Citizen journalism. Analysis of opinions of journalists from Spain, Italy and Belgium

Juan Carlos Suárez-Villegas / jcsuarez@us.es

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2199-7028

Universidad de Sevilla, España

Abstract: One of the most significant changes in journalism over the last decade has been the participation of citizens in the information process, establishing various forms of interaction with professional journalists and the media. This development has established a new journalistic culture based on dynamic interaction with the audience that improved information processes in various ways. However, this active role of the audience can not substantiate the so called citizen journalism, because it lacks the necessary conditions to ensure quality information that secures constructive and civilized public debate.

Key words: journalism, citizenship, interaction, democracy, information.

Resumen: Uno de los cambios más significativos en el periodismo de la última década ha sido la irrupción de los ciudadanos en el proceso informativo, estableciendo diversas formas de interacción con los profesionales de la información, con los medios de comunicación y también entre ellos. Esta novedad ha establecido una nueva cultura periodística donde la noticia adquiere una dimensión dinámica y en la que la propia interactividad con el público puede contribuir a alimentar distintos aspectos que también han entrado a formar parte de los medios de comunicación. Sin embargo, este papel activo del público no puede sustanciar el denominado periodismo ciudadano, pues adolece de las garantías necesarias de una información de calidad que asegure un debate público ordenado y constructivo.

Palabras clave: periodismo, ciudadanía, interactividad, democracia, información.

Introduction[1]

Citizen journalism is a tag that gained enormous popularity in the first decade of the XXI century as an amateur modality of the profession called to address the generalized mistrust generated by the media in society. With the inclusion of citizens in the informational process, a greater aperture in the configuration of the public agenda was fostered, the contribution to wider plurality of sources before the entrepreneurial monopolies and journalism became renewed to a large extent in virtue of the possibilities opened by the new digital technologies.

Any citizen with a cellular phone or a camera was enabled to be a witness of an event, record and disseminate that material for the rest of society to consume. Not only videos and photographs, but also stories from the place of the events by means of which fill in for the professional journalists. The very media have resorted to the citizens' new informational role in certain situations in which it was easier to publish a photograph or the information sent by a witness than dispatch a group of professionals to the place.

This way, last-minute news items with heavy impacts, such as attacks, natural disasters or armed conflicts have been an ideal opportunity for anonymous citizens to see their contents published on the front pages of international media. The very witnesses of July 7th 2005 London bombings (7/7) uploaded videos and photographs to YouTube and Flickr, in like manner did those who witnessed the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, the 2009 Hudson River emergency landing (US Airways Flight 1549), the 2010 Haiti earthquake, civil demonstrations in north Africa and Near East in 2011 and numberless events over recent years that verify this relation between media and users (Suárez-Villegas and Jiménez-Gómez, 2015).

However, not all the news products in which a member of the audience had participated in one or another way can be called citizen journalism. According to the definition by Bowman and Willis (2003: 99), we can speak of citizen journalism when the user "plays an active role in the acquisition, report, analysis and dissemination of reports and news items"; this is to say, when they are the ultimate responsible to gather, edit and distribute the

information over self-managed digital platforms, thus controlling all the news' production processes.

This definition differences it from participatory journalism, in which collaboration between citizens and journalists takes place and develops in the professional sphere of the activity. For instance, a video of a hurricane sent by a witness to the direction of the medium and published in its digital version would be a practice framed in participatory journalism. Well now, if the video is shared directly over social media, it is considered citizen journalism.

In view of deepening further into the concept, we can establish up to three elements key in the nature of citizen journalism: open publishing using low-cost easy-to-use tools, collaborative edition on interactive platforms such as chats, forums or social media and the disintermediated distribution of contents. These characteristics take us to a different informational culture based on the permanent interconnection of the nodes of an extensive decentralized network, in which contents are created, recreated and shared apart from the traditional consumption patterns. This is what Axel Bruns (2008) called "produsage" referring to the dual nature of the digital citizen that at once consumes and produces information as another communicational actor.

Social media are a good instance of this practice owing to its inherent characteristics. Harrison and Barthel (2009: 174) argue that the "transience of the social media lies in its capacity for a larger volume of users to experience with a wider variety and more heterogeneous variety of collaborative creative activities", something close to the concept of "collective intelligence" proposed by Malone et al. (2009) to refer to this collaborative activity from a mobile, ubiquitous and asynchronous model, in which the public and the private merge.

The functions and uses of social media are numerous and go from entertainment to personal expressions and informational ends. In fact, in recent years, it has been noticeable how these tools have become noticeable as platforms of information consumption to the point of being integrated into the communication media with buttons, by means of which to share news items, this way increasing the visibility of the items beyond the medium website.

Not in vain, Bruno (2011: 64) proposed the concept of "twitter effect" to define a phenomenon by means of which "the content circulating in the social media has become an integral part of today's newsgathering during major events. Real time tweets, amateur videos on YouTube and first-hand accounts on Facebook fill up the 'news-vacuum' that until a few years ago characterized the aftermath of major crisis events".

This collaborative dynamic occurs at the same time as other initiatives adopted by the citizens to offer their own accounts of topics of interest. They are formats in which the citizens offer contents that can be interesting for the rest of society, but are produced apart from the professional sector, making use of the ways enabled by auto-publishing technologies. It is no longer contents disseminated over social media, but spaces in which there is a clear informational motivation developed from criteria similar to the journalistic.

For instance, by the mid 1990's blogs popularized as an easy-to-use tool that allowed publishing opinions and information in a decentralized manner, in addition to create users' networks with which to share articles and data, which supposed a clear differentiation regarding the traditional model of public communication. According to Singer (2005), "rather than acting as gatekeepers, bloggers see themselves as serving a nearly opposite function: Providing a venue in which whatever anyone in the world knows or thinks can receive a hearing and then be publicly debated. Blogs are, if you like, the 'marketplace of ideas' with a vengeance".

Gradually, citizens' blogs have incorporated to the media offer, given their heavy impact on public opinion in successful models such as the one set up by the HuffPost (formerly The Huffington Post), an American medium in which a large part of the contents are generated by bloggers.

In addition to social media and blogs, by the turn of the century there appeared some informational platforms exclusively managed by citizens such as opinion forums and amateur media. However, it is necessary to differentiate between formats fully developed by citizens from those in which there was professional management. For instance, the Korean news website OhMyNews has been traditionally used to illustrate the phenomenon of citizen journalism, albeit, its functioning depended on the work of a group of journalists that edited the citizens' contributions.

The website was set up in 2000 with a reduced number of journalists in charge of verifying minimally the stories sent by millions of users. In fact, the success of the newspaper, which even launched a Japanese version that failed later in 2006, was the reason for its own demise: the professionals were incapable of managing the vast amounts of information sent by citizen journalists, provoking a change in the format and philosophy in 2010.

As the case of OhMyNews, many collaborative platforms of citizens and journalists appeared globally. Even the large media included sections in which the users were invited to participate with self-produced contents. For instance, in Spain, for example, in 2007 El País inaugurated the section *Yo periodista* [I, journalist]; nevertheless, it was disabled only three years later with questionable results (Suárez-Villegas and Jiménez-Gómez, 2015).

Well now, what is the opinion of the very journalists on the phenomenon called "citizen journalism"? in an R&D&I on the ethics of digital journalism in three European countries: Spain, Italy and Belgium, we have intended to deepen into the opinion of professionals regarding this issue. And as an introduction to the conclusions defended in the present article, we can advance that there are clear discrepancies on the value given to the audience's contributions. Most warns the risk of calling this activity citizen journalism, as it propitiates its mistaking with the activity carried out by professionals.

Because of this reason, rather than journalism, understood as a regulated exercise which provide a public service, it is suitable to consider these practices as interactive communication between private citizens, in which their subjective perspective and the absence of a protocol of professional diligence prevail. Owing to this, such contributions should be considered hints or informational indications, which once verified, via other channels and duly contextualized, can acquire informational value.

Therefore, journalists show certain caution to this form of "citizen journalism" as a way to convey the information. Conversely, once clarified that these contributions from users cannot substantiate the legitimate right to be informed, as well as structured public debate, they are in favor of accepting the fact that citizens have become fundamental agents in the informative process from the performance of a number of functions. This way, from a general perspective, professionals do not accept citizen journalism as such, but do accept journalism *with* the citizens.

And it is that with the development of internet and the social uses attached to it, there has been a change from a culture in which the journalist "informed" the public in a unidirectional way to another in which the journalist communicates with the public organized in virtual communities and with an active role in the construction of the news items, either contributing with data, interesting topics or disseminating them. In short, this joint activity is developed inside a new more horizontal ecosystem in which the audience partakes of the various stages of the informative process by means of the use of new technologies. The limit is imposed, however, in the need of the professionals to timely verify these contributions.

From the constitutional doctrine, the difference between the right to inform, as a right of the emitters, and the right to be informed, as a public right, has been insistently underscored, as they are both different in their limitations and duties. While the first can be exercised without further requirements by any citizen to narrate an event from their standpoint or to express their opinion on issues that regard the whole of society; the second is a right that

structures knowledge and the public debate about issues that concern the whole of society. Thereby, it is an essential right on which democratic society seats and which requires an organized and institutionalized activity that safeguards the correct administration of such right.

On this right the freedom of the press substantiates, and by means of it professional journalists perform a qualified function in their exercise and assume an especial responsibility derived from the qualities demanded for such information: veracity, independence, plurality and public interest. In like manner, these qualities of the information demand from the professionals a moral dimension founded on honesty, understood as the priority of their commitment to the citizenry above any other sort of interests.

At the present moment in which information professionals and citizens have hold more horizontal positions in the public debate, the preponderance of the professional as a gatekeeper of information has been broken, as it can be disseminated over different channels (Dahlgren, 2016). On the other side, users have entered the editorial offices by means of their contributions to the informative process, in such manner that nowadays the news item has somewhat become a collaborative work. Because of this, facing the dichotomy between the right to inform and the right to be informed, there appears a new dimension that would be the citizens' right to participate in the informative process, but not only as a right of the emitters, but as agents who collaborate with the professionals, each with distinct functions.

This new culture has turned the news items into a story that acquires a later dimension from the very social use made of it, because of which the journalist not only must inform, but has to take up a more direct responsibility for the effects that such news items produce on the citizens. Thereby, even if the large media still dominate the communicative panorama, more frequently there will be broader interaction between the media and virtual communities, where informative activity will be complemented by contributions from the audience.

This resorting to contents sent by citizens is not seen, nevertheless, as something positive by all the professionals. In a research conducted by Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2011), up to three stances for such collaboration are stated: of resistance, in which the professionals' capabilities and skills are stressed before the amateurs; of resignation, in which certain pressure to incorporate this sort of contents by the new logic of digital journalism is recognized; and of acceptance, which suggests adopting a new spirit more open to the current context in which participation, transparency and more horizontal media culture prevail.

In the study carried out by Harro-Loit (2015), in which professional journalists are questioned on a value as deeply rooted as accountability, the conclusion is that there exists certain mistrust toward every content that is not directly gathered by the journalist according to their criteria and usual procedures. Such as established at the end of the article, this traditional vision of the construction process of news items leads journalists to adopt good deontological practices based on their principles and professional values.

The sphere of photojournalism, for example, is one of the most compromised by the citizens' interventions to provide audiovisual material up to the point that these are more required than the professionals themselves (Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2011). In Mortensen's (2014) study, in which the etic of both actors is compared, the widespread confusion regarding this concept and the confrontation experienced around who develops it with greater responsibility and rigorousness are evinced. In any case it is a fact that virtually all of the citizen photojournalists, in spite of having professional experience, do not receive a payment for their contents.

To sum up, and as it comes from most of the referred studies, it is not about fostering optimism that individuals turn themselves into the media (Gillmor, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003), but to establish ways to reinforce the right to be informed with the participation of the citizens in such process. This way, both previous phases would be integrated into this new dimension of the informational right of the citizenry to be informed.

Methodology

This work is framed in a Research and development and innovation project of the Ministry of Economy and Competiveness entitled "*Desafíos éticos del periodismo digital. Un estudio comparativo entre tres países europeos: España, Italia y Bélgica*" [Ethical challenges of digital journalism. A comparative study between three European countries: Spain, Italy and Belgium]. The present article describes the attitudes displayed by *digital* journalists in these three countries facing the so called citizen journalism.

Such research developed in two phases: one quantitative and other qualitative. The first phase consisted in producing a series of questions with closed answers on issues regarding the changes *new* technologies have brought about in the professional culture, fundamentally in its ethical dimension. Among other conclusions, the atomization of the journalistic work with new formulas for telework and for local journalism that are easier to manage and fund in virtue of the *new* technologies was demonstrated. In this phase,

it was also noticed how citizens have become more active agents in the construction process of the news items in a new informational environment.

In this work, we present a summary of the quantitative data and the qualitative phase of such study. More specifically, we will focus on the question: "what sort of valuation does the so called citizen journalism deserve?" within a broader set of issues aimed at analyzing the novelties provided by the internet to the informational dynamic referred to the relation between professionals and audience. It was a semi-structured interview held with more than seventy journalists from these three countries over 2014.

The professional profiles of the participants were diverse, from writers to the responsible of the media, with a mean age of 36 years and a percentage of 58% men and 72% of women. Twenty-four interviews were held in each country, of which twenty were selected to carry out the comparative study.

By means of various aspects aimed at recording the journalistic value attributed to the citizens' contributions to invigorate public opinion, one of the questions intended to find out the value given to the determinate citizen journalism; this is to say, of the citizens' contributions via different digital formats might be an informational alternative to the function carried out by the media. In which to understand and conciliate the citizens' contributions and the function of professional journalists in the new digital schema.

Facing an unknown universe of journalists, some authors consider it justifiable to interview in depth to a score of guys, as from such number there is saturation; this is additional interviews do not produce "new visions in the key variables" (Hughes, 2012). Therefore, the article possesses a qualitative character and it is useful to the extent that it contributes to detect new tendencies on the complex relation between journalism, citizen and democracy (Suárez-Villegas and Jiménez-Gómez, 2015).

Results

In the first place, we offer some data corresponding to the quantitative part of the research that reflects the opinion of the professionals on the participation of citizens in informational processes in a positive manner. Conversely, in the qualitative part, it is noticed this new participative dynamic does not seem capable to substantiate the so called citizen journalism as a spontaneous way of informative interaction from which critical and organized public opinion emerges.

In the survey, regarding the issue of how the contribution from citizens to informational activity is valued: 42.3% of the Italian respondents states

that citizens actively look for information for their medium, while 38.5% of the Spanish and 36.7% of the Belgians does. 62.6% of the Italians, 42.3% of Spanish, 34.6% of the Belgians mention their role in verifying the information. While, 60.2% of the Italians, 35.5% of the Spanish, and 30.7% of the Belgians refer their participation in the contextualization of the information.

Thirty point 3 percent of the consulted Spanish professionals, 53.9% of the Belgians, and 58.4% of the Italians consider the citizen participation as a display of democracy and rational, free and plural dialogue. However, 29.4% of the Spanish, 53.9% of the Belgians, and 39.6% of the Italians agree that comments tend to be disparate and/or heated.

In a proactive scenario, in view of accomplishing citizen participation in the media according to the ideal of a democratic society, 43.1%, of the Spanish, 61.5% of the Belgians, and 62.5% of the Italians support not allowing anonymous comments. 52.5% of the Spanish, 61.6% of the Belgians, and 68.7% of the Italians consider it is necessary to filter the contents to eliminate those slanderous, offensive or degrading; while 42.4% of the Spanish, 53.9% of the Belgians, and 50% of the Italians advocate to ask the user to register in order to participate with comments.

In the qualitative part, noticeable are the ethical convictions of the journalists over the increasing interest of a different and more participative professional culture, fruit of the constant interactivity with citizens, even without mistaking the roles of journalists and users. This was also evinced in the results of the in-depth interviews. By and large, all concur that journalism has changed but not its essence, for journalism is still rooted in the search for veracity, understood as a professional method based on the verification of sources, plurality of perspectives and the distinction between facts and valuations, among other measures.

In the sphere of digital journalism, where this task has become increasingly collaborative between journalists and citizens motivated by the possibilities opened by new technologies, the challenge is to preserve this professional method while giving the users access to the informational process following a path over which both spheres remain relatively separated.

In fact, most of the interviewed journalists shows disagreement to call the auxiliary and sporadic task carried out by the citizens through digital means citizen journalism. In a very eloquent manner, one of the respondents expresses his stance:

> I don't believe it. I don't think there is citizen journalism. Save you allow me to be, when I change a bulb at home, a citizen electrician. Or if I heal a wound of my little

child, I am a citizen doctor. Let me make that comparison. I believe citizen journalism doesn't exist. One is journalism, it is written in capitals and has same capacity and ethical principles as 50 years ago. It is a work based on the contrast of information and on actual proofs that determine some affirmations made by the journalist. And this is not done by citizen journalism. So let us not mistake (Spanish journalist, 62 years).

Well now, denying citizen journalism is not denying the need to collaborate with the citizens and open for their contributions to be part of the material with which journalists work to make information. At present, any person has a cellular phone that records videos or takes photographs of acceptable quality that can become graphic documents of great journalistic value.

The testimonial function performed by the citizens that witness transcending events such as an armed conflict difficult to reach or a last-minute event which has not been reached by journalists yet, as it has been seen in a myriad of circumstances in recent years, in which these contents have opened newscasts or appeared in the front pages of international newspapers, is one of the possibilities opened by a close collaboration between journalists and users which is practiced regularly.

As we previously referred, journalism acquires, more than ever, a certain collective dimension that poses numerous ethical risks. The journalist cannot stop assuming seriously and rigorously their professional duty, for that who simply reproduces what they receive from a third party, even though they verify and it is true, will have the responsibility of consulting somewhere else and report from a full vision of the events. In this regard, one of the respondents comments on a current issue, evictions:

I don't know, something in vogue nowadays, an eviction. If someone from *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* sends me a video of an eviction, for me it is useful information, but it is not journalism. I don't know what the stance of the real estate agency or the bank is... I don't know, I don't know. But I do understand that PAH doesn't have the obligation to send me this counterpoint. They give you their information, what affects them. I don't know if it's a very happy example, but... what do I know? Or if someone gets their flat or land expropriated: "the municipal council or the ministry are expropriating this plot that is mine, this and that..." and they send you a video or a note telling you it is unfair and this and that... well, that is not citizen journalism. In a testimonial from a citizen, you give it the importance you deem fit, but hey, what happens with this? If you ask what happens here, you immediately need another source (Spanish female journalist, 53 years).

Nowadays the journalist has more additional resources to produce an item, but it cannot be based exclusively on graphic elements or decontextualized demonstrations. As argued by one of the journalists interviewed "don't mistake that which is attractive with what the core of the problem is. Only when one understands what one talks about, what goes on, can one report fully aware" (Italian journalist, 35 years of age). This is say, the journalist that is waiting for the items to reach their office without deepening into the terrain where the events occur will be only able to repeat what others

say, but they will not have imperative criteria to approach the news item from the citizens' interest; therefore, they can become a mere spokesperson for one of the parties.

Because of this, most of the journalists interviewed considers that contributions from citizens to the media such as photographs, videos, testimonials or any other event of informative interest are materials that can be valuable once verified and contextualized in the story of the events, but making them news items because of having such resources without understanding their meaning is a way of laying, at the risk of providing a disproportionate image in favor of the parties, which can become a gross manipulation to profit from the benefit generated by sensationalist images.

As declared by one of the respondents, "an agenda exclusively created by citizen journalism media would be as dangerous as an agenda of professionals that disregards the voice of the web social media". Because of this, he opts for the term "citizen information" instead of citizen journalism, as he says "it seems very positive and enriching to me the contribution that citizens can make to journalism as witnesses, providing elements of analysis, broadening the agenda and collaborating with the media, but I consider that the management of their rights and the contents are not appropriate" (Belgian journalist, 32 years).

For their part, Belgian colleagues consider that the name "citizen journalism" is delicate as it may imply that everyone can be a journalist. They pinpoint that it is necessary to specify and differentiate the professional journalist from those who are not, as citizen journalism does not guarantee its credibility and respect for the professional deontology. In the first place, they state that it is also indispensable to recognize the sort of citizen participating; if they are witnesses, experts on the topic, a usual collaborator, an anonymous user that shares information as a source of the journalist…

Some Belgian professionals comment that contents sent by citizens, increasingly numerous and which reach the newsrooms without looking for them, are new sources of information with which one has to adopt the same verifying measures. After all, they go on; journalism is a profession that performs an activity of greater width and the facts are only news items when they are fully verified and contextualized and related to current events.

The characteristic of the professional is not only what they say, but the knowledge they have on what they say and the way they know to disclose it to underscore its relation with the rest of reality that affects the individuals. This way, one of the respondents point out that "by virtue of citizen journalism fewer events go unnoticed than in the past, but on the other side it is more

complicated to contrast the information, contextualize it and acknowledge its origin" (Spanish journalist, 38 years).

By contrast, other respondents use a negative valuing of this sort of journalism, as it only contributes to confuse the citizen on what must be considered a news item. In fact, some state that for a digital medium it is more difficult to obtain an interview than for a traditional newspaper, as "it is associated with poor quality and lack of seriousness". Another danger underscored by the respondents about citizen journalism is that the communication media are not sending journalists to cover the events on the ground, as they obtain graphic and audiovisual material freely from the citizens.

This reliance on the citizens' testimonials somewhat undermines the construction process of the news item, to the extent that they should be obtained on the ground by a professional journalist, capable of appreciating the facts from a more impartial and plural standpoint. As stated by a number of journalists included in the study, one is at risk of losing the pulse of the events and that these are reconstructed by journalist from the fragments of testimonials they cannot directly verify against the facts.

Therefore, from the journalists' opinions that communication with the audience is an added value for the informative activity, as newscasts can be complemented with elements that might be useful; but this is not the same as mistaking journalism with communications from the audience, for the essence of journalism as the professional job of reporting with actual knowledge of the facts and the commitment to champion the attention to public interest will be lost. Moreover, the journalist should not opt for the news items to arrive, which concedes preeminence to the sender, but look for them, verify and relate the facts with a full view of the events.

However, most of the respondents considers that the possibility of interacting with the citizen is a democratic advancement, as the audience can express and in some cases can even complement the information; thereby, it is positive. One of the interviewed journalists states that there is even a relative representativeness of the citizen on the internet, however, according to her, it would be utopian to deem it public opinion, which requires confrontation processes that lead to agreed stances. Besides, not all the citizens are represented on the internet and not everyone does so at the same extent and capability; this way, there may be phenomena of informative inequality on the internet that should not be obviated.

On the other side, a number of journalists comment that digital forums and spaces for comments are not actual spaces of debate and interchange

of opinions and arguments, but additional spaces of personal expression. As regards the comments that the citizens add to the items, most of the respondents warns that they are more an emotional reaction than a rational discourse.

This comes from the perception that, on the one side, the comments that users generate do not add anything interesting or constructive to the news item; and on the other, at a deontological and ethical level, these comments are not suitable in a large number of cases, which subtract quality from the digital medium, for frequently insulting contents or not related to the item are published.

Another journalist comments that the participation of the audience "is something recent and it is a long way from going for it to actually contributing to the quality of journalism". In his opinion, the goal must be the model under implementation in the United States, in such manner that this participation summons voices of experts in certain topics in order to comment or ask a change in the item, in view of increasing the quality of information. In this same way, some of the respondents, largely Belgians, state that the interaction with the audiences is not something relevant for the activity of journalism: "the media offer the chance to do it because not doing it is frowned upon, but in general the users' comments or opinions are not considered, save in few exceptions" (Belgian journalist, 39 years).

As a matter of fact, in Belgium there are certain items for which commenting is not available, for instance, those in which topics such as immigration, Islam and homosexuality are dealt with. The overview is that the media are responsible for their publications and must maintain the ethic and deontology both in their contents and comments the users publish. Because of this, they stress the importance of regulating the interaction and the participation rules, so that it can contribute to develop a more democratic space.

At the level of contents, the journalists do not consider interesting the comments either, except for some of them in which the user corrects a term or idea from an expert perspective. Regarding interactivity, they point out that it is not definite, as there is no interaction with the medium, but with other users. They agree that one of the few interesting and practical aspects is at the economic level, as according to statistics of participation and traffic generated by the users, publicity fees are calculated. Likewise, they pointed out that the contributions from the users have an impact on the content of web journalism, in which more participation and light and entertainment contents are in increasing demand.

The Italian journalists, on a general basis, keep a positive stance regarding citizen participation for, in addition to offer indications to follow events, it transfers heterogeneous stances on day-to-day matters. As one of the journalists expressed,

> it is a pulse that is good to keep to perform a sort of journalism that accompanies the people's concerns. On the contrary, journalism can be an almost officalist task and become a step between the media discourse and the citizens' concerns. It's convenient to fill that space with stories that link the social macro-discourses with the individuals' intra-stories. Ultimately, the journalist performs an essential function for the citizens' interests, even if he should do it with the rigor demanded by a professional treatment (Italian reporter, 33 years).

This is to say, the citizens' complaints and demands need develop the spearhead that inspires authentic journalistic research and connect it as a part of public-interest information. This way, both parts help reinforce the democratic function of the press. Albeit, all journalists insist that it is a tool, a new way of being on the "virtual street", but not journalism. They warn there are also false alarms and news which the journalists have to be careful with when investigating them, before disseminating them, as the journalist may be contributing to oversize episodes fostered by certain groups that look for limelight in the media.

Furthermore, paying attention to the distinction with which we opened this article and following the opinions of the respondents, it should not be forgotten that citizens express without restrictions from principles or duties that ensure informative quality, this way their subjective, and on occasion scarcely ethical, perspective prevails. Reason why the journalist, as stated by a number of professionals, has to be a filter to interpret the interest in certain pieces of information from the citizens to track and verify elements pertinent for the construction of news items.

Another of the journalists interviewed considers that "in any case you don't know what the future holds and how these contributions from the citizens will organize" (Belgian journalist, 44 years), so he considers that the only way to prevent any attempt to compare would be to demonstrate the difference made by a professional work. "Ethics, training, rigor and commitment seem indispensable qualities for the tasks of the professional and clear any doubt on this debate" (Belgian journalist, 53 years).

But journalist are wrong when they do the same as the citizens, recycled news or reports reproduced with no understanding of the topic; this is to say, as one of the respondents says: "the journalist will only be respected if he keeps the determination to validate the rigor of information and develops

other investigative activities to offer the citizens broader perspectives of the events" (Belgian journalist, 37 years).

Discussion

In recent years, the changes in the digital journalistic environment introduced by new communicational tools and the incorporation of citizens into the construction process of news items has shaken the foundations of the profession as never before. The proliferation of alternative sources of information on the internet, in which consumption is decentralized and the traditional media lose the monopoly of telling the events, has propitiated the appearance of numerous challenges, which directly affects the work of the very journalists.

Maybe one of such challenges that greater academic attention and in the professional sphere has called has been that regarding citizen journalism, an umbrella term for practices in which nonprofessional users perform a rather relevant informative function, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by new technological tools and the digital communication platforms. From the popularization of this concept already in the XXI century, the debate has been especially fierce and has produced clashes in the journalistic sphere.

The aim of this article was to calibrate the opinion of journalists from three countries on citizen journalism, by finding out the argument in favor or against this practice. As we have verified in Results, the general perception is that the fact that a person records live a certain event or writes an article on a concrete topic does not turn them into journalists even if the reach of the content is massive. Most of the professionals interviewed argues that journalism is not only an informative activity, but a cluster of values that incorporates an ethical dimension into such activity and that connects with the responsibility expected from a profession called to manage the democratic right of freedom of expression and information.

This interest in finding out the opinion of professionals on citizen journalism has also been present in some previous studies developed in other contexts where similar results have been obtained. For example, in the research conducted by Örnebring (2013) on journalists from six countries (United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Poland and Estonia), this negative perception is verified on the basis of a series of differentiating and authoritative elements regarding the amateur practices such as their function of gatekeepers or the editorial selection of relevant information, as well as adherence to ethical and deontological values that ensure a rigorous treatment of the facts.

This last aspect relates, according to Örnebring, with a new way of legitimacy pinpointed by the journalists as a collective, as individuals who belong to organizations with shared values and who difference themselves clearly from the users, commonly isolated. As Örnebring (2013: 48) expresses: "The straw-man citizen journalist is outside this collective, outside the system of shared knowledge and controls. The total absence in the material of any kind of claim of uniqueness or distinction based on individual autonomy is very striking".

Therefore, it would be a sort of corporatist sentiment that also manifests in a number of the answers obtained in the present research.

In another research developed by Blaagaard (2013) is analyzed in the perception of international students of journalism to obtain similar results; this is to say, by means of their answers, obtained from focus groups, a differentiation between the professionals of journalism and the amateur citizens is carried out on the basis of the values inherent to the profession. However, an additional dimension is added: the labor precariousness of journalists related to the appearance of websites of alternative information that are not managed by professionals. This fear of labor intromission is established as another barrier to consider citizen journalism as such.

In a different context, particularly the Chinese, Tong (2015) reaches similar conclusions after interviewing journalists in the country. These see citizens more like suppliers of informative material, with whom it is possible to sporadically collaborate, than competitors in the journalistic sphere. In this study one finds the corporative nature of journalism, this is to say, the inclusion of the journalist in an organized entity and with a series of professional values that makes a difference regarding other practices.

> The job trains journalists to produce credible content in a professional way, while organisational guidelines and professional norms guide and limit journalistic practices to ensure they are professional. In this sense, the typical employment relationship between journalists and news organisations is crucial in the boundary work of Chinese journalism and marks out the boundaries of journalism (Tong, 2015: 611).

Therefore, one can establish the collective dimension of the journalism exercised within an entrepreneurial structure where shared professional values prevail, as the main argument provided by the journalists themselves in order to justify their general negative perception of the so called citizen journalism, to which they give other attributions such as the timely provision of information or certain interactivity that become a greater aperture of the media.

Conclusions

1. Interactivity has become one of the essential characteristics of *digital* journalism and the new construction of public space, even if the processes developed on the internet are part of a much larger fabric of communication and social interaction. However, such interactivity has allowed the users to acquire a certain degree of control over the dissemination processes of the contents and to increase their possibilities to dialogue, interchange, support and establish relationships with other users or with the journalists themselves in the context of the medium (Suárez-Villegas and Jiménez-Gómez, 2015).

2. Citizen journalism is a practice that has found its main capacity of action far from professional management, this is to say, in decentralized formats with high capacity of interaction between users, as it is the case of blogs and social media. These are practices that produce contents which cannot be considered to have professional value; i.e., that they were produced following a protocol of informative diligence, but indeed with a high social value. Because of this, journalists have to clarify that despite both actors fulfill different roles and thereby have different responsibilities, in turn they share the same objective of reaching better criteria to analyze the contents.

3. In spite of the utilization of these amateur contents in traditional media, the tag of citizen journalist has been object of controversy both at academic and professional levels, for it is considered that the mere fact of sending news contents does not grant the category of journalist to anyone. In like manner, the term citizen journalist also comes into conflict with other tags such as interactive or participatory journalism, which entail different practices according to the degree of autonomy of the citizen in the configuration of information and its relation with the medium, as it is established in the categorization devised by Nip (2006).

4. This communicational optimism has become a mirage, for such frenetic and exuberant activity by the citizens has not contributed to establish an agenda of veracious facts and public interest. This is why citizen journalism has turned into a fuzzy concept that mistakes the private exercise of communication and the offering of testimonials for the public responsibility of informing, which demands a series of duties from professional journalists (Suárez-Villegas and Jiménez-Gómez, 2015).

References

Anden-Papadopoulos, K. and Pantti, M. (2011), *Amateur images and global news,* United States: Intellect Books.

Blaagaard, B. B. (2013), "Shifting boundaries: Objectivity, citizen journalism and tomorrow's journalists", in *Journalism*, vol. 14, no. 8, United Kingdom: Sage Journals.

Bowman, Shayne and Willis, Christ (2003), *We Media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*, United States: The Media Center at the American Press Institute, Hypergene. Available at: http://www.hypergene.net/ [October 19th, 2015].

Bruno, Nicola (2011), "Tweet First, Verify Later: How Real-Time Information is Changing the Coverage of Worldwide Crisis Events", paper for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford: University of Oxford. Available at: http://reutersinstitute. politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/fellows__papers/2010-2011/ tweet_first_verify_later.pdf [September 4th, 2015].

Bruns, Alex (2008), *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and beyond,* United States: Peter Lang.

Dahlgren, P. (2016), "Professional and citizen journalism: Tensions and complements", in Alexander, J. C., Breese, E. B. and Luengo, M. [eds.], *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future*, England: Cambridge University Press.

Gillmor, Dan (2006), *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, United States: O'Reilly.

Harrison, Teresa and Barthel, Brea (2009), "Wielding New Media in Web 2.0: Exploring the History of Engagement with the Collaborative Construction of Media Products", in *New Media & Society*, vol. 11, no. 1-2, United States: Sage.

Harro-Loit, H. (2015), "Journalists' Views About Accountability to Different Societal Groups", in *Journal of Media Ethics*, vol. 30, no. 1, United States: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hughes, Sallie (2012), "Qualitative supplement of the Worlds of Journalism core questionnaire", in Hanitzsch, T. [coord.], *Worlds of journalism.* Available at: http:// worldsofjournalism.org/download.htm [September 23rd, 2015].

Malone, Thomas *et al.* (2009), "Harnessing Crowds: Mapping the Genome of Collective Intelligence", in *MIT Sloan Research Paper*, no. 4732-09. Available at: http://ssrn. com/abstract=1381502 [October 30th, 2015].

Mortensen, T. (2014), "Comparing the Ethics of Citizen Photojournalists and Professional Photojournalists: A Coorientational Study", in *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, vol. 29, no. 1, United States: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nip, Joyce (2006), "Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism", in *Journalism Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, United States: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Örnebring, H. (2013), "Anything you can do, I can do better? Professional journalists on citizen journalism in six European countries", in *International Communication Gazette*, vol. 75, no. 1, United Kingdom: Sage.

Singer, Jane (2005), "The Marketplace of Ideas-With a Vengeance", in *Media Ethics Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 2, United States: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Suárez-Villegas, Juan Carlos and Jiménez-Gómez, Eva (2015), "Los periodistas digitales españoles ante la participación ciudadana: ¿Hacia una mejor democracia?, in R. Cetina *et al.* [eds.], *Medios y Periodistas en la era del Gobierno abierto y la transparencia*, Spain:

Latin Cyberlaw Clinic, Universidad Complutense and CIEDI. Available at: http://eprints.ucm.es/31385/1/Media%20and%20journalists%20in%20the%20 age%20 of%20Open%20Government%20and%20Transparency%20Medios%20 y%20 periodistas%20en%20la%20era%20del%20gobierno%20abierto%20y%20 la%20tr. pdf [September 8th, 2015].

Tong, J. (2015), "Chinese journalists' views of user-generated content producers and journalism: a case study of the boundary work of journalism", in *Asian Journal of Communication,* vol. 25, no. 6, Singapore: Sage.

Juan Carlos Suárez-Villegas. Doctor in Philosophy. Titular professor in the University of Seville, Spain. Main research lines: ethics and deontology of journalism, gender equality, interculturality. Recent publications: Suárez-Villegas, J. C., "Selfregulation of offline and online journalism in Spain in the experience of the Arbitration, Complaints and Ethics Commission", in *Communication & Society,* vol. 28, no. 3 (2015); Suárez-Villegas, J. C and Cruz-Álvarez, J., "Cambios en los patrones de consumo entre los estudiantes de periodismo: de prosumidores mediáticos a profesionales de la información", in *Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico*, vol. 21, no. 1, January-June (2015); Suárez-Villegas, Juan-Carlos, "Nuevas tecnologías y deontología periodística: comparación entre medios tradicionales y nativos digitales", in *El profesional de la información*, vol. 24, no. 4. Available at: http://dx.doi. org/10.3145/epi.2015.jul.05 (2015).