THE ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CITIZEN MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Various social, political and technological developments have redefined the role of media in social life since the beginning of the twenty-first century, as attested by a burgeoning body of literature that interrogates the scholarly and disciplinary implications of such changes. Widely endorsed conceptualizations of the function of mass media in the Habermasian public sphere until the early 2000s have been superseded by new scholarly perspectives that foreground the impact on contemporary media practices of emerging forms of creative and political agency, labour structures, institutional agendas and technological platforms. Whereas the mass media of the public sphere were seen as mediators between the systemic world of political and economic institutions and the lifeworld of ordinary people sharing their feelings, experiences and values through everyday relationships (Habermas 1964/1989), the new media ecology is predicated on a more intricate enmeshing of the institutional domain and the subjectively experienced world. In this reconfigured public sphere, the systemic and the public are bound together as an organic whole by the discourses circulating not just within each of these domains but also across the two realms (Torgerson 2010). The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media explores the shifting conceptual network required to gain a better understanding of this reconfigured public sphere, thematizing new means and practices of representation and expression by ordinary people who wish to exercise citizenship in every domain of today’s informational society.

This is by no means the first attempt to capture and elucidate the fluid and rapidly evolving interplay between media and the social fabric, as the relatively high number of encyclopedias on media and communication studies published since the turn of the century confirms. Whether they are published as multi-volume works (Valdivia 2013; Johnston 2003; Donsbach 2008) or in more compact formats (Schaefer and Birkland 2006; Danesi 2013), these cartographies of established pathways within media studies include entries on mediated discursive practices that reflect a variety of world views. Most of the scholarly work on media content produced by ordinary people during this period has orbited around two key concepts theorized in a range of monographs: radical media (Downing 1984, 2001) and alternative media (Atton 2002, 2004). Both designate citizen-driven projects seeking to resist and transform the establishment primarily through one of three channels: participatory journalism, e.g. blogs reporting about activist issues and events; mediated mobilization facilitated by platforms that host resources or circulate information about upcoming protests; and commons knowledge transmitted, for example, through wikis that are made up of citizen threads or posts (Lievrouw 2011). But while Downing (1984:ix) uses ‘radical’ to characterize media aiming to effect social change and build solidarity around their activist agendas, Fuchs (2010:178) favours the label ‘alternative’ to designate media “that challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media
production, media structures, content, distribution and reception” and whose content articulates “opposi-
tional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination” (ibid.:179). The difficulty in
disentangling radical from alternative media – one of the reasons why critics have questioned the terms’
explanatory power (Atkinson 2017) – is compounded by the fact that the same term may carry different
meanings for different scholars. Unlike Fuchs, for example, Atton (2002:8) extends the scope of the term
‘alternative’ beyond political and resistance media to encompass “artistic and literary media (video, music,
mail art, creative writing)”, including “newer cultural forms such as zines and hybrid forms of electronic
communication”.

During the second decade of this century, debates over which term best represents the remit of oppos-
tional media projects and initiatives seeking to provide alternatives to their mainstream counterparts have
given way to retheorizations of old practices/acts and explorations of new ones. Large editorial projects have
ushered in revised categorizations and new designations – reflecting the extent to which the two key terms
have become inflected by competing themes or disciplinary perspectives. Acknowledging the drawbacks
of using the term ‘alternative’ to refer to media that bypass the usual channels of commercial production
and distribution, Atton’s (2015) Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media effectively equates
alternative media with community media to foreground the fact that they “are most often organised and
produced by ‘ordinary’ people, local communities and communities of interest” (ibid.:1). Thematizing the
role of communities in today’s media landscape – whether these take the form of transnational networked
subjectivities or, alternatively, map onto neighbourhoods, indigenous groups or diasporic constituencies, to
give but a few examples – opens up new perspectives that are as concerned with issues of power, represen-
tation, participation and citizenship as they are with the subject matter of media content produced outside
mainstream media structures.

In a near contemporaneous major editorial project, on the other hand, community media are subsumed
under the category of social movement media, together with a myriad of other media types. Driven by
“an anthropological and social movement perspective”, Downing’s Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media
(2011:xxv) embraces a broad spectrum of media, ranging from established forms of activist journalism to
“murals, graffiti, popular song and dance … video and cinema”, from “[l]ow-power community radio to
hitech digital networks”. As Downing himself notes in the introduction to this Encyclopedia, the term
‘social movement media’ is not chosen here to advance the disciplinary agenda of this scholarly domain,
which has so far ignored activist initiatives outside the Global North and neglected the study “of commu-
nication and media as integral dimensions of social movements” (ibid.).

Despite the differences in their size, nomenclature and guiding principles for the selection of topics and
contributors, Atton’s and Downing’s projects deliver comparable surveys of contemporary media actors
and practices that straddle the digital and physical spheres, with an emphasis on those that critique dom-
inant power structures. By contrast, Gordon and Mihailidis take a different slant on this mapping exer-
cise in a major collective project entitled Civic Media: Technology, design, practice (2016). Civic media, the
core concept at the heart of this publication, is defined as “all the technologies, designs, and practices that
connect people to government, institutions, and more generally, the practice and promise of contemporary
democracy” (ibid.:20). Most of the examples of civic engagement in digital culture explored here focus on
“people around the world harnessing the affordance of digital media to enable democratic participation,
coordinate disaster relief, advocate for policy change, empower marginalized communities, or simply to
strengthen local advocacy groups” (ibid.), although some of the contributions to the collection explore
how organizations and institutions can use digital technologies to develop closer relationships with citizens
and service users. While approached primarily from a technology-centred perspective, the concept of civic
media is ultimately underpinned by an understanding of citizenship, justice, inclusion and equity as the
drivers of critical and engaged sociality.

Atton’s (2015) emphasis on communities; Downing’s (2011) conceptualization of social movements and
their repertoires of media practices as instruments of resistance against the ‘antidemocratic’ and ‘antisocial’
forces at play in today’s society; and Gordon and Mihailidis’ (2016) focus on the connective practices and critical discourses fostered by the ubiquity of civic tools all bring into sharp relief the challenges that the shift towards digital culture poses to media and communication scholars. Although a number of thematic threads run through these reference works, thus pointing to the existence of shared core concerns across individual perspectives, the differences in nomenclature also expose the conceptual overlap and redundancy between them. By extension, these differences also expose gaps in the remit of the three editorial projects, as illustrated by the relatively small amount of attention paid to individual media practices in Atton’s companion on community media; to the potential of playfulness and affect to feed and stir resistance against social structures in Downing’s Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media; and to the role of embodied, on-the-ground performance of dissent in Gordon and Mihailidis’ volume on civic media.

The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media has been conceived as an intervention in ongoing terminological and conceptual debates. Informed by Baker and Blaagaard’s (2016) extended discussion of the term, citizen media is theorized in this volume as the physical artefacts, digital content, performative interventions, practices and discursive formations of affective sociality that ordinary citizens produce as they participate in public life to effect aesthetic or socio-political change. The contribution that the concept of citizen media makes to extant scholarship is multifold, as are the manifestations of citizen media that Baker and Blaagaard’s definition encompasses. Unlike other conceptualizations of non-mainstream media, their understanding of citizen media places equal emphasis on both the digital and the material, as well as on the interplay between virtual and physical forms of expression. Seen from this new perspective, digital technologies act as the technical infrastructure enabling and amplifying multi-voiced discursive practices from networked subaltern counterpublics (Fraser 1990), providing individuals and collectives with the means and opportunities to share social imageries and discourses with other members of their networked imagined communities (Anderson 1991). Counterpublics sometimes take the form of disembodied spaces of discourse (Stephansen 2016), but they can also arise from a multiplicity of material processes and a constellation of individual and collective interventions in publics through the medium of the human body that numerous strands of media studies have tended to downplay (Baker and Blaagaard 2016).

Any area of human experience is therefore seen here as subject to negotiation by ordinary individuals and groups positioned largely outside the mainstream institutions of society and committed to expressing their concerns – politically, artistically, emotionally, physically or otherwise – in their own, often novel ways and using any media at their disposal. The large, global movement for natural birth, which challenges the widespread medicalization of women’s bodies, is thus a form of citizen media practice as understood in this Encyclopedia, as is the small, local Ikwe Marketing Collective, a grassroots economic development project on the White Earth Indian reservation in northern Minnesota which supports economic subsistence in the community by ensuring its crafts and wild rice are sold at a fair price (Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine 1987). In resisting the conflation between citizen media and the digital, and acknowledging the potential of virtual and physical artefacts and practices to operate through and upon the other (Isin and Ruppert 2015), this Encyclopedia engages with participatory cultures across the entire spectrum of a population, irrespective of their level of access to digital media: even illiterate members of a society experience and engage in embodied forms of expression, while it is primarily the (relatively) privileged and (relatively) young who have access to and know how to use social and digital media effectively.

The inclusion of citizens’ physical practices within the remit of citizen media, as conceptualized here, affords a new lens to explore how these forms of unaffiliated expression and representation, whether embodied (e.g. flash mobs, graffiti and street art or parkour) or virtual (e.g. selfies or other forms of user-generated content), performatively confront the disciplining norms of society – one of the main themes running through this Encyclopedia. Drawing on a body of literature on performance studies and theories of performativity, Baker and Blaagaard have argued that the intervention of citizens in publics, often with a view to subverting or renegotiating prevailing social norms, “is a form of performance that participates in constructing the social space in which we live and act as citizens” (2016:7), both locally and in networked
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spaces of cosmopolitan solidarity. Indeed, the growing amount of scholarly attention that the constructed, performative dimension of these interventions is attracting is not simply a reflection of the fact that studies of citizen media accommodate multiple ontologies and foster epistemological plurality. Ultimately, this increased attention recognizes that “by actively intervening in and transforming the established mediascape” and “contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations” (Rodríguez 2001:20) citizen media enable the enactment of citizenship.

Some of the most studied practices and interventions “through which individuals become citizens” (Stephansen 2016:28; emphasis in original) aim to bypass various structures and systems of control and surveillance (e.g. hacking and hacktivism, surveillance, sousveillance), voice political or ideological dissent and enact protest. As a theme, resistance features very prominently in this Encyclopedia, foregrounding the connections between our conceptualization of citizen media and some of the more established notions in the field, such as radical media and critical media. Entries gravitating around this theme focus on various categorizations of resistance (e.g. activism, civil disobedience, direct action), attempts to silence protest and prevent uprisings in public spaces (discussed, to some extent, in the entries on autonomous movements and space and place), and the threat of co-optation through which existing structures of political and corporate power try to contain the subversive (co-optation).

A third, interlocking theme in this Encyclopedia pertains to the centrality of witnessing in a wide range of citizen media practices. As befits an editorial project firmly anchored in the age of digital culture, the Encyclopedia includes a range of entries that examine how the enactment of citizenship and performance of resistance are documented (e.g. archiving, community media, digital storytelling, citizen journalism, Indymedia, documentary filmmaking, mobile technologies, photography), whether events are witnessed by citizens on the ground or by networked communities capitalizing on the affordances of digital technology. By “engaging people’s potential to care” (Chouliaraki 2010:305) and turning witnessing experiences into mediated discourses, citizen media thematize moral demands on publics and audiences to act on behalf of ordinary individuals and communities who suffer in situations of political and armed conflict and through natural disasters. In these sites of struggle, citizen media contribute to bridging space and time, and to developing structures of moral and affective sociality, as discussed in the entries on solidarity and precarity. The growing need for protocols to facilitate the independent verification of citizen media content adds another dimension to the role of witnessing in the context of citizen media studies (see the entry on authenticity).

While other theorizations privilege the communal dimension of citizen media (Atton 2015; Rodríguez 2011), the conceptualization of citizen media underpinning this Encyclopedia places particular emphasis on unaffiliated citizens acting, potentially on an individual basis, “in the pursuit of a non-institutionalized agenda, and without the mediation of a third party or benefactor” (Baker and Blaagaard 2016:15). A number of entries relating to participation, the fourth of the major themes covered in this Encyclopedia, explore how citizen media practices, whether they involve individual or collective agents, facilitate the construction of physical (e.g. the entry on the World Social Forum) or virtual networks or platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and hashtags, Weibo, YouTube) of like-minded individuals around a collective sense of purpose. By examining how unaffiliated citizens participate in publics, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the collaborative production and dissemination of knowledge and information (e.g. big data, citizen science, commons, wikis); of debates on roadmaps to replace vertical structures of democratic representation with horizontal models of deliberation (e.g. social movement studies, prefiguration, civil society); and of the dynamics of sites of engaged or aesthetic, often playful, affectivity (culture jamming, video games).

Participation intersects fruitfully with the fifth of the major themes running through this Encyclopedia: immaterial work. Explored in a range of general entries (e.g. immaterial labour, amateur), immaterial work is responsible for the proliferation of free media content produced by unpaid ordinary citizens – whether they act on their own impetus or their involvement is solicited by specific corporations or institutions (see the entries on crowdsourcing and crowdfunding). Amid fast-paced changes blurring
traditional boundaries between the production, distribution and consumption of media content (convergence) and fostering the development of participatory sites of ‘prosumption’, the involvement of individuals and communities in different forms of co-creational work (fandom, remediation, social media, content moderation and volunteer participation) is disrupting traditional structures of labour and eroding the social status of established professions in the creative and media industries. The cluster of entries engaging with the logic of the gift economy raises important issues pertaining to the interplay between citizen media and digital technologies, whether this is ultimately shaped by a relationship of empowering synergy or driven by dynamics of regulative tension – in those cases where the technologization of these interventions effectively restricts the transformative power of the practices that enable the enactment of citizenship.

In addition to mapping out practices, acts and platforms whose contours continue to change at an accelerated rate, we have also sought to offer critical accounts of the core conceptual framework at the heart of this emerging interdisciplinary domain of study (entries on citizenship, media, media ecologies, media event, media practices, mediatization, process vs. event, public sphere, publics), as well as more pervasive phenomena that are important to understand in the context of how individuals and groups negotiate social and political spaces dynamically to express their aspirations (e.g. authenticity, precarity, solidarity, subjectivity, temporality).

The grouping of entries under each of the various themes outlined above is not meant to put in place a rigid compartmentalization of citizen media content and practices, insofar as most entries are connected with one or more of these themes. Indeed, as defined in this volume, the study of citizen media necessarily draws on theoretical and methodological linkages that have not been addressed so far within the scope of a single companion volume. For instance, in engaging with the practices of citizens voicing their views, articulating their shared interests and negotiating their personal and collective identities in public, some entries make excursions into domains such as social movements, activism and fandom studies. To shed light on the affective and transformative potential of citizen media practices – whether these take the form of amateur art installations or community radio, among other examples – the various entries surveying these areas necessarily bring into sharp relief the entanglements between media and relevant forms of multimodal expression. And in discussing digital practices of citizenship such as digital storytelling and remediation – which, unlike their traditional embodied counterparts, are delinking citizens’ agendas from their immediate physical environment, disrupting the traditional entwining of people, culture and place and weaving transnational affective bonds across different regions of cyberspace and digital media spaces – the Encyclopedia draws on insights from globalization theories and studies on participatory and networked cultures. In light of the rapidly evolving and ever more challenging configuration of citizen media studies, which is not yet recognized as a distinct field of study, the Encyclopedia adopts a broad, cross-disciplinary approach that cuts across practically all fields of enquiry – from core areas of the humanities to social science, and to the natural sciences and the study of medicine. A number of entries are thus intended to map scholarly developments at the interface between citizen media and other disciplines or interdisciplinary domains, in order to encourage the nurturing of synergies and engage scholars in related fields of study (e.g. anthropology and citizen media, conflict & humanitarian studies and citizen media, film studies and citizen media, migration studies and citizen media, performance studies and citizen media, philosophy and citizen media, political science and citizen media, popular culture and citizen media, postcolonial studies and citizen media, race & ethnicity studies and citizen media, social movement studies and citizen media). The risks that citizens incur in producing media content and the ethical responsibilities of researchers investigating this domain are also explored in a dedicated entry (ethics of citizen media research).

A number of concepts, practices and media (such as aesthetics, affect, co-creation, blogs, vlogs) and disciplines (including gender studies, sexuality studies, legal studies and urban studies) that we hoped to engage with remain sadly absent from the volume. Some were commissioned but did not materialize, while others proved too complex at this stage of developing the concept of citizen media as understood here to attract willing contributors. We hope to be able to address these gaps, and several others, in a future edition.
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of the Encyclopedia, when the interdisciplinary domain of citizen media we have attempted to chart here is more developed. Until that future edition materializes, we trust this reference work is strong and flexible enough to offer a theoretical anchor and methodological steer through the rugged emerging terrain of citizen media studies.

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References