2014 IAMCR Conference
Hyderabad, India

Omar Al-Ghazzi

Digital media practices and meta-narratives: The citizen journalism frame in an Arab context

Abstract:

For the past decade, citizen journalism has been a popular journalistic and academic frame in describing digital media practices. The Arab uprisings are the latest world event that has generated substantial discourse about citizen journalism. Despite its popularity, it remains unclear what digital media practices the term includes or excludes.

In the uprisings, political activists, ordinary people, armed rebels, state agents, soldiers, and torturers have all used digital media for different purposes. Many examples of their use complicate our assumptions about digital media. It has become difficult to assess when digital media are used to witness or to stage an event, to lobby for a cause or report on a story. They were instrumental in efforts to mobilize political action against brutal dictatorships, but they were also used as a weapon of war and tool of torture. What are the criteria, then, for the citizen journalism label? And what are the analytical implications of discussing digital media practices as citizen journalism? Furthermore, what assumptions are produced/ reproduced in discourse about digital media and the universality of the concepts of journalism and citizenship?
In this paper, I interrogate the frame of citizen journalism by examining digital media practices in Arab contexts and by making the case that journalism and citizenship in these contexts have particular intellectual genealogies. Against the backdrop of the Syrian uprising, I explore how the complexity of digital media practices is concealed by the meta-narrative of citizen journalism.