Citizen Journalism and Editorial Policies: A Case Study of The Trinidad Express Newspaper

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CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND EDITORIAL POLICIES: A CASE STUDY OF THE TRINIDAD EXPRESS NEWSPAPER

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RQ 2. In what ways have the steps/procedures taken influenced the publishing of citizens’ information?

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Keywords

Citizen Journalism, Traditional Media, Newspapers, Media Platforms, Free Flow, Digitization

1. Introduction

The rapid growth and expansion of technological advancements have influenced ongoing trends in mass communications. More so, the traditional methods of gathering news have changed in the current era of digitization. The evolution of new media has given rise to a new “cyber village correspondent” known as citizen journalist (Canter, 2013). During the past decade, news gathering has witnessed a paradigm shift with the influx of information gathered from citizens who no longer wish to be mere consumers of news products, but rather involved in the news-making process. The advent of these new forms of media has provided the means for citizens to become journalists in their own right. On the other hand, new media have become a challenge for those involved in the traditional gatekeeping (watchdog) monopoly of mass media, as media professionals are unable to regulate the free flow of information (Channel, 2010).

According to Stuart (2009), journalism has undergone many changes. It has become more receptive to alternative modes of news gathering, more diversified across task, as well as citizens involvement. Lewis, et al. (2010), further shed light on the changing trends in journalism, whereby news agencies have begun to incorporate user-generated content in the
form of comments, blogs, photos and videos. Though news agencies have become welcoming of citizen journalism, it (citizen journalism) has challenged the authority of traditional media professionals as gatekeepers (watchdogs) of news content as well as their role as agenda-setters (Allan, 2010).

Though there have been significant changes within the press industry, there has been very little to no research on the development of citizen journalism within the geographical borders of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Moreover, there has not been any published study which informs how traditional journalists within the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago have been coping with citizen journalists and citizens’ content with regard to regulation and policy making. Thus, the current study seeks to address this shortcoming relative to the evolution of the press industry in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago by examining The Trinidad Express Newspapers. The newspaper dates back to 1967 and is part of a media conglomerate known as Caribbean Network (CCN), One Caribbean Media Limited (OCM).

It is envisaged that the study will contribute significantly to the body of knowledge related to the regulation and creation of editorial policies with particular emphasis on print journalism in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore, the findings should provide media organizations, particularly editorial policy-makers, insight into the importance of creating sound editorial policies which impact information provided by citizens within print media (newspapers) and the wider society. From a mass media perspective, this investigation is relevant and timely for the news industry, which is currently witnessing significant changes in the way news is gathered and circulated. Correspondingly, since there is very limited to no research within the field of citizen journalism which focuses on the Trinidad and Tobago context, this study has the potential to add to the existing literature in the field of media.

2. Literature Review
Technological advancements have contributed to the rise of citizen journalism. This has resulted in a media shift which impacts on how news is sourced and circulated. According to Canter (2013, p. 1091), these “new breed of cyber village correspondent” known as citizen journalists are noted to be contributing valuable media content. While citizen journalists are contributing considerably, on the other hand, the utilization of material provided by them has threatened the career of professional editors and journalists. This is so as there is a reduction in news staff since citizen journalists are providing the news for the mainstream newsroom at reduced cost. For instance, Canter (2013) highlights that the fourth largest local newspaper publisher in Britain (Northcliffe Media) has witnessed a drastic reduction in staff, as a result of the welcoming of free material provided by the public. In view of this, audiences are not merely active recipients of news rather active participants in the process of constructing it.

To date, Campbell (2015) has explored the theories of citizenship within citizen journalism, while Canter (2013) examined the emergent of the field of citizen journalism, also called collaborative journalism, and the extent of the shifting roles of journalism. Specifically, Campbell (2015) critically examined what is deemed citizen (-ship) and its relation to citizen journalism. Though this study’s aim is not focused wholly on theories of citizen (-ship), Campbell’s finding has shed some insight on conflicting issues within the field of citizen journalism by offering varying perspectives on who is a citizen and what constitutes the ideology of citizenship given the blurry field of citizen journalism thus provoking the need for further research.

The hike in citizen journalism and the use of new media technologies have called for concern for the theory of gatekeeping to be upgraded. Cossiavelou and Bantimaroudis (2009) highlighted that digital media have made the gatekeeping paradigm irrelevant due to the fact that media professionals are unable to control the flow of information to the public. Channel (2010) shared similar sentiments whereby a call is made for scholars to develop new theories that are relevant to the shift from traditional to new media marked by a free flow of information driven by technology. On the contrary, Lunt and Livingstone (2014) noted that emerging global media systems have generated a challenge for governments to devise media and communication policies which are focused on shared national values and aimed at delivering
social and cultural policies. They further highlighted that regulation is a response to cultural, social and economic changes which in turn can advance social and public purposes. In this light Fenton (2009) has provided a comprehensive analysis of technological changes, historical conditions, local contingencies and process dynamics which result in transformational changes in journalistic practices. Overall, he viewed these changes as an unpredictably negative and positive development.

Furthermore, Christians et al. (2009) addressed the theoretical underpinnings for the examination of the press. The historical aspect, the purpose, as well as the application of the libertarian and social normative theories were explored. Both the libertarian and social theories provide valuable information for the undertaking of this study. A thorough understanding of journalism, according to Papacharissi (2009), can only be conceived within the larger political and social context within which journalism operates. In view of this, reference was made to Polish social theorist, Zygmant Bauman, who defines society as a “liquid modern society” (Papacharissi, 2009). Bauman’s theory was used as a framework to discuss an unstable ever-changing society, comprehensive of political changes. Thus, the field of journalism is undeniable one of change, since it operates within both a political and social sphere.

In contrast, Hermida (2011) investigated how participatory journalists are viewed by professional journalism within a democratic society. In particular, the stages of the news production were explored in relation to the level at which different participant(s) are involved. While audience participation has become part of professionally edited publications, it is noted that traditional journalists and editors are not in favour of sharing the news jurisdiction. Indeed, traditional journalists have viewed themselves as an “elite group” which provides information to the public (Hermida, 2011). Specifically, despite the inflow of participatory journalism, traditional journalists have retained “control over the stages of identifying, gathering, filtering, producing and distributing [of] news” (Hermida, 2011, p.16). Thus, the idea of relinquishing control over production and reporting of news has been frowned upon, as journalists desire to preserve a professional status quo.

Findings produced by Hermida (2011) highlighted that users/audience contributed to the production of the news by submitting information (text, audio visual etc.). However, the professional journalist had the final decision on whether or not an audience’s information was of interest, thus gaining further attention. In light of this, professional journalists continue to be agenda-setters for the publication of the news. Additionally, the study also highlighted the stringent guidelines implemented by the mainstream newsroom for the writing of stories produced by users. Prescribed formats, along with a degree of editorial supervision, governed the written pieces submitted by users for publication. At the distribution level, the development of social networks as mediums of distribution posed a challenge for editors to maintain the hierarchy and distribution of news. Lastly, at the interpretation level, editors expressed mixed feelings regarding how news published were analysed or interpreted based on the users’ feedback or comments.

In comparison to Hermida (2011), Ryfe (2009) shares a similar perspective about traditional journalists’ attitude towards change within the mainstream newsrooms. These ongoing changes have challenged the culture of professional journalists. Hence, professional journalists are thought to be resistant and resentful towards new ways of news gathering, production and distribution. Such changes have defied the status quo of traditional journalists with regards to “good” and “bad” journalism and what constitutes such. To further emphasize, Ryfe’s (2009) study gives insight about the change of activities within a particular newsroom which impacted on news gathering and reporting.

Many journalists within the particular newsroom expressed emotions of distress and “feeling strange” as their freedom were infringed upon. This resulted in many of them conforming to old routine (s) and/or some quitting. Internal changes within mainstream newsroom which are a result of external factors and trends, pose a threat to professional journalist. Traditional professional journalists seek to remain an exclusive group of individuals who are eligible to provide substantial information across various spheres of life (Ryfe, 2009).
The influx of citizen journalists and their interactions with new media have created great concerns for the adoption of laws which govern the free flow of information by citizen journalists. As stated by Turner (2012, p.8), citizen journalists are a noteworthy source of news today and “often fulfill the same functions as traditional journalist in society.” From this perspective he adds that citizen journalists should be protected by law just as traditional journalists are protected by law. Turner (2012) further notes that the unequal treatment of citizen journalists in comparison to traditional journalists raises First Amendment concerns. One commentator, as mentioned by Turner (2012, p.12), states that “creating two class of First Amendment speakers… is difficult to square with First Amendment principles.” Hence, a broad Federal Shield Law should be implemented which incorporates citizen journalists. Reference was made to California and New Jersey which have adopted laws that protect citizen journalists. Though this study does not focus on the protection of citizen journalists, Turner’s (2012) article has provided a route that can be taken to encourage the access to information, while allowing citizens to provide valuable information (news) which is governed under effective law enforcement.

In contrast to Turner’s (2012) concern for the protection of citizen journalists by the development of laws, Masum (2014) has provided a wealth of knowledge pertinent to the role of the media as it exists within a society governed by laws. As the media assumes its role in society, the enactment of laws and regulations ensure that the media perform at its utmost best. In so doing, the issue of libel and slander as acts of defamation become of great concern during the process of publication. By understanding the media’s rights to freedom to express and its position based on freedom of expression, Masum and Desa (2014) distinguish two forms of defamation: libel and slander. Libel as explained by Masum and Desa (2014), is the act of producing defamatory material which is written (emails, pictures etc.) in a permanent form. Slander, on the other hand, is defamation in a temporary form such as gestures and spoken words. They further explain the grounds on which communicated material may be considered defamatory and how the media is protected from defamatory, once the information published by the media is factual and truth. While this study does not focus solely on media laws and regulation, Masum and Desa’s (2014) study provides valuable information relevant to the upkeeping of editorial functions, as journalism continues to evolve within the society it exists in.

The differentiation between formal and informal rules of media further allows for a better understanding of media regulation. Paolo Mancini (cited by Price et al, 2013, p. 35) informed that “law is inserted within a cultural framework that… very often either contradicts the existing law or makes it ineffective through transformations…. [and/or] adaptations.” In other words, [media] laws are created and developed in accordance to the society’s culture, and can become a challenge due to change. He goes on to discuss the mixture of law and culture and informal and formal rules which are reflected in the structure and performance of news media. Drawing reference to German sociologist, Mancini stated that laws are derived from the need of society for order and protection which justifies the need for policies and rules to be created that are relevant to the upsurge of citizen content.

By the same token, Cohen (2011) also supports the need to develop policies relevant to the current state of new media noting the upward movement of journalism and regression of media laws and policies. The public no longer only view themselves as consumers of news, but also reporters of news. To further emphasize the point, reference was made to Habermas’ public sphere, which Cohen (2011, p. 4) lamented, “...access to the public sphere [wa]s open in principle to all citizens.” Hence, journalism should not be restricted to one particular group of individuals within society. More so, new media should not be viewed as the replacement for old media. According to him, the Fourth Estate has insufficient resources available to cover the current media environment.

Conversely, the Fifth Estate continues to increase and is filling the gaps of the Fourth Estate. Citizen journalists and non-profit news sites which report the news from different viewpoints were noted to be representative of the Fifth Estate. As Cohen (2011) pleaded for the establishment of news laws, he states that the transformation of journalism ought not to focus
on the “Media that Citizens Need” but should focus on the media produced by citizen journalists. Thus, law enforcement bodies should establish a First Amendment “right to participate.” The article goes on to explore the shifting media landscape and its impact on print media, making the claim for the establishment of the Fifth Estate whereby, an “architecture of accountability” is adopted (Cohen, 2011).

All in all, technological developments have contributed to the increase in media globalization thus impacting journalism. As political, economic and social spheres of society continue to evolve, media organizations are forced to embark on new forms of regulation. Within the shifting paradigm of journalism, citizens are known to be active participants rather than mere active consumers of news. Hence, libertarian and social normative theories are used as frameworks to better understand the societal and political changes in which journalism exist presently. Although, different authors have noted the changing role of journalists and new media, there remains a scarcity of information on specific editorial policies used or implemented as a method of control for the publication of citizen content. Notwithstanding, Hermida’s (2011) study provides a lens which helps to understand the processes involved for the monitoring and presenting of audience’s content. Hence, this strongly reiterates Cossiavelou and Bantimaroudis’ (2009) plead for more research to be conducted within the emergent field of citizen journalism. Though traditional journalists have been welcoming of media content, they prefer to remain distinguished from citizen journalists.

Setting and Context

The first mass media in Trinidad was the print media (newspapers). According to Besson (2011), prior to the early nineteenth century, several newspapers existed. Two years after the British Conquest, the first English Language newspapers (The Trinidad Weekly Courant) was published in Trinidad by M. Gallagher in 1799. The establishment of ‘The Trinidad Gazette” in 1820 was the first weekly newspapers to publish. Five years later (1825) The Trinidad Gazette was renamed to the “Port of Spain Gazette” (Gordon, 1999).

The year 1874 witnessed the publication of the first daily newspapers, the “Trinidad News” established by Dr. Edward Paijne. Seventeen years later (1891) the development of the print media industry continued to bloom with the embarking of the “Trinidad Times”, edited and published by W.A. Clarke. However, its existence only lasted two months. Not only was the print media blossoming in Trinidad, but more so a variety of print media continued to be birthed. In 1892, the semi-weekly newspaper “Public Opinion” was launched by Phillip Rostant (Gordon, 1999). One year after its release, the Public Opinion was changed to the “Observer”, by its editor and publisher, Joseph de la Sauvagre, who had served in the French army during the France-Germany war. The publication of the Observer only lasted two years (Gordon, 1999). Once again, the Observer was retitled Public Opinion in 1896. It failed and was replaced by the Reform. Previously a weekly newspaper, the Reform became a daily newspaper in 1897. The Reform was representative of the Reform Movement with intense competition from the Daily News and later The Mirror. However, the Reform’s failure as a daily newspaper, lead to its publication once again as a weekly newspaper (Gordon, 1999).

The year 1898 saw the establishment of three (3) newspapers: The Mirror, the Indian Kol-l-Noor Gazette and Evening Gazette respectively. Both the Indian Kol-l-Noor Gazette and the Evening Gazette were short-lived. In 1901, a second daily newspapers appeared which lasted two months and six days. Three years later (1904), The Pioneer was established by H. N. Hall and survived for approximately a little more than two (2) months (Gordon 1999). The Argos, a Spanish evening paper, was established in 1911 by D. M. Navarro, a Venezuelan, and sold for a penny. The publication was later published in English under the management of Aldrie Lee Lum and lasted from 1911 to 1920 (Gordon, 1999).

As time progressed, the Evening Guardian followed by the Trinidad Guardian newspaper was published in 1917. To date, the Trinidad Guardian newspapers has been the longest surviving daily newspapers publication. As a national newspaper, it guards its responsibility as fourth estate (Trinidad Publishing Company). The Port of Spain Gazette became the Trinidad Chronicle in 1956 and failed three years later. Shortly after the failure of
the *Trinidad Chronicle*, the *Evening Star* emerged, which did not last long, followed by the *Daily Mirror*, published by Cecil King due to the dramatic close down of the *Daily Mirror* in 1966 when Vernon Charles courageously started the *Trinidad Express Newspapers* (Gordon, 1999).

The establishment of the *Trinidad Express Newspapers* meant that the Trinidad Guardian which had dominated the newspaper market for eighty-two years had a competitor. Currently, the Trinidad Guardian Newspaper continues to compete with the Trinidad Express Newspapers being the second oldest surviving daily newspaper. A decade after its establishment (Trinidad Express Newspapers), it replaced the Trinidad Guardian newspaper as the dominant daily newspapers in Trinidad and Tobago (One Caribbean Media Limited, 2008). Thirty-four (34) years after its birth, the Trinidad Express became part of a media conglomerate, its holding company, Caribbean Caribbean Network (CCN). The country’s leading television station TV6 and other Caribbean media houses are also owned by CCN (One Caribbean Media Limited, 2008).

The Trinidad Express Newspaper, according to One Caribbean Media Limited, was founded on “the precepts of good, solid expository and investigative reporting”. The Trinidad Express daily readership averages over seventy-five thousand (75,000) which is representative of forty (40) percent of the reading population in Trinidad and Tobago. Additionally, its Sunday edition (Sunday Express) witnesses an outselling of almost eight thousand (8,000) copies each week (One Caribbean Media Limited, 2008). With the advent of news media/technology, the Trinidad Express Newspapers aims to continue to be in trend with the demand of the market. Hence, in 1997, it established its first website. The website has attracted a monthly audience of one hundred and forty thousand visitors from around the world. More than ten thousand (10,000) people log in everyday for news update and events from Trinidad and Tobago (One Caribbean Media Limited, 2008). The year 1993 saw the welcoming of the *Newsday* newspaper. Three years later (1996) the Independent was established as a weekly newspaper. That same year the *Independent* became a daily newspaper and in 1998 it was integrated with the *Trinidad Express Newspapers* (Gordon, 1999).

In addition, while the print media evolved in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs has developed the Libel and Defamation Act (Chapter 11:16). The advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the risks associated with it, further led to the establishment of the *Trinidad and Tobago Cyber Security Agency, Bill 2014*, which was presented to the House of Representatives on 21st March, 2014 (Parliament Trinidad and Tobago, 2014). The Cybercrime Agency is a cyber security contact point for any concerns related to cyber security and any other matters related to such (Parliament Trinidad and Tobago, 2014).

**Methodology**

The study utilized a qualitative approach which incorporated eight (8) one-on-one semi-structured interviews. To this end, the following research questions (RQs) were posed:

**RQ1**: What are the steps/procedures taken by traditional journalists in handling of citizen journalism?

**RQ2**: In what ways have the steps/procedures taken influenced the publishing of citizen’s information?

Based on the accessibility to participants, convenience sampling was used based on participants’ knowledge on the study’s aims and their ability to respond. The first step was to seek consent to conduct an interview with a maximum of ten (10) employees at the Trinidad Express Newspaper. The selection of the participants was determined by the participants’ job description inclusive of editor (-s) and journalists/reporters. All interviews were conducted within the Trinidad Express Newspapers’ editorial department, located in the capital of Trinidad (Port-of-Spain). Eight (8) one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, due to time constraints and the availability of the participants. Participants who were interviewed consisted of three senior editors, one sub-editor and four senior journalists/reporters. The interviews were conducted over two days.
The purpose of semi-structured interviews was: (1) To enquire whether there are any specific editorial policies that govern the publishing of citizen content within the Trinidad Express Newspapers. (2)To determine what are the editorial policies that governs the publishing of citizen content, (3) To probe who determines which type of citizen content is published (4) What are the steps involved for the publication of citizen’s content? (5) To enquire whether there were any challenges faced with the advancement of new media which have resulted in an influx of citizen journalists.

Data Analysis
A thematic framework of analysis was used for the examination of data collected from the semi-structured interviews. This involved reading the transcribed interview transcripts, developing codes for categorizing and tagging the responses from the interviews and interpretation consistent with the study’s research questions.

Initially, all interview transcripts were read at least twice, in-order for the researcher to become familiar with the discourses. Next, all the interviews were analysed for keywords, phrases and passages and coded in relation to the questions asked during the interviews, which were linked to the study’s aims and research questions. Analysis of keywords, phrases and passages were further analysed for repetitions and the use of expressions that were unfamiliar or not often used. The categorizing of data allowed for the development of main themes and subthemes. During the analysis of data; observations, thoughts and conclusions regarding the data were noted throughout the transcripts.

Results and Discussion
A descriptive analysis of the study’s findings was conducted. The strategy for the analysis of the data was based on the qualitative data analysis – thematic analysis as follows:

Table showing participants’ details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudo Name</th>
<th>Male (M)/Female (F)</th>
<th>Number of years in Current position and position held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13 years /Reporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5 years / Sub-editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Over five years/Reporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8 years/ Senior Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>9 years/ Reporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13 years/ Reporter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis of the study’s findings are discussed according to four (4) main themes which were identified and further broken down into sub-themes respectively. **Editorial Codes and Functional Procedures** is the first main theme discussed, inclusive of the following sub-themes: **Truth and Accuracy, Accountability and Transparency, Trust and Independence and Confidentiality and Privacy.** **Challenges of Citizen Journalism** is another main theme within the study’s analysis and findings. The next theme is **Traditional Newsroom: Publication of Citizen’s Content** culminating in **Media Law.**

**Editorial Codes and Functional Procedures**

The Trinidad Express Newspaper was noted to be guided by the “One Caribbean Media (OCM) Statement of Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines.” Such principles and guidelines are used as the Trinidad Express Newspapers ‘sacred book’ which informs the work and the conduct of all individuals who are involved in the production and delivery of news and other content across the many media platforms of the OCM Group. These principles and operational guidelines also serve as the company’s “public declaration” of purpose and its obligation to society by providing trustworthy information to the public. All eight participants have expressed the view that the OCM Statement of Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines are general rules which guide all content and information received as they relate to editing and publication. In other words, there are no prescribed editorial policies specifically outlined for the publishing of citizens’ content, since all media productions and delivery are guided by the company’s principles and guidelines set forth.

Notably, the OCM group principles are governed by democracy, whereby all citizens have the right and freedom to be informed and enlightened. These principles are founded on justice, equity and respect to all (One Caribbean Media, 2008). Hence, the Trinidad Express Newspapers’ editorial decisions are guided by the following principles: truth and accuracy, accountability and transparency, trust and independence and confidentiality and privacy.

**Truth and Accuracy**

The public’s right to know the truth is at the heart of the Trinidad Express Newspapers’ mission. Every situation/event ought to be reported accurately, fully and in context. This hinges on the notion of credibility based on facts. As two participants emphasized, information received and gathered should come from first-hand sources or verifiable evidence. One participant stated: “don’t take information from anyone other than the actual source [person(s) involved]” First-hand information was noted to add to the news legitimacy. Clearly, the origin of a source plays a crucial role in contributing to the truthfulness and the accuracy of news. According to the OCM Statement of Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines (2008, p. 4), “sources and contacts are the lifeblood of journalism…reliable sources [allow] us to serve the public interest; manipulative sources, on the other hand, poison the entire information system…with grave consequences for the entire society.” This leads to the principles of **Accountability and Transparency.**

**Accountability and Transparency**

Accountability and transparency are two other guiding editorial principles that govern the Trinidad Express Newspapers. Trust amongst the public and the Trinidad Express Newspapers is developed by the Express’ acceptance of their responsibility of being accountable for all actions, in light of the freedoms granted to media institutions (freedom of the press). Thus, fairness and privacy play a fundamental role in the execution of information to the public. Fairness, according to the Oxford Dictionary, refers to just treatment without
favouritism and discrimination. Indeed, fairness lays the foundation for the developing of trust between citizens and the Trinidad Express Newspapers. When trust is gained by the public, for the media (institution) it signals a degree of transparency and openness demonstrated by the media institution.

Transparency is encouraged throughout the editorial process which includes public enquiry and discussions about the work of the newsroom. The elimination of arbitrariness and uncertainty requires an open pathway to enquiry, which further encourages discussion amongst the public domain, which has the right to be informed.

Trust and Independence

Every stage of the editorial process which involves the gathering and presentation of information is directed by the requirement for trust at both internal and external operations. Gaining the public’s assurance relies on “a clear and demonstrated commitment to the public interest” (OCM, 2008, p. 2). The public’s ability to rely on information provided and the actions taken by the Trinidad Express Newspapers further impacts the media’s power and ability to influence the public. Public’s trust is further built upon confidentiality and privacy of individual’s rights.

Confidentiality and Privacy

The rights and protection of subjects and objects that become part of the new gathering process are respected. The mishandling of information deemed confidential both internally (within the confines of the media house’s workspace) and externally (with reference to the public domain) often have significant implications. Thus, confidential sources ought to be treated with the utmost protection to the extent that prompt action is taken against anyone found in breach. More so, diligent care is taken to ensure that no evidence is left unsecured, inclusive of electronic trails which can lead to the identification of someone whose privacy has been promised. One such case in which the Express Media House exhibits this delicate handling of sensitive information relates to situations concerning children. The media house considers children as being the most vulnerable of the society’s population; therefore, discreet information concerning these subjects is treated with extra responsibility as their welfare is of utmost concern. In so doing, children are not identified either by name or face, nor are they quoted in reports which may “expose them to the risk of violence, abuse, ridicule or punishment in any form” (OMC, 2008, p. 8).

These principles discussed above are fused into the day-to-day activities which guide the operation of the newsroom and the actions/behaviours of its staff. An understanding of the OCM Statement of Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines can be linked to the Social Responsibility theory which recognizes that the press has a responsibility and plays a significant role in the democracy in which it functions in, by providing a “truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of [the] news and events” and as a catalyst for development and exchange of information within the public sphere (Fortner & Fackler, 2014, p.14).

Moreover, an analysis of the principles and procedures set forth by One Caribbean Media highlighted that those principles and procedures are woven into all publications, inclusive of citizen’s content. This in turn ensures the accuracy, transparency and the trust of the press are maintained in light of receiving information from the public, while demonstrating the characteristics of a free and responsible press.

Challenges of Citizen Journalism

The advent of new media technologies has brought along both positive and negative outcomes for mainstream newsrooms. As many participants have noted, new media have allowed for the dispersion of information in a quick and timely. However, on the other hand it (new media) has created a platform which allows for the propagation of misleading information (to which many referred to as “fake news”). As a result of the dissemination of fake news, most participants reiterated that the traditional news room is now faced with the challenge of
verifying fake news, since society relies on the traditional news room to provide information which is truthful and unbiased.

The publishing of sensationalized and fake news raises concerns of objectivity, accuracy, and privacy of citizen information (content). For instance, one editor made reference to a news story which was circulated and stated that a prominent athlete of Trinidad and Tobago was killed in an accident. However, upon further investigations, [professional] reporters were now faced with the challenge of correcting the misleading/fake news shared via the various media platforms. One reporter stated that the constant verification of misleading information can be seen as a “balancing act” where reporters and journalists are constantly faced with both factual and non-factual information. To emphasize the reporter’s perspective of having to engage in the balancing of information, Fenton (2009) noted that media changes are unpredictably negative and positive development.

The constant validation of misleading information, as lamented by all participants, has made the job of traditional journalists, editors and the traditional newsroom a bit perplexing. However, two participants stated that while the job has become a bit of a challenge, the influx of the free flow of information by citizens should not be viewed as a threat to the traditional news room but should challenge traditional journalists to be at the top of things and constantly be on the beat.

While most participants highlighted an upsurge of misleading information during the past decade being shared by citizens through the use of various social media platforms, they also noted that citizens do play an active role in providing first-hand information of events which at times can be used as potential news stories. While sources are valued, first-hand information from the subjects or objects involved is preferred. Since citizen journalists are always on the beat to capture and share events that occur, the use of new media has facilitated the quick flow of information within real time, which has imposed a problem for print media (newspapers). According to majority of the participants, by the time news get printed and reaches in the hands of readers, the news being read is already ‘stale news’. Thus, print media now competes with the different media platforms to provide the public with news that occur within its present time frame. Such competition has resulted in media organization now moving towards the digitization of newspapers and a move away from the printing of traditional media (newspapers). The Trinidad Express Newspaper is no stranger to the digitization of newspapers, as they have developed an online newspaper website, where their readers can also enjoy reading their newspapers at any time and location.

**Traditional Newsroom: Publication of Citizen’s Content**

All information received from the public and published, according to the study’s participants, is guided by the *OCM Statement of Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines*. The publication of citizen’s content goes through the regular process as any other news/information gathered by professional journalists/reporters. The basic stages identified for the publication of citizens’ content are gathering (sourcing), verification, and selection/editing as follows:

**Gathering (sourcing)**

Information is primarily received by various ways. At times, people (citizens) contact the newsroom via telephone or email informing that they (citizen) have a story worthy of being published. Citizens also provide the newsroom with photographic clippings and videos of events which had occurred. An alternative avenue used by citizens to provide mainstream newsroom about events and/or concerns which occurred was *Letter to the Editor*. Eyewitness account was another tactic used by the mainstream newsroom to gather information which are referred to as the source. As noted by an editor, “without any source we have nothing…as sources can give you real stories” Hence, the source play a significant role in providing the newsroom with information that is further scrutinized before being disseminated to the public.

Sources were considered to be the initial touch point and idea catalyst for the production of news frames. Based on the study’s analysis, after information had been
gathered from the source(s), traditional journalists/reporters then began implementing the mainstream newsroom’s policies and procedures required for the production of the news. After the source(s) have provided the idea for the development of news stories, they then (sources) become unsolicited, since they are no longer needed in the production of news. This is further emphasized by Hermida (2011) who states that journalists do not wish to share dominion over the news.

Verification

When news/information is received at the newsroom, it goes through a verification process which involves making direct contact with the relevant source(s) involved. Making direct contact with the respective source(s) gives those source(s) the right to answer and clarify any misguided information. Once direct contact has been made by the relevant journalist/reporter to the relevant party(ies) involved, the story then becomes a potential story to be published. However, selection of the story is decided upon by the editor who determines whether the story has any merit to be further considered.

Verification of information provided by citizen, hinges on both gatekeeping theory and social responsibility theory which the press functions and operate by. Under the gatekeeping theory of the press, verification of information sets the pathway to determine whether a news report/story has access through the “gate” of the newspaper. In contrast, by providing trustworthy news to the public through the process of verification ensures that the press fulfils its role in society as outlined within the social responsibility theory.

Selection/Editing

When stories/news/event have been verified accordingly, the journalist/reporter then writes a story about the event. Once the story has been written, it is passed to an editor to confirm whether the story is relevant. Once the story has been approved by the respective editor(s), it is then amended and sent to the sub-pool. At this stage the story becomes part of what is called a content package.

The study found that while citizens (sources) have been providing the mainstream newsroom with valuable information, the information provided is reproduced in accordance to the editorial policies and standards (OCM Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines) of the newsroom. By incorporating the policies and procedures, it signals that the Trinidad Express Newspapers has set parameters for the production of citizen journalism. According to Lunt and Livingston (2014), cultural, social and economic changes have fostered the need for regulation.

Furthermore, the reproduction of citizens’ information continually places traditional journalists/reporters and editors as ‘gatekeepers’ in the midst of the competition to be abreast of events that occur. This is so as new media have allowed citizens to produce and share news without the involvement of media professionals such as journalists and editors. For this reason, Caaiavelou and Bantimaroudis (2009) have stated that the gatekeeping theory has become inapplicable.

While the gatekeeping theory has been plausible, Shoemaker (1991 cited in McQuail, 2010) appealed for wider social context and other factors to be taken into consideration, since there is “one (initial) gate area and one main set of selection criteria” with this in mind, the gatekeeping theory does not account for the present new forms of media development which is used for the dispersion of information. Like Shoemaker (1991), Cossiavelou and Bantimaroudis (2009) shared similar sentiments that the gatekeeping paradigm has been irrelevant owing to the fact that media professionals are unable to guard the free flow of information. Hence, it can be stated that the theory of gatekeeping is in a current state of flux.

Moreso, it can be said that the absence of specific policies and regulation which governs citizen’s journalism may impose a treat to the agenda of the traditional mainstream newsroom. According to Mc Quail (2010), news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are and is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues. In other words, when stories are framed in a particular manner through the reproduction of such, the
public view particular events from the perspective of the newsroom agenda/goals. On the other hand, when there are no rules which determine or which guide the publishing of unfiltered information shared by citizens, the mainstream newsroom agenda can become questionable. McCombs and Shaw (1972 cited in Boyd-Barrett & Newbold, 1995) note the level of importance attached to an issue initiated from the amount of information given about an event/situation by the newsroom (organization). That in itself fulfils the media’s agenda which is guided by their own policies and procedures under the banner of self-regulation. On the contrary, the free flow of information by citizen journalism, which has not been filtered by the mainstream newsroom, creates a playground for citizens to be misinformed and misguided by the sharing of “fake news”. Thus, by fulfilling its social responsibility to the public, the media (press) ought to set high standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance (Baran & Davis, 2015). Therefore, the filtering of citizens’ information by mainstream newsroom may ensure that high editorial standards are implemented in fulfilling the media’s role in society.

Media Law

Focusing on media accountability, the issue of libel comes into play. While information and ideas are disseminated through the media, there are restrictions and limitations regarding the publication of media content which may be considered harmful, insensitive or malicious. These restrictions and limitations do not prevent the media from participating in what is considered freedom of expression. However, while they are able to operate under the banner of freedom of express, mainstream newsroom staffs are to ensure that reporting and publication of events are done in a manner that does not bring citizens character into disrepute. Therefore, events which occur ought to be reported without any prejudice and should be factual and truth with sound evidence. Hence, those involved in the editing and publication of the traditional media (newspapers) must be mindful of the impact and the damages of the abuse of press freedom. As one participant noted, “Libel plays a crucial part in the transmitting of information …[hence the Trinidad Express Newspapers] ensure that all errors made are corrected within the shortest possible time (retraction).”

Unlike traditional media, information published by citizens across varying media platform is unfiltered. That is to say, information about events which occur are not edited nor checked for subjectivity when provided by citizen journalists. Since there are no laws or policies which govern or control the flow of information by citizens, acts of slander are most likely to occur amongst information published by citizens. For instance, reference was made to murdered Woman Police Constable (WPC) Nyasha Joseph, whose character was tarnished by some individuals via social media. Though her character had come into disrepute, there are no laws within the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that can prosecute the slander(s). Important to note, while there are no laws that control the flow of information throughout social media platforms, there is a Cyber Security bill that was introduced to the House of Representative, on 21st March, 2014. The bill is yet to come into effect and be passed as a law within the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

On the contrary, while freedom of the press and freedom of expression may allow mainstream newsrooms to convey and disseminate information, their reputation can come into disrepute based on the publication of information which can cause harm. For instance, two of the study’s participants noted that if the newsroom is not involved in self-regulation or does not abide by the editorial policies and procedures set forth by the Trinidad Express Newspapers, there will be backlash which at times can become a matter for the court. For instance, one senior editor recalled an incident whereby the reporting of an event had reached to the court. Despite the event being truthful, there were no evidence to further support their (mainstream newsroom) claim and as a result they had to stand the consequences of not being able to provide event. Hence, they were charge based on the laws of libel. To this end, Masum and Desa (2014, p. 35) also reiterated that “if appropriate measures are not designed and effectively enforced, the media can be counter-productive.”
Masum and Desa (2014) further state that it is of poor state for the media that operates within a democracy to engage in the sharing of untruthful information under that disguise of freedom of the press. Thus, it may be argued that citizen journalism should also be held account for any information shared which is untrue and misleading, as such is considered to be harmful in regards to libel and defamation. This leads to the concern to create editorial policies which govern citizen journalism, as this study seeks to explore what are the policies and regulations that control the free flow of information by citizens. As Turner (2012) highlighted, citizen journalists play a significant role by being the source(s) that provides newsworthy information and fulfil similar functions as those who operate within mainstream newsroom. Since citizens provide newsworthy information, they should be held accountable for any information shared which is questionable.

Conclusion

An examination of citizen journalism and editorial policies has revealed that there are no precise editorial policies used in the publication of citizens’ content. However, the study has shown that all information/news received at the Trinidad Express Newspapers for publication, inclusive of citizens’ content are guided by the One Caribbean Media Statement of Editorial Principles and Operational Guidelines. In essence, citizen content received from the public (citizens) is treated in like manner, as any other information received by employees (journalists/reporter, editors) of the mainstream newsroom. Further, the study has highlighted that while the Trinidad Express Newspapers has been controlling information received from the public as it relates to publication within the press, they are unable to control information and/or news shared by citizens across various media platforms such as Facebook.

Furthermore, since the Trinidad Express Newspapers aims to continually fulfil its purpose and commitment to the public, they are governed by the following editorial principles and operational guidelines: Truth and Accuracy, Accountability and Transparency, Trust and Independence and Confidentiality and Privacy. Such principles and guidelines are in keeping the social responsibility theory [of the press] which rests on the foundation of being valuable to society, enlightening the public, safeguarding the rights of individuals and providing a forum for discussion, while operating within a society where it is free from pressures of special interest.

By ensuring that its editorial principles are kept at high esteem, information/news that is received goes through three basic stages of publication: gathering (sourcing), verification and selection/editing. At the first stage, news is considered to be unfiltered. It is at this stage where citizen journalists are placed and recognized as sources or individuals who have first-hand information. Important to note, it only at this stage citizen journalists are involved in the publication process. On verification or the other stage of publication, mainstream newsroom staff gain access or liaise with the parties or subjects directly involved in order to clarify and ensure all information received is authentic and objective. Selection/Editting, being the last stage in the publication of news, focuses on determining whether a potential story meets the criteria to be published. Once approval is given by the respective editor(s) and is abridged, the story then becomes publishable and is sent to the respective individual(s) who ensures that the story is published within the correct content page and all the publishing mechanics are completed before being printed.

In the wake of new technologies and new media, traditional journalists/reporters and editors have been faced with challenges of citizen journalism. One major challenge faced is the transmission of sensationalized and misleading news across various media platforms. As a result of such, the mainstream newsroom is constantly caught in the ‘balancing act’ of validating misleading news propagated by citizens. Based on the challenge of not being able to control the flow of information by media professional, the gatekeeping (watchdog) theory has come into question. Many authors such as Cossiavelou and Bantimaroudis (2009) have stated that new media have impacted the gatekeeping theory, as there are many ‘gates’ through which information in now being dispersed. Hence, it has been lamented and recommended...
based on the study’s findings, that there should be the establishment of policies and laws which focuses on the control of citizen information shared.

Another struggle faced by the mainstream newsroom is being up-to-date about events and situations and providing information on the subject of such events in real time or as the event(s) unfold. Though the mainstream newsroom is in a battlefield of getting news in quick time, citizen journalists are cited as contributing considerably as sources who provide the newsroom with photographs and even giving eyewitness’ accounts.

While mainstream newsrooms are free to express themselves (freedom of the press), their behaviour and actions are monitored by laws of libel and defamation which keep them in check. In addition, to ensure that the mainstream newsroom operates in a manner which is worthy, the mainstream newsroom also engages in self-regulation which is influenced by the culture in which the media operates. Thus, media laws are considered to be formal and informal based on whether the laws are institutionalized and based on laws that existed before.

Putting citizen journalism and editorial policies into context, reference to the social responsibility theory is of prominence, as it allows for a better understanding of society and the role of the media within the society it functions. By examining the social responsibility theory, one is able to conclude whether the Trinidad Express Newspapers is fulfilling its role within the domains of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago by delivering to the citizens a press which is truthful and provides a platform for the public to be informed and voice their opinions. Moreover, while the mainstream newsroom acts on the benefit of society at large, they are still considered to be seen as the watchdog of news in the midst of the new trends in journalism as they continue to provide a press which is accurate and subjective. However, it is noted, that while the mainstream newsroom acts as the gatekeepers (watchdogs), new media have shown the theory of gatekeeping to be inept, as media organizations are no longer able to withhold information from the public. Noteworthy, journalists/reporters and editors who operate within the mainstream newsroom still consider themselves to be the ‘watchdog of news’ since society still depend on them to provide reliable news.

References:


