing Media Environment: Incorporating
New Media and Citizen Journalism into the
Freedom of the Press Index

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Abstract: The present article discusses how the new category of “citizen journalist” fits into the overall media environment and how the Freedom House Freedom of the Press methodology has been changed to incorporate this category.

Keywords: citizen journalist, Press methodology, new media, Freedom of the Press Index

Adaptation des concepts de la liberté de la presse à l'environnement changeant des médias: intégrer les nouveaux médias et le journalisme citoyen dans Freedom of the Press Index

Résumé : L'article met en question la manière dont la nouvelle catégorie de « journaliste citoyen » s'inscrit dans l'environnement global des médias et la façon dont la méthodologie de Freedom House Freedom of the Press a été modifiée afin d'inclure cette catégorie.

Mots-clés : journaliste citoyen, méthodologie de la Press, nouveaux médias, Freedom of the Press Index

The Freedom House Freedom of the Press (FOTP) index—which is the longest-running such index measuring media freedom—has grown in depth and detail over the past 30+ years, as we have sought to improve the quality and rigor of the research and publications process as well as to reflect varied strands of thought circulating in the academic and practitioner communities about how best to measure media freedom. The index measures the level of freedom by examining the political, legal and economic environment in which the press operate. One of the major challenges in recent years has been how to adapt this methodology to a rapidly changing news and information environment in which the means of news production and dissemination have been expanded and democratized. As a result of technological developments and shifting notions of who comprises “the press,” the internet and digital media have contributed to the reconfiguration of the organizational logic of knowledge and power. The field of journalism has drastically evolved over the past few years amid the rise and expansion of the internet, social media and digital personal ICTs. New voices and perspectives are present in the independent and online press and the mainstream media’s amplification, certification and framing of these voices created a journalistic dialectic that required new thinking about what freedom of “the press” really means.

Of particular concern is the issue of the “professional” vs the “citizen” journalist and how both categories are covered in indices that measure media freedom. The paper will examine how to conceptualize the “citizen journalist” and how this category fits into an overall media environment, some of the changes that have already been made in our FOTP methodology to include this category, and additional issues which we feel need further consideration or development as we seek to adapt the index to a continually changing media environment.

1. The Freedom House FOTP methodology

Throughout the years, we have refined and expanded our methodology, while also seeking not to drastically affect the comparability of data for a given country over the 30-year span or the comparative ratings of all countries over that period. The FOTP methodology was last substantially revamped in 2002. Our examination of the level of press freedom in each country is currently comprised of 23 methodology questions and 109 indicators divided into three broad categories: the legal environment, the political environment, and the economic environment. The diverse nature of the methodology questions seeks to encompass the varied ways in which pressure can be placed upon the flow of information and the ability of print, broadcast, and internet-based media to operate freely and without fear of repercussions: In short, we seek to provide a picture of the entire “enabling environment” in which the media in each country operate. We also seek to assess the degree of news and information diversity available to the public in any given country, from either local or transnational sources. In terms of the finished product, we assign category designations of Free, Partly Free, and Not Free for each country examined, a numerical rating on a more nuanced 0-100 point scale that then determines the category designation, and narrative country reports explaining the factors that go into the ratings. Each country is also given a ranking in global and regional tables so that it may also be compared with its neighbors—i.e. a country may be rated Partly Free with a score of 53/100 points, and also ranked 123 out of 197 countries worldwide. While we do not release the scores for each of the 23 individual methodology questions, we do publish sub-category scores so that a country’s score on the legal, political, and economic environment categories can also be seen.

In the decade since the last major revamp of the methodology, there have been major changes in the news and information environment, both in terms of the ways in which news is delivered (internet, mobile phones and other digital technologies) and produced (the rise of bloggers and citizen reporting/journalism). In an attempt to address these changes, at several points we introduced small changes or additions to our methodology, particularly in terms of adding to or expanding on the language for the 109 indicators. The most extensive changes occurred for the 2011 edition, and tried to overtly include concepts and ideas that had been incorporated in a de facto manner during previous editions of the index. For example, we explicitly expanded our definition of news outlets to include blogs and social media, and also currently consider attacks and legal cases against bloggers and citizen journalists, as well as professional journalists. Censorship of the means of production has also expanded to include the internet. However, we also recognized that not all bloggers or online media users comprise “the press” and that crackdowns on the use of digital media to organize social protest, and thus attempt to focus on citizen media that are journalistic in nature.

However, the addition of the term “bloggers” to the methodology as opposed to a wholesale reconfiguration of the indicators underscores that mainstream it remains important to continue focusing on newspapers, broadcast and satellite media in assessing the press freedom environment, while delving into greater details about the specifics of internet censorship and access in *Freedom on the Net*. Broadcast media are used by undemocratic states to manipulate domestic public opinion because of its overwhelming symbolic power, agenda-setting capabilities and ability to transcend illiteracy (Karlekar 2011). Hence questions of media independence from political control, editorial independence, and pluralism attempt acknowledge this fact. They also imply that internet access or online freedom is not a panacea to restrictions on professional and mainstream media. Most people in the world continue to rely on radio and television to get their news, and the primacy of a message framed as “news” wields significant power (Bourdieu 1991, 1998; Darras 2005). Controlling this power has been the policy of repressive governments ever since the introduction of broadcasting, and thus the political section of the methodology account for 40 of the 100 points allocated in the survey methodology.

2. Conceptualizing the “citizen journalist”

There is a stark need to reexamine the role of citizen journalism in a way that builds upon insights from a broader array of academic disciplines including international communications, political science, comparative politics and ICT studies. Citizen journalism, like participatory journalism, has been defined as an “act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information, in order to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wideranging and relevant information” (Bowman and Willis 2003, 9). Radsch defines citizen journalism as “an alternative and *activist* form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a repose to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism” (Radsch Forthcoming). She conceptualizes journalism as a set of informational communication practices based on particular principles and rules that include credibility, accuracy, witness, investigation, reporting, and timeliness, that seek to establish authority in the production of what is considered reality (Bourdieu 2005; Lowrey 2006; Ryfe 2006). A journalist is therefore someone who is distinguished by their participation in these practices and the field they constitute, and journalism therefore an act by which that identity is invoked through certain practices and ontological commitments. Therefore including consideration of bloggers who engage in acts of journalism, such as reporting, fact-checking, documenting, verifying, quoting and self-publishing and disseminating the resulting user-generated content, most often through alternative media make sense in assessing the press freedom situation in any country.

Furthermore, citizen journalism and professional journalism enjoy an increasingly symbiotic relationship through content partnerships, participatory newsmaking processes, and mutual certification. Many bloggers leverage their citizen journalism experience to get jobs or freelance work with mainstream media while professional journalists increasingly use their blogs and social media accounts to publish stories or views that do not make it through the editorial filter. In some countries, internet-based media provide an opportunity to post controversial stories or information that would otherwise not make it into the mainstream media. And many of the same standards for judging credibility in the mainstream media also apply to the citizen media: accuracy, evidence, reputation and consensus. But as an alternative, grassroots form of journalism subject to a different logic than professional journalism, citizen journalism has different norms, values, and rules. And citizen journalists rely more heavily on personal technologies like mobile phones, personal computers, and digital cameras than their professional counterparts, underscoring the need to account for access, censorship, and blockage, as we do in the section on political environment.

Therefore in 2011 we specifically added the term “bloggers” to the methodological questions about journalists. Rettberg, for example, argues that it is not important whether a blogger is regarded as a journalist or not, although she recognizes that “there are times when it really matters” (Rettberg 2009, 91). Perhaps this is the case in the Western, democratic contexts in which her study is largely confined and where journalism is usually an unlicensed profession. But in repressive, undemocratic countries, the distinction is a critical one, with monumental consequences for the individuals at stake. A ‘journalist’ is a privileged category of person, one which endows its recipient with certain authority, rights, and recognitions. Journalists have access to power resources, namely the power to shape public perceptions and mobilize public opinion. There are material consequences in such certification as well. Journalists can be members of the Press Syndicate and reap the financial benefits this membership entails but are also subject to specific laws and regulations reserved for the media. Journalists and their citizen counterparts enjoy protection from transnational human rights organizations and their access to the media, emergency assistance funds and pro-bono expert legal representation, and such.

A central contention underlying this methodology is that the proliferation of personal ICTs means that *anyone* can become a citizen journalist if that individual engages in journalistic practices, and that the identity citizen journalist can potentially be enacted by anyone at anytime, it is not a fixed or permanent identity. Rather people engage in acts of citizen journalism when they snap a picture of a policeman beating a citizen and post it online, text message information that establishes witness to an event like the number of people at a protests, or upload a video to YouTube of people being forcibly removed by authorities. Such reports can

be intentional or unintentional (Rettberg 2009). Blogs, mobile phones, and social media are powerful precisely because they enable any person to become a citizen journalist at any point, whether for a moment or a lifetime. Thus anyone can enact the role of citizen journalist at particular moments, while others may adopt it as a primary identity on the blog.

One of the starkest ways citizen journalists differ from their professional counterparts in that they are driven by different objectives. In the freer media contexts bloggers range from subject-matter specialists to opinionated pundits and everything in between. In some repressive countries they are a primary informational outlet whereas as in others they are interpretive and subjective and disavow the norm of objectivity. Increasing use of citizen media content therefore results in the acknowledgement and potential certification of those values. As the journalistic field becomes harder to define, the distinction journalists enjoy lessens.

Yet the dialectic between professional and amateur, mainstream and alternative, becomes problematic as reference points shift. Furthermore, the very nature of news is shifting as digital technologies that span the globe instantaneously and enable anyone with an internet connection or mobile phone to communicate what's happening directly to a potentially infinite number of people continue to evolve, transforming social, political and economic logics. Just as the telegraph of the 1830s, radio in the 1920s and television in the 1950s transformed the way people got information and the definition of news itself, the digital revolution of the 2000s has transformed the both the nature of news and relations of power. Citizen journalism alters not only how news is created and public perception influenced, but the very political logic of authoritarian systems predicated on control of information and a monopoly on the means of symbolic power.

By juxtaposing the term "citizen," with its attendant qualities of civic mindedness and social responsibility, with that of "journalism," which refers to a particular profession, to describe online and digital journalism done by amateurs, underscores the link between the practice of journalism and its relation to the political and public sphere. Amateur journalism, on the other hand, situates the amateur journalist in the journalistic field and implicates them in the reification of that field and its attendant rules and practical logic. The term 'alternative journalism', on the other hand, is counterhegemonic and situates the alternative journalist in juxtaposition to the mainstream or corporate media, its values and its ideology. As Atton notes, alternative media present a "radical challenge to the professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media" (Atton 2003, 267).

The structural advantages of citizen journalism platforms include facile production, instantaneous transmission, diverse coverage of topics not typically

‘allowed’ in traditional media, and individual rather than corporate ‘ownership’ that can make it difficult for the state to exert pressure economically or otherwise. According to Flew, there have been three elements critical to the rise of citizen journalism: open publishing, collaborative editing and distributed content (2005). In addition to those elements one should not forget the decreasing cost of technology and internet access that enabled these elements to become widely accessible, which we include consideration in the indicators but explore in greater depth in our annual *Freedom on the Net* report. Open publishing means that citizen journalists are not subject to the same editorial controls or filters nor economic dynamics of ownership and influence as professional journalists since they are essentially volunteers who self-publish via online media and social networking platforms.

Blogs and citizen YouTube channels challenged the privileged role of professional journalists as ordinary citizens gained platforms for gathering information and mass dissemination, giving voice to the voiceless and making it more difficult for the repressive regimes to control the media and information. Unencumbered by the constraints of professional journalism, grassroots citizen journalists cover taboo topics like corruption, torture, and human rights that are absent from coverage in many Partly Free and Not Free countries.

3. Changes to the FOTP methodology

In the 2002 revised methodology, previously separate categories for print and broadcast media freedom were combined so that each methodology question encompassed all types of media. Smaller adjustments to the wording of the 109 bullets over the succeeding years made reference to the internet and to bloggers as being covered under the purview of the methodology. For example, under question B3 on censorship, blocking of websites and blogs was mentioned in addition to censorship of print and broadcast outlets. In addition, as a practical matter issues such as internet censorship and filtering or attacks and legal cases against bloggers were covered by the analysts in the course of their assessments and were explicitly mentioned as reasons for improvements or declines in scores during ratings review meetings. This was particularly true of certain countries and regions—for example, we saw that the growth in independent online content was a major factor in improved scores for some Middle Eastern countries during the mid-2000s. After crackdowns on traditional media in China and Iran, people’s access to online news and ability to blog was cited as a reason against assigning the worst possible scores on the methodology question concerning people’s access to robust and diverse news and views (B5).

However, prior to the 2011 publication cycle, we decided to more thoroughly update the methodology (within the parameters of our existing questions and scoring

system) to take account of new media and citizen journalism. One aim was to make more explicit the inclusion of these issues that had developed over the years on a more ad hoc basis. Thus, at the outset, we included language under the general guidance on scoring that reads:

As a general guideline, the index is focused on ability to access news and information (which predominantly means print and broadcast media but can also include blogs, social media, and other forms of digital news dissemination) and providers of news content, which predominantly means journalists but can also include citizen journalists and bloggers, where applicable.

Language was amended under both the overall questions and the bullets as well. Under a number of questions, “journalists” was replaced by “journalists or bloggers”—for example, on questions A2 and A3 concerning legal cases being brought against journalists, B7 concerning physical attacks against members of the press, and C7 concerning journalists accepting bribes or being paid for coverage. In a number of other questions—such as B1, on influence over news content, and B5, on access to diverse content—efforts were made to clarify the inclusion of online content by adding language such as “internet-based news sources.” Finally, regarding the means of dissemination, a bullet was added under question B7 to cover “technical attacks on news and information websites or key online outlets for information exchange” and under C4 to add mobile phones under the means of news distribution (the internet had been previously added, which would cover infrastructural constraints on access). As a result of these changes, inclusion of new media and bloggers/citizen journalists has been made an explicit part of 10 of our 23 methodology questions.

4. Concluding thoughts

The symbiosis between citizen and professional media is likely to continue and grow as internet access expands and better connectivity speeds makes video and audio sharing easier and faster. The increasing use of citizen-generated content in mainstream media, from CNN’s iReport to Al Jazeera’s The Stream, as well as the ability to bypass professional media all together will surely continue to problematize how we study “the press.” But it does not discount the need to continue monitoring the fourth estate, even if that estate is perhaps less exclusive than it was when we first started this survey. Defining what we mean by the press will likely become increasingly challenging as new ICT platforms elide the distinction between free expression and free association. The ability to monitor press freedom could become more difficult if semi-private platforms like Facebook continue to remain popular platforms for producing and sharing news since they are less open to public scrutiny.

The increasing use of ICT platforms for news and dependence on citizen journalism impose their own set of challenges, particularly related to media literacy. Internet and 3G phones to get news and information requires media as well as technological literacy, bringing a new set of constraints in the digital divide debate. Furthermore, in order to effectively use citizen media as an information source one must be able to assess credibility and trustworthiness of a multitude of sources, a challenge in the mainstream media environment not to mention on Twitter and blogs. Although *Freedom of the Press* survey does not specifically address the issue of media literacy, the increasing reliance on citizen media without the gatekeeper role played by the mainstream media could impose new dynamics in the ecology of press freedom that may need to be addressed.

Nonetheless, the unparalleled longevity of the press freedom survey coupled with the variety of indicators contributes to an important understanding of the press freedom situation in each country of the world and how it has developed over time. By keeping the methodology rigorous yet flexible, the survey can account for changes in news production and distribution while simultaneously enabling comparison across time. The role of journalists and characteristics of the profession may be undergoing a significant change, but the press continues to play an important role in upholding and enabling democratic governance.

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