Beyond Crisis Journalism

RNN, Global Voices and the Scale of Citizen Media

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In 2008, Clay Shirky famously claimed that “you no longer have to be a professional publisher to publish” (2008, 66). When “everyone is a media outlet,” Shirky argued, the power of professional journalists to serve as society’s informational gatekeepers disappears. Or as Alan Knight has argued, “the Internet allows almost anyone to become not only a media critic, but also a reporter and a producer” (2008, 117). Yet despite more than a decade of thinking on this subject, it remains a contentious disputation. When it comes to journalism, many have contended that far from empowering ordinary people with the power to “commit acts of journalism,” as Clay Shirky might argue, social media merely grant temporary fame to a few people while channeling most content through professional media sources. As Dhiraj Murthy argues, “Twittering citizen journalists are ephemeral, vanishing after their 15 minutes in the lime- light” (2011, 786). If it is true that the most followed entities on Twitter are professional journalists, celebrities and politicians, is there any room at all for true citizen journalist? And if so, what might the path of a successful citizen journalist operation actually look like? More importantly, are innovations in citizen journalism leading to innovations in news production – i.e. the creation of new modes of media production? And if so, what are the intrinsic characteristics of these forms and how might we fit them into existing schemas of media production and ecology? In this paper, I will explore the history and trajectory of the Rassd News Network – an Egyptian organization that began as a purely volunteer news network that also happened to be exclusively on Twitter – and Global Voices – an international and multi-faceted citizen media organization – to illustrate the ways that citizen and participatory journalists can join together and affect news coverage and political events, and how they can do so in a way that is not fleeting, that is scalable, and that can have a real and lasting affect on the media environment.

**Citizen Journalism Versus Participatory Journalism: Fault Lines**

Before we can seek to position these two organizations in the media ecology – and hence determine their political efficacy – we need first to arrive at a set of definitions for different modes of journalism. To do so I will adopt the model developed by Nip (2006) and reiterated by Kperogi (2011) that divides journalism into 5 primary modes: traditional, public, interactive, participatory and citizen. Traditional journalism is the model of professional editors and writers determining content decisions for consumers of news, whereas public and interactive journalism are similar models that seek input from local communities on content decisions and directions (Kperogi 2011, 316-319). Interactive journalism means that consumers of news can take part in conversations (i.e. through comments sections on online news sources), and have an appropriate amount of choice about what they read or watch. Note, however, that in traditional, public and interactive journalism, ordinary citizens are influencing the news indirectly via input, conversations and choice, but never producing it. In participatory journalism, such as CNN’s iReports, non-professionals create and submit content to CNN, but do not have the ultimate control over what they produce or how it is presented or edited. Only in citizen journalism itself do non-professionals achieve some measure of control over the content they produce, in the absence of oversight or gatekeeping by news or media professionals. Citizen journalism can take the form of individual blogs, Twitter or Facebook accounts (or a variety of other emerging platforms like Tumblr), but can also be a group endeavor so long as the staff remains non-professional, i.e. unpaid.

How are the effects of citizen journalism? Meraz (2011) found that political blogs in the United States have reversed the agenda-setting function of professional media. Some studies have pointed to the power of citizen journalists – whether in the form of blogs or microblogs – to expose faulty reporting or bias in the mainstream media. Or by paying sustained attention to particular stories that are neglected by the mainstream media, citizen journalists are able to gain influence, as with the case of Virginia Senator George Allen’s 2006 racial slur against an Indian-American that was captured on camera and covered relentlessly by blogs until it became a major news story (Karpf 2010). Many studies seeking to determine the efficacy of Twitter in particular, and citizen journalism more broadly also have focused largely on “prodemocratic institutional outcomes” (Segerberg and Bennettt, 2011, 198). These cases revolve almost exclusively around the collective action potentialities of social media Other studies begin with a big event – the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the crash of a flight, or even the Burmese government’s reaction to the 2007 cyclone. Citizen journalists after, for example, the Southeast Asian tsunami in 2004, were able to “bear witness to human suffering” in places where there were no professional reporters (Allan, Sonwalker and Carter 2007). Such cases are structured largely as explorations of the news-generating and gathering capabilities of citizen journalists using social media to break events or scoop news organizations. In these cases, individuals who are able to bear witness to rare events, in the absence of professional media, see their followership skyrocket, and often play a leading role in shaping the initial coverage of events. And as I will argue below with respect to the case of Egypt, citizen journalists have been credited with opening up spaces for dissent, documentation and organizing in closed societies. While these studies are invaluable in terms of exploring the role of social media in critical, breaking events, they miss the opportunity to study longer-term citizen media operations that have been successful for reasons other than breaking a large international news story. Other studies look at actual metrics of Twitter followers and “retweets” and argue that citizen journalists simply don’t stand a chance when arrayed against their better-funded professional competitors. But focusing on these two trends misses out on capturing some of the most innovative citizen media projects across the world. This article will focus on just two of those projects – RNN and Global Voices – and argue that more work is needed to understand the importance and implications of long-running citizen media projects that might fly beneath the radar of media and scholarly attention. I will also argue that we need to move past the dichotomy of paid/unpaid as a proxy for whether journalists are “professionals,” to a more nuanced understanding of the unfolding ecology of digital media.

**The Tweet, or the Tweet Itself? RNN and Social Media Journalism**

The Egyptian news environment has been in a state of flux since the January 25th, 2011 uprising that forced longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak from power. Under Mubarak, Egypt underwent several distinct periods of state-media relations. For most of his presidency, Egypt’s media environment was entirely closed, with major newspapers either owned or licensed by the state, and the only alternative voices were papers operated by state-licensed political parties. Then in 2003-2004, changes in the press law led to the founding of several independently-owned, financed and operated daily newspapers, among them *Al-Dustour* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, the latter of which has maintained its popularity and credibility as an alternative news source well into the post-Mubarak period. These developments prior to the uprising led William Rugh in 2009 to characterize the Egyptian system as mixed, “containing strong elements of government control and influence, alongside elements of freedom and diversity” (Rugh 2009). Throughout this period, the Mubarak regime also did little to disrupt Internet-based activism and news production, which led to the flowering of the region’s most robust blogosphere, and the creation of globally-known citizen media personalities like Wael Abbas, whose Web site, *Misr Digital*, became one of the leading clearinghouses of news, commentary and documentation of regime abuses from sexual harassment to torture. This small but vibrant blogging community was responsible for bringing many issues into the public sphere, and became the core of a committed group of activists seeking to change the political regime in Cairo (Radsch 2008; Faris 2008; El-Malaky 2007). Of course, individual citizen journalists – or blogger-activists as they referred to themselves in the domestic context – were frequently jailed, harassed, and tortured, but prison terms were rare, and Web sites were rarely permanently shut down.

It was in this context that R.N.N. was formed, at the height of the Mubarak regime’s efforts to close off the aborted democratic opening of 2004-2006. The Rassd News Network is a unique news consortium founded in Egypt in 2010, in advance of the country’s November, 2010 parliamentary elections (Faris 2012). Rassd is an Arabic acronym that stands for *Raqib* (Monitor), *Sower* (Shoot [i.e. film]), *Dowin* (Write). RNN was founded by Abdullah Al-Fakharany, at the time a medical student nearing the completion of his studies. He and a small group of friends wanted to find a way to challenge what everyone expected to be a heavily rigged set of parliamentary elections[[1]](#footnote--1) – and indeed the Mubarak regime reached deep into its toolkit of electoral subversion by excluding candidates, rigging individual races, and preventing individuals from reaching their polling places (El-Ghobashy 2010). Al-Fakharany and his colleagues never considered themselves to be neutral – in other words they considered themselves activist-journalists, doing the kinds of reporting that other organizations could not or would not do. RNN began to gain attention during this period through its unique system of channeling citizen reports into short Facebook posts and Tweets. Until late 2011, all of RNN’s reporting took place on these two accounts – there was no web page, no television station, just very short news articles submitted largely by individual Egyptians. Anyone can send a report to RNN, but the organization’s small editorial staff made a concerted effort to verify which reports were and were not true. These efforts were particularly important since one of the persistent criticisms of citizen journalism is the absence of institutional controls and verification (although it should be noted that even major news organizations like Newsweek no longer employ fact checkers.[[2]](#footnote-0) Thus RNN became well known both for the volume and general accuracy of its reports, a reputation which was responsible for its meteoric rise in the regional news environment.

Currently RNN has more than 418,000 followers on Twitter, making it one of the leading news sources on Twitter, particularly in the Arabic language[[3]](#footnote-1). For comparison’s sake, Al-Jazeera’s Arabic Twitter feed has just over 1.6 million followers.[[4]](#footnote-2) To put this in perspective, RNN, with its tiny staff of volunteers, and which was launched only in 2010, can claim more than 25% of the readership of Al-Jazeera, an established international broadcast news network with a multi-million dollar budget and the backing of one of the major petro-states of the Persian Gulf. Because one of the critiques I am offering in this paper is that Twitter followership is not tantamount to overall influence, I am not suggesting that RNN’s numbers should speak for themselves. But the success of the network, and its humble origins story, should complicate the emerging consensus that social media merely reproduce professional media hierarchies online.

RNN is unique in that as a news organization it effectively consists of a Facebook Wall and a Twitter feed. It has thus never conceptualized itself as a market competitor with Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiyya. It does have a web site with original content but as will be detailed below, it’s Facebook posts and Twitter posts appear to be purposed for themselves – i.e. they are not intended to direct people to the Web site. For most news organizations, social media is a component of their overall strategy. News organizations like the *New York Times* and *Al-Jazeera* now routinely include their staff in making videos, and most reporters have their own Twitter feeds. Oftentimes those feeds are used partly to increase the overall reach of some particular piece of reporting or commentary by posting a shortened URL link to the web site of the news organization where the article can be found. For RNN, which also links frequently, the outbound URLs from their Twitter feed are typically routed to RNN’s Facebook page. Most often, the content is the same, but the Facebook page includes photographs or videos that of course cannot be posted into a Twitter feed. In that sense, Facebook can be conceptualized as the primary home of RNN, but not in the same way that Al-Jazeera’s Web site is the primary home of AJ’s Arabic web operation. Al-Jazeera’s Web page includes links to broadcast videos, videos produced exclusively for the Web, as well as a wide range of commentary and news pieces. RNN’s Facebook page, on the other hand, is merely a parallel platform for its 140-character Twitter news feed, with the addition of pictures and sometimes some additional text. This might seem like a hair-splitting difference, but it is an important one in terms of how the organization conceptualizes itself and how we might understand its function and efficacy in the media ecology of the Middle East.

To empirically verify these differences between news organizations, I looked at the 3-day period surrounding (i.e. including one day before and after) the news that Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi had succeeded in forcing out several senior members of the country’s ruling military establishment including Field Marhall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who had been the leader of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) since the the deposition of longtime authoritarian ruler Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. This was a momentous news story, and probably the most important institutional development in Egypt since the revolution, even if it is not clear that these moves represent a real break with the authoritarian past (Sallam 2012). It meant that Morsi had succeeded in wresting some measure of power away from the ruling SCAF, and solidifying his own hold on an institutional office of greater significance than it appeared to hold at the time of his election in June 2012. The Tweets analyzed are from August 12th to August 14th, 2012 for both organizations. The first thing to notice is that RNN out-Tweeted Al-Jazeera on August 12th 210 to 60, or by a factor of almost 4. This mostly likely is explained by the fact that Facebook and Twitter comprise the entirety of RNN’s operation, whereas Twitter is merely a tool for Al-Jazeera to widen the reach of its existing web-based content. This is generally true, I think, of most professional news organizations – Twitter is seen as a strategic part of a general campaign of increasing viewership and readership, and not as an end in itself. Now, individual writers or reporters for these organizations will often have their own stand-alone Twitter accounts, which they use to post their own articles, of course, but also links to other important articles and sometimes simply brief thoughts about the news. But RNN is unique, it seems, in its determination to treat Twitter and Facebook as a news platform rather than a reader-gathering tool.

RNN’s Facebook page also has an even more impressive number of followers – 1,891,523 at last count.[[5]](#footnote-3) This makes it the most “liked” Egyptian-origin page in all of Egypt – more than any brand (the leaderboard is populated with the likes of Vodafone and Nescafe), and more than the next-liked news organization, the online newspaper *Youm 7*.[[6]](#footnote-4) RNN is the 9th-most popular Facebook page in all of the Middle East and North Africa, directly behind the Lebanese satellite channel MBC4 and only 6 spots behind Al-Jazeera’s ranking.[[7]](#footnote-5) This remarkable achievement suggests that social media have only yet begun to yield new forms of media, contention and participation. It also suggests that in addition to being a component of the existing market strategies of existing media firms, or empowering individuals in moments of crisis, social media may have properties that create new forms of media in and of themselves. In other words, microblogging might be not just something for citizen journalists, but might rather yield an entirely new form of the craft.

Counting “likes” on a Facebook page, or followers on Twitter is one thing. But how can we be sure that these likes and follows actually amount to some kind of media influence? One of the ways to measure the influence of a particular identity on Twitter is to ask how often content is retweeted. An individual or organization’s Twitter presence is quite different from a Web site, which measures its influence in inbound links and page-views. On Twitter, it is possible in theory to have tens of thousands of followers who don’t much care for or disseminate the things that you write. The retweet function consists of other Twitter users reposting your content with attribution. The text begins with RT@ followed by the Twitter handle of the original author, to make a clear distinction between original and re-tweeted content. According to retweetrank,[[8]](#footnote-6) the world’s most retweeted person is Marshall Mathers, also known as the musician Eminem. The site’s retweet “leaderboard” is populated with celebrities like Kanye West, as well as global news firms like the Associated Press, and major national news organizations like the BBC. By these metrics, RNN’s feed, which is composed entirely in Arabic, is highly influential. RNN’s Twitter feed is ranked 683rd in the world in total retweets.[[9]](#footnote-7) This may not seem especially jaw-dropping, but consider for a moment that Al-Jazeera’s Arabic Twitter feed (AJAarabic) is ranked 1,352nd[[10]](#footnote-8), and you get a feel for how RNN, which virtually no international press attention, has become one of the most popular news sources in the entire Arab world. Not only do its Facebook posts attain a significant share of the available eyeballs in the regional media ecology, but when the organization posts and shares news, those posts travel widely through the regional informational ecosystem.

RNN has been so successful that it has given rise to a series of country-level voluntary news networks, the most successful of which so far is the Egyptian News Network (E.N.N.), with more than 580,000 “likes” on Facebook and more than 45,000 followers on Twitter. Like RNN, ENN encourages followers to become participants in the production and dissemination of the news. Other ventures, like the Tunisian News Network (T.N.N.) and the Gaza News Network (G.N.N.) appear either to be in their infancy, or not succeeding to the extent of R.N.N. and E.N.N. There can be little doubt, however, that these groups tap into the desire of ordinary citizens in the Middle East to become active participants in both the production of news and the sharing of discussion of commentary. Their enthusiasm may stem from the decades-long distrust of state-controlled and monitored news organizations, and a set of media cultures that always placed the interests of the ruling clique far above the pursuit of truth.

**The Front Page of the Citizen Mediasphere: Global Voices**

Global Voices Online (hereafter Global Voices) was founded in 2004 by the former CNN journalist Rebecca MacKinnon, and MIT scholar Ethan Zuckerman, as a way to create networks between local citizen journalists and bloggers in various countries around the world. In effect, Global Voices is not meant to compete with other news organizations, but to be the kind of meta-news organization of the entire blogging and citizen journalism community. According to the group’s Web site, GV writers and editors “work together to bring you reports from blogs and citizen media everywhere, with emphasis on voices that are not ordinarily heard in international mainstream media.”[[11]](#footnote-9) The organization now features hundreds of volunteer bloggers and content-curators in nearly every country on Earth. Their most recent summit, held in Nairobi, Kenya, managed to fill nearly three hotels. Not everyone is a volunteer, though. GV maintains a paid staff of about 20 editors who work with the volunteer bloggers and reporters in various countries (Preston 2011). However, not all of the site’s content gets vetted through these paid editors – thus raising the question of how we might categorize Global Voices according to the schema laid out by Kip and Kperogi. The presence of a paid staff would seem to suggest a more participatory rather than citizen journalism model. But because even many longstanding writers and editors (for instance Amira Al-Husseini, the Middle East editor, is unpaid) work for free, it is not clear that a professional staff is making decisions about content and production on a daily basis. Global Voices, then, seems to exist in a liminal zone between participatory and citizen journalism.

The Twitter account @global voices has over 41,000 followers[[12]](#footnote-10). This is not nothing, of course, but it pales in comparison to RNN’s figures. The organization appears to use its Twitter feed largely to link to its own content on its website by pushing readers toward particular recently-published stories. This is probably not an accurate measure of how Global Voices’ work makes its way through the global media ecology, since most writers and editors have their own individual social media accounts that they use to promote their work or the work of others, as well as to add commentary on daily events and link to other news organizations. Amira Al-Husseini, for instance, Tweets from @JustAmira, and has more than 30,000 followers of her own as of August 25th, 2012.[[13]](#footnote-11) In fact, Al-Husseini is perhaps the most well-read social media activist in the entire organization – her Tweets are both more frequently retweeted, and her account more followed, than even Global Voices co-founder Rebecca MacKinnon.

The overall operation is a dizzying blend of media forms. It began largely as a mode of reporting on and relaying the activities of citizen journalists writing outside of the English language, and as a way of bringing that content to English-speaking readers. To that end, part-time editors with language fluencies were assigned to particular regions and countries of the world, to cultivate citizen reporters on digital freedom issues, and to bring interesting and noteworthy content to global English-speaking audiences. Global Voices frequently posts and discusses acts of sousveillance. Steve Mann originally coined the term sousveillance to encompass the “…ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance and to neutralize surveillance” (Mann et. al. 2003). However, the term has since come to include a broader array of activities, primarily ordinary citizens filming police abuse or otherwise capturing instances of state actors violating laws or decency. More recently, Global Voices launched the Lingua translation project, which seeks to reverse-engineer the original mission, by translating English-language content back into local languages. At last count, Lingua included volunteer translators in 27 languages, including threatened languages like Aymara, an indigenous Bolivian language. Thus the Lingua project is not just about bringing content to people who might not speak English, but has also involved itself in a project to help rescue some of the world’s most threatened languages.

One of the primary missions of Global Voices is to bring news of threatened bloggers to the global public sphere, and the site features frequent news about imprisoned activists around the world, many of whom announce their own detentions through social media, such as the recently-detained Saudi activist Reema Al Joresh.[[14]](#footnote-12) The organization also maintains a separate page tracking what it calls “threatened voices” – i.e. bloggers who have been arrested or detained by particular regimes around the world. Not surprisingly, Iran leads the list of national offenders. Overall the project is currently tracking 328 such cases. While this is not the world’s only effort to track the arrest of bloggers, it is the only one that appears to be driven almost entirely by volunteer reporting and editing.

Complicating matters is the issue of funding for such media organizations. The 2012 Citizen Media Summit was in fact not free, nor was it self-funded. Global Voices had a series of very prominent funders, from Google and Yahoo to the MacArthur Foundation, The Open Society Institute and Hivos, some of whose representatives were featured on panels at the event in Nairobi. Does this mean that Global Voices is no longer a purely citizens’ media operation? Or does it perhaps suggest that we need to expand our definition of what constitutes citizen journalism, and more importantly, what kind of impacts we want to measure? Certainly if the metric is whether organizations are able to survive and grow large and still be completely voluntary and non-professional, we may not be able to find many cases. Yet we don’t expect our NGOs or non-profit organizations to be unprofessional. We expect them to be, rather, not-for-profit. It is this issue of profits that may serve as a more useful distinction between participatory and citizen journalism than the presence

**Conclusions**

The brief case studies of RNN and Global Voices – very different organizations operating in different environments with wildly divergent constraints and outcomes – point to the necessity of expanding our discourse about citizen journalism. Social media are unlikely to empower ordinary individuals with the privileges, access and readership of professional journalists in the long term without substantial investment or funding from outside sources. In that sense, we might better think of citizen journalism as “non-profit journalism” to distinguish between these very different cases. We should also complicate our notion of what constitutes professional journalism. Some of the board members and writers of Global Voices are paid, and some are not. Does this mean that GV as an organization counts as professional media, or not? In what sense is this distinction even meaningful? All news organizations, from BBC to Al-Jazeera now count on the contributions of unpaid individuals, whether in the form of iReports for CNN or in the form of op-eds, for which many newspapers have stopped paying. When an individual publishes a free op-ed in a newspaper, is he or she committing an act of professional or citizen journalism? Global Voices, for instance, defines citizen media as anything that is “self-published on the internet by individuals or groups, usually in a non-professional capacity.” Do GV’s part-time editors count as professionals or non-professionals? They certainly do not earn enough money working for GV alone to pay the bills, and this calls into question Nip and Kperogi’s distinction between participatory and citizen journalism.

A more important argument is that we simply cannot analyze social media and citizen journalism as different parts of the media ecology, but rather as part of an emerging networked ecology of news, information and entertainment. In other words, the value of Global Voices is multifaceted. It provides a critical space for networking and collaboration between physically dispersed bloggers and journalists, and offers a robust platform for their work, free of charge to the authors. But the goal of most Global Voices authors is not to supplant or do an end-run around professional media sources, but rather to influence the kind of professional news coverage that gets generated, and to bring stories and issues in far-flung parts of the world to the attention of a press corps that would prefer to focus on other things. In that sense it shares similarities with R.N.N. in that it does not conceptualize itself as a media market competitor, but as an entirely new form of journalism, one that is not necessarily married to the model of objectivity. Interestingly, both GV and RNN make the properties of social media an intrinsic part of their core operations – GV by reporting on, translating and highlighting social media production around the world, and RNN by channeling nearly all of its news production through the capabilities of the platforms themselves, rather than augmenting existing operations with social media.

It is RNN, ultimately, that provides an entirely new model of social media production, and thus perhaps an entirely new mode of media. You might call it “All the news that’s fit to Tweet.” While RNN now features a Web site, its existing social media news production and content does not actually point readers back to the site, meaning that the majority of followers and readers are interfacing with the organization entirely through its microblogging platforms on Twitter and Facebook. What is most appealing about this process is that it avoids issues of bandwidth and the financial hassle of hosting a large, well-trafficked Web page, by channeling its consumers through the already-existing and externally-paid for servers of Facebook and Twitter. In that sense the organization has solved one of the problems of scale and funding that can plague such organizations. That said, we need more work on long-term citizen journalism efforts – not just case studies but empirical work that can answer important questions about the agenda-setting and news production capabilities of such organizations. We might even be able to Tweet the results.

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