



# Perspectives of an underconsidered stakeholder group: Citizen journalists' views of public relations practitioners and their materials



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 March 2015

Received in revised form 3 July 2015

Accepted 26 September 2015

Available online 17 October 2015

### Keywords:

Citizen journalists

Social media

Online news

Jeffers' Syndrome

News ecology

## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long studied the relationships between professional journalists and public relations practitioners. However, public relations literature (both scholarly and trade) has not sufficiently examined the nature of the relationships between citizen journalists and public relations practitioners. This study addresses that gap through surveying U.S. citizen journalists on their views of public relations professionals and their materials. Study findings point to ambivalence among citizen journalists: they are not sure of the value of public relations people or the usefulness of their material, but they voice a positive regard for public relations people the more they interact with them. These findings indicate that a more carefully considered outreach to citizen journalists can allow public relations practitioners to build better relationships with these non-traditional reporters and, therefore, enhance the opportunity for practitioners to be more effective conveying information within the online news ecology.

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of the Internet in the last two decades has provided a new medium through which news can be conveyed and, as such, has allowed journalists not affiliated with professional newsrooms to offer up news accounts. Known as “citizen journalists,” these reporters have borne witness to many dramatically noteworthy news events in recent years, such as the 2014 race riots in Ferguson, Missouri, the sinking of a ferry in South Korea in April 2014 that killed hundreds, and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. Accordingly, the role of citizen journalists in crisis situations like these and others (e.g., California wildfires, Superstorm Sandy, massive tornadoes in the U.S. Midwest and Southern states) has been receiving more attention in emergency management circles (Novak & Vidoloff, 2011; Watson & Wadhwa, 2013). In each of these instances citizen journalists were present, capturing video, gathering information, and transmitting accounts in real time. As such, citizen journalists are playing an increasingly important role in the news-gathering process, especially at a time when traditional newsrooms continue to cut their staffs (Jurkowitz, 2014; Total employment, 2013). There are now hundreds of citizen journalism sites providing news from non-professionals; according to a Pew Institute study, between January 2011 and March 2012 approximately 40% of the most viewed news videos came directly from citizens placing their videos on the Internet (Jurkowitz & Hitlin, 2013).

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Still, public relations literature has done little to examine citizen journalists as a rising stakeholder group within the wider news milieu. Certainly, public relations research has, over the last two decades, investigated how the Internet has affected the news ecology within which public relations practitioners attempt to convey news about their clients. Particularly notable is [Ye and Ki's \(2012\)](#) survey of 27 years of peer-reviewed public relations journal articles concerning the Internet. Significantly, they found that public relations scholarship was transmission centered: public relations literature focused heavily on how practitioners conceptualize and execute what they consider to be effective communication through the Internet. They pointed out that audience-centered public relations research was lacking. Not surprisingly, their study found no peer-reviewed research on citizen journalists as a separate stakeholder group within the news arena that has distinct perceptions of public relations people. This study addresses that gap, inspired by Ye and Ki's call that public relations scholarship should expand to move beyond "organizations' or practitioners' perceptions to also include publics' experiences" (2012, p. 426). As such, this works reports on a study of the viewpoints of citizen journalists about public relations practitioners and the materials they offer.

## 2. Relationships between citizen journalists and public relations practitioners

Public relations literature reveals scant information about the relationships between citizen journalists and public relations practitioners. One factor that might be complicating research about this relationship is a tendency, both in academic works and public relations trade publications, to identify citizen journalism as an example of social media, customarily classifying citizen journalists as "bloggers" who often engage in dialogic communication with other bloggers and commenters ([Armon, 2008](#); [Barlow, 2007](#); [Managing a crisis online, 2008](#); [Waters & Morton, 2010](#)). Shedding further light on this blogging frame of reference was a recent study of the Internet-related content carried by 28 scholarly communication journals from 1992 to 2009. That work revealed that blogging was the second-highest research topic, appearing in almost 21% of Internet-focused pieces across these publications ([Ye & Ki, 2012](#)).

However, it is problematic to conceive citizen journalism as inherently linked to social media's discursive tendency. Social media is a broad term for digital platforms that offer "mediated opportunities for bringing people together and encouraging social networking and dialogic communication" ([Sweetser & Weaver Lariscy, 2008, p. 180](#)). Relatedly, [Solis \(2014\)](#) pointed out that social media, especially from a public relations perspective, is about "connections" and "emotions," characterized by "expressions" that "reveal the souls and personalities of online communities" ([Solis, 2014, p. xv](#)). While such a conversational dynamic can be a part of citizen journalism, it appears to not be essential as this emerging practice has not customarily been defined as primarily about dialogue. Instead, a closer look at specific definitions of citizen journalism reveals that it has been identified as a variation of news gathering and transmission practices rather than as a site of dialogue generation. More than 10 years ago, [Bowman and Willis](#), in a seminal piece, defined citizen journalism as "the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" ([Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9](#)). In the years since then, several scholars have defined citizen journalism by emphasizing that such reporting was done by non-journalists who now had access to affordable technologies that allowed them to capture, edit, and present news ([Gillmor, 2006](#); [Nip, 2006](#); [Rosen, 2008](#)). [Nip \(2006, p. 218\)](#) pointed out that, in fact, the dispersal of these tools outside of the traditional newsroom actually enabled citizens to produce news reports that could be disseminated beyond a blog, appearing, for example, in a "news website, community radio station, or newspaper." Most recently, citizen journalism has been characterized as "a range of amateur information reporting and sharing activities" ([Carr, Barnidge, Lee, & Tsang, 2014, p. 454](#)).

Still, the public relations scholarly literature has yet to clearly articulate the delineation between social media and citizen journalism. Furthermore, the field's trade publications, like *PR News* and *PR Week*, have displayed a haziness about clearly identifying the citizen journalist. One prevailing conceit about citizen journalism in these two prominent public relations publications is that this form of reporting is best understood as a variation of consumer empowerment, an emergence of customer commentary that complements other technological vehicles like blogs, Facebook, and podcasts. That is, citizen journalists can use social media tools to trumpet or criticize a company's products or services ([Bernstein, 2006](#); [Managing a crisis online, 2008](#); [Toledo, 2008](#)), demand changes to product quality ([Washkuch, 2008](#)), and point out bad business actors ([Bernstein, 2006](#)). Additionally, these trade publications repeatedly emphasize that this particular brand of consumer empowerment needs urgent attention because, with continual advances in portable and affordable technology, anyone can do citizen journalism ([Granat, 2006](#); [Navigating the new media world, 2009](#); [Spielman, 2012](#)).

Public relations and communication conferences that offer a mix of scholarly and professional research indicate a strong focus on the wider term "social media," but mostly elide study of citizen journalism. For example, the 17th International Public Relations Research Conference proceedings showed 12 papers (out of a total of 40) that include the term "social media" in their description and none for "citizen journalism" ([IPRR, 2014](#)). The proceedings from AEJMC's 2012 conference indicated 25 papers were scheduled that included the term "social media" in the title, but only six had "citizen journalism" (or "citizen journalist") in the paper's title ([AEJMC, 2012](#)).<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, a recent qualitative study revealed that public

<sup>1</sup> Of course, many more papers at both conferences hit upon particular aspects of social media, but did not include "social media" in their descriptors. But, even then, these works investigated the modes of communication (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, etc.) instead of examining citizen journalism.

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