

The Citizen Journalist vs. the Academic Citizen: Citizenship in the Age of Cyberspace

Samih AZOUI¹, *

¹ ENS Assia Djebbar/ Constantine (Algeria), samih_azoui@yahoo.fr

Received: 23/02/ 2022

Accepted: 23/11/2022

ABSTRACT:

Keywords:

professional journalism, traditional university, citizen journalist, academic citizen, cyber-journalism,

The revolutionary discoveries in communication technologies, that have ushered in a new era of news/ knowledge collection and distribution in the Anglo-Saxon societies, are problematic and questionable as they have triggered unprecedented transformations in such (presumably not related) concepts as citizenship. The aim of this article is to argue that the emergence of new types of citizens tells of the irreversible decline in the inherited values of media and academia. Given the suggested comparative perspective, the structure of the paper takes it from the (near) death of professional journalism and traditional university through the emergence of a new generation of citizens and the wishful thinking that ordinarily accompanies it to end with the less publicised fact that it is another world being lost.

* AZOUI Samih

Introduction:

The academic interest for this topic stems from the over-publicised, nonetheless factual, breakthrough in the communication technologies that have inaugurated a new era of news/knowledge collection and distribution—commonly called cyberspace. Of all the societies that are experiencing the effects of such changes, focus is put on the Anglo-Saxon parts of the globe. Apart from the optimistic views with regard to the benign bearings of such technological innovations on citizenry's welfare worldwide, their damaging impacts on traditional media and academia must not be overlooked. Such an assumption calls for questions associated with the reasons behind (1) the degradation of professional journalism and traditional university, (2) the rise of new types of citizens, namely the “citizen journalist” and the “academic citizen,” (3) and those directed to the possible correlation between the former and the latter, i.e. (1) and (2). The task of this article is to explore the destructive effects of such groundbreaking advances to both media and academia, to argue that the emergence of the “journalist citizen” and the “academic citizen,” as new paradigms being included in the protean definition of citizenship, substantiates the contention that professional journalism and traditional university in the forms known so far have deteriorated permanently. The comparative approach comes in handy. The line of argument departs from the (near) death of professional journalism and traditional university, then makes a halt at the emergence of “citizen journalists” and “academic citizens” and the wishful thinking as to the post-apocalyptic survival of journalism and the university's fall from grace, not death, to finally reach the less publicised fact that it is another world being lost.¹

I. Media

I.1. Professional (Traditional) Journalism vs. Online News

There is good evidence that traditional (professional) journalism is living its last days as it is facing up to cutthroat competition against the popular online news. One authority in this field is Dan Gillmor, author of *We the Media*, and director of the Center for Citizen Media. He interestingly points to the retracting “elitist” journalism that cares for depth and quality in the face of the ever expanding “populist” cyber-journalism which stands for what he calls “tyranny of popularity.” Journalists lost the leverage of telling their readers, viewers or listeners what they need to know because they have become “the arbiters of what is newsworthy” by the power of mouse clicks (“The Changing Mix”). Why?

¹ This is an elaborate version of a paper presented for the International Conference on Media, Language and Society: Perspectives and Reflections on the Mediatisation of Culture, held on 10-11 January 2022, University of Algiers 2, Algeria.

One of the reasons is the corrosion of existing business model. The prevailing media business model, based on “classified advertising,” has for long been the main source of revenue, almost the lifeline, for serious journalism. For obvious reasons, Gillmor believes that this model is being eroded by web services (like eBay) which offer the best deal any advertising company would chase in terms of larger spaces and lower prices. As the competition is becoming stiffer than ever, the high profit margins that advertisement used to generate for newspapers, for example, are being carved away by those “online advertising brokerages.” And this makes it difficult for professional journalists to find the necessary financial support to hold the line in the face of the advancing bloggers and their compatriots—whom, it seems, Gillmor holds in some esteem. As a matter of fact, says he, few media organisations have secured finances like the BBC. And the price for high-quality journalism was the monopoly of “the manufacturing model media” (“The Changing Mix”). Whether it is worth it or not could call for another debate.

Another reason is the democratisation of journalism by means of technology. The collision of technology and media is breaking the monopoly of conventional journalism and media is undergoing a profound process of democratisation. This has created what Gillmor calls a “cyber-journalistic competition” between a mass media increasingly pandering to entertainment and diversion (not serious journalism) and bloggers and other people who go narrow and deep by means of affordable publishing tools, thus winning larger audiences (“The Changing Mix”). The “other people” (as opposed to professional journalists) are making the best of what those tools of production and distribution are offering to create powerful, easy to use and inexpensive digital content such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, discussions, multiplayer games and mashups, and to disseminate it via the internet and mobile-phone networks, i.e. the other easily accessed means of communication. They (the other people) could no longer be safely called consumers inasmuch as they are growing more interactive and less passive. They are now part of “a global conversation,” as Gillmor calls it. As for the “other people”, he attributes them the “status” of “citizen journalists” (“Technology Feeds”).

I. 2. The Citizen Journalists (the Other People)

Who are they? According to Samuel Freedman, professor of journalism at Columbia University and author of Letters To A Young Journalist, the trendy term “citizen journalist” “refers to anybody with a video camera or cell-phone or blog who posts photographs, live-action film, or written reports on news events” (in

Hillary Profita). The phenomenon came to be noticed during the terrorist attacks on London subways and buses in the summer of 2005, when traditional news organizations and informal Web sites (and security services for that matter) resorted to using the images and photos that many witnesses supplied. The trend has been expanding exponentially ever since. There is an idealistic idea attached to it: “To its proponents,” says Freedman, “citizen journalism represents a democratization of media, a shattering of the power of the unelected elite, a blow against the empire of Big Brother” (in Profita).

Possibilities for ordinary people to become reporters, of some sort, are legion. Bloggers are just one good example of (not necessarily) efficient gathering and distribution of news. It could be hard to disagree with such claims as UK editor Mike Woof’s that: “The vast majority of blogs are self-indulgent ramblings,” but less so with UK photographer Tim Dennell’s: “One thing that does surprise me ... is the amount of personal information people are prepared to make available” (in “Technology Feeds”). In this new mode of conversation, the contribution of people (readers for example) eager to commit themselves to some acts of journalism should not be ignored. More than that, professional journalists must ask them their help; Gillmor calls it: “distributed journalism” (“Technology Feeds”). In retrospect, traditional journalism organisations have customarily used freelancers’ photographs on countless occasions, a practice that is being expanded to include amateurs’ pictures and videos. It comes natural to see partnership between professional journalists and journalist citizens. But, is it workable?

I. 3. Quality Journalism at Stake

A serious hindrance to quality journalism in this new state of affairs is journalist citizens’ ignorance/neglect of journalism. Freedman argues that: “Citizen journalism does not merely challenge the notion of professionalism in journalism but completely circumvents it. It is journalism according to the ethos of indie rock ’n’ roll: Do It Yourself.” His worst fear is that “citizen journalism forms part of a larger attempt to degrade, even to disenfranchise journalism as practiced by trained professionals.” The best they could do is an interesting supply of raw material with no skilled journalists’ capability to weighing, analysing, describing and explaining (in Profita). According to Gillmor, this could be remedied.

I. 4. Solution

Partnership between professional and citizen journalists must/could be envisaged. Gillmor says: “Citizen journalism and professional journalism are not mutually exclusive concepts.” The natural act of professional journalists asking

their audiences for pictures could not but be part of professional news reporting. The next step is, still according to Gillmor, empower those citizen journalists to fully engage in that global conversation via blogs, podcasts, discussion boards and all of the other conversational tools. May be to the dislike of Freedman, he suggests that they could adopt the Talking Points Memo method. That is, “Find a topic where thousands of people can ask a single question and report the answer back to a central person or database. The results become journalism.” To help citizen journalists master the secrets of the trade, a necessary step towards professionalism, professional journalists should help them with education and training. Gillmor hopes that citizen journalists will not replace the professionals (“Why We Are All Reporters Now”), which suggests an allusion to the possible damages that professional journalism could sustain if amateurism is not checked.

I. 5. Some Wishful Thinking

In this vein of wishful thinking, there is hope of survival as to the prospect of a cataclysmic collapse of traditional journalism. Regardless of the type, Gillmor professes that it will not disappear altogether: “People will still write books, and some mass media are likely to survive in some form.” This springs from his belief that: “Sound journalism is a foundation of an informed citizenry in self-governing nations, and the watchdog journalism, that takes deep pockets and a civic commitment to produce, is part of it” (“The Changing Mix”). The protean definition(s) of an informed citizenry and a self-governing nation and their bearings on the mission of journalism could open up new vistas for academics.

II. Academia

II. 1. Traditional vs. Virtual University: The Case of the British Aerospace Virtual University (VU©)

The turn of the century announced a reshaping of higher education to respond to the new exigencies of cyberspace age, as well. One good example is selected in the United Kingdom. Geraldine Kenney-Wallace is Chief Executive and Vice-Chancellor of the British Aerospace Virtual University, created in 1997. Kenney-Wallace argues that a revolution has taken place by the close of the century in the definition and functions of the traditional university to match the technology-intensive manufacturing and services and to keep pace with the fast-changing specialist knowledge and practical know-how. The Virtual University had been designed in response to business needs of the British Aerospace. These needs were basically the result of the Darwinian evolution in aviation from scratch to systems-integration products on one hand, and the global reality of aggressive market competition, on the other (Kenney-Wallace 59). Despite its long history of

apprentices and graduates, the British Aerospace Company needed multi-disciplinary skills and effective teamwork, particularly on the systems integration. For this end, the Chief Executive, Sir Richard Evans, and a small advisory group proposed the concept of a company-based university. On 3 March 1997 the Board of Directors approved the concept. The mission of this university was “to develop and capitalize on the human, intellectual, technological and process resources of the company” (60).

In May 1997, the British Aerospace Virtual University (VU©) was officially created. It reflects the evolving business needs as well as cultural and organizational realities of the age; and seeks to liberate the talents and to enhance capacities and capabilities of its whole workforce within a learning organization. It comprises the Faculty of Learning, the International Business School, the Faculty of Engineering and Manufacturing Technology, the Benchmarking and Best Practice Centre, and the Sowerby Research Centre. It has fifteen (15) business units and over thirty (30) locations in UK alone (Kenney-Wallace 61-2).

The most striking difference with the traditional university is that the students come from the employees, all of whom have full-time jobs. In considering the logistics and affordability, Kenney-Wallace asserts that the noble aspirations of learning could hardly be seen in the blunt business realities of delivering airbus wings or aeroplanes to a tight schedule (62).

In addition, the concept of a ‘virtual university’ adds to the opinion that traditional universities are no longer the dominant players in the creation and communication of knowledge, especially in cyberspace: “Just-in-case education has moved to just-in-time and just-for-you, as self-managed computer-based learning plays an increasing and natural role for individuals and families.” Kenney-Wallace has given this new concept a name: “Plato.com” (60).

Universities have hardly been immune to external pressures. The accompanying transformation in the realm of higher education to the economic changes of the closing decades of the 20th century has been the rise of the corporate university, i.e. a university devoted wholly to professional training (Nigel Thrift 21). By definition, this new generation of universities values profit, control and efficiency, and has little “considerations about pedagogy or the role of the university in the preservation and enhancement of social responsibility and social democracy” (Yeakey 363). To answer the new economic imperatives, the traditional university is compelled to relinquish some of its founding principles. From Kenney-Wallace’s own experience in the executive administration of the Aerospace Virtual University, the three major missions of a corporate university

appear to be (1) strategic driver for change, (2) embedding of change and capture of best practice, and (3) global benchmarking for excellence under a business philosophy of continuous improvement. In other words, the elaboration, expansion, or closing down of the learning and research programmes are subject to clearly articulated business needs (68). Be it as it may, where is the problem?

II. 2. The Academic Citizens (the Other People)

The revolution in communication technologies, which opened the gates on cyberspace, has coincided with the age of the fading of academic tenure. It has inaugurated an age of what Douglas Coupland calls “McJob”—to mean a “low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector”—that progressively “proletarianised” the professorship (5). The close of the twentieth century was simply one of college part-time teachers with different titles but the same bottom line: “no security, no benefits, no time for research or reflection, no academic freedom, no prestige, no institutional power” (Nelson and Watt 8). College teaching was gradually becoming a low-level service job, and full-time tenure-track faculty are already no longer the primary providers (8).

II. 3. Disengagement from Academic Decision-Making

The resulting ‘casualisation’ and ‘atomisation’ of academic labour have contributed to the disengagement of the academic from decision-making processes at all levels. Casualisation refers to the growing contingents of part-time and casual staff employed, themes exhaustively developed by Patrick Ainley (7-9), while atomisation indicates the electronic (or ‘e’) learning divisions and subdivisions of the more professional and practice-based subjects, often without full academic status. Both of which could be called arguably “the other people,” compared to the formally recognisable academics. Such further subdivisions, instructional designing or web developing for example, impose the recruitment of new staff on a contractual basis. Because of their contractual status, these staff are less involved in academic governance and end up disconnected from the mainstream academic community (Bruce Macfarlane 21). This is much characteristic of the university under New Labour’s reforms of the post Dearing Report.

Shall it be called the ‘curse’ of the untenured college teachers (the other people)? Peter Jarvis evokes the merits of democratically involving active citizens in the process of governance and the esteem and the sense of personal fulfilment they achieved in the city states of Greece of yester centuries. He argued that the other people could still assert themselves by voluntarily espousing the status of the ‘academic citizens’; that is, make academically efficient and responsible use

of their professoriate, and thus make it difficult for tenured faculty to belittle them or, simply, dispose of them (48).

II. 4. Solution

If citizen journalists are being endowed with means to enjoy the right for free expression, academic citizens could still find means to have (some) academic freedom. Jarvis suggests that the academic freedom must be conceived of as a duty and not just a right, and thus enhance the status of academic citizenship. Hence, it is the duty of the academic citizen to engage in university political literacy; and, especially the duty “to become involved in governance to insure academic freedom is preserved in practice” (Jarvis 48).

II. 5. Some Wishful Thinking

Some analysts ‘dare’ go very far as to think of the death of the university and the end of knowledge (Bill Readings). For sure, the idea is there to suggest that the traditional university is being challenged seriously. A probably more moderate attitude is that of Ronald Barnett, Dean of Professional Development at the Institute of Education, University of London, who prefers to focus on the new reconfiguration of the ever growing university sector. Universities collectively continue to adapt to new demands and expectations, but not to everyone’s taste, to the degree that the term ‘university’ no longer has any clear sense (111). In fact the concept of university has waned. He thinks (wishfully) that the university is not “dead” but has “fallen from grace” as it has lost its “purity.” He asserts that the state of modern university is epistemologically and ontologically adrift. He argues for a new idea of a university, a new state of grace (112). And this could well be the concern of another paper.

Conclusion

Could technology and media or academia be a bad mix? On the surface, those technological advances have democratized journalism and higher education in proportions never experienced before. The effects have dramatically changed the inherited image of both professional journalism and traditional university. One of the manifestations is the evolution in the definition of citizenship. Surely the academic citizen is not a replica of the citizen journalist, but both could fit into the larger concept of the quest for personal freedom. But could the pursuit of this latter be worth sacrificing the two institutions of media and academia? Because, actually, this is what is still happening. The bulk of criticism that could be collected to reveal the limitations and weaknesses of journalism and higher education in the commonly known forms are used, I am afraid, just to advertise for the selling of new products (of digital nature) to answer the exigencies of new

economic realities. The process of the metamorphosis (slightly Kafka's) is obviously irreversible. Is it not a *deja vu* scenario of another world being lost for both media and academia, with no serious intent to save it? The obsolescence of the existing economic models has ruined professional journalism and traditional university, and only the reminiscence of the romantic old days shall survive alongside the rubble. Peter Laslett's book, The World We Have Lost, could be very inspiring.

References:

Ainley, Patrick. Degrees of Difference: Higher Education in the 1990s. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994.

Barnett, Ronald. "Reconfiguring the University." In Higher Education Reformed, ed. Peter Scott. London: Falmer Press, 2000. 111-125.

Coupland, Douglas. Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Gillmor, Dan. We the Media. 2004. CA: O'reilly Media, 2006.

— — "Technology Feeds Grassroots Media. " 9 Mar 2006. 15 Oct 2021 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4789852.stm>> .

— — "The Changing Mix of Money and Media. " 4 May 2006. 25 Feb 2010 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4972302.stm>>.

— — "Why We Are All Reporters Now. " 6 Apr 2006. 15 Oct 2021 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4882474.stm>>.

Jarvis, Peter. Democracy, Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society. London: Routledge, 2008. Vol. 3 of Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society. 3 vols.

Kenney-Wallace, Geraldine. "Plato.com. The Role and Impact of Corporate Universities in the Third Millennium." in Higher Education Reformed, ed. Peter Scott. London: Falmer Press, 2000. 58-77.

Laslett, Peter. The World We Have Lost. 1983. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

Macfarlane, Bruce. The Academic Citizen. London: Routledge, 2007.

Profita, Hillary. "Outside Voices: Samuel Freedman on the Difference Between the Amateur and the Pro. " 31 Mar 2006. 15 Oct 2021 <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/outside-voices-samuel-freedman-on-the-difference-between-the-amateur-and-the-pro/>> .

Readings, Bill. The University in Ruins. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1997.

Thrift, Nigel. "University Reforms: The Tension between Form and Substance." In European Universities in Transition Issues, Models and Cases, eds. Carmelo Mazza, Paolo Quattrone, Angelo Riccaboni. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2008). 17-30.

Yeakey, Carol C. "Who Shall Be Educated? Governmental Policy Influences on Educational Opportunity." In Higher Education in a Global Society, eds. Walter R. Allen et al. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd, 2006. Vol. 5 of Advances in Education in Diverse Communities, 5 vols.