



# Gatekeeping and citizen journalism: The use of social media during the recent uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya

Media, War & Conflict  
6(1) 55–69

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1750635212469906

mwc.sagepub.com



**Sadaf R Ali**

Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI, USA

**Shahira Fahmy**

University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

## Abstract

This critical study focuses on three major conflicts involving protests in the Middle East and North Africa. From a theoretical perspective, this research expands the study of gatekeeping by examining the characteristics of gatekeeping practices by citizen journalists. Overall findings suggest traditional ‘gatekeepers’ continue to maintain the status quo regarding news about conflict zones.

## Keywords

Citizen journalism, Egypt, gatekeeping, Iran, Libya, social media

With the advent of social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs, citizen journalists have new opportunities for joining the ranks of mainstream and/or elite journalists in producing news and engaging audiences. However, user-generated content (UGC) is subjected to ‘gatekeeping’ practices that filter news content, making it often consistent with narratives in traditional media.

White (1950) defined gatekeeping as a selection process where ‘gatekeepers’ pick and choose which news articles and/or visual images to run in the media. The ensuing content

---

## Corresponding author:

Sadaf R Ali, Department of Communication, Media & Theater Arts, Electronic Media & Film, Eastern Michigan University, 106 Quirk, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, USA.

Email: sali8@emich.edu

we see in traditional media therefore tends to follow organizations' news routines and narratives. In the context of social media, however, studies have indicated that while such news outlets have been touted as being a free space for citizen journalism, UGC that becomes major headlines in traditional media is still subjected to these gatekeeping practices (Domingo et al., 2008). Journalists and media scholars have long debated whether technology has changed the journalism landscape (Livingston and Bennett, 2003). However, few researchers have looked at how UGC has been subjected to gatekeeping practices by traditional media, forcing this alternative media content into specific frames that continue to preserve traditional news routines, thereby undercutting UGC's very 'revolutionary' purpose.

News organizations have a cornucopia of UGC to choose from. However, such information available from Twitter and status updates on Facebook is also indirectly subjected to gatekeeping by these traditional news outlets. These institutions pick and choose what information from these sites is most relevant to their routines and narratives. As a result, only a small portion of the abundant information on social networks is made available to the public through the mainstream forum.

This critical analysis focuses on the way social media have conveyed information to Western audiences in three major conflicts and uprisings: (1) The unsuccessful 2009 uprising in Iran following the victory of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; (2) the successful overthrow of the dictatorship of Mubarak and his close entourage; and (3) the successful overthrow of Gaddafi's regime. Using the theoretical concept of gatekeeping, we examine the relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media and how 'gatekeepers' continue to maintain the status quo in regard to news about and in these three conflict zones. From a theoretical perspective, this research therefore expands the study of gatekeeping theory by examining how citizen journalists manage their own stories to remain in line with traditional media sources. More specifically, we analyze the efforts made by these three governments to control information disseminated by citizen journalists, and the ways in which social media might have been restricted by the hegemony of Western mainstream media and their gatekeeping practices.

## **Has technology changed the journalism landscape?**

Despite the emergence of new technologies, gatekeeping practices in traditional news organizations have not changed. Livingston and Bennett (2003) provided an early example by examining the introduction of videophones. Analyzing international news coverage by CNN, they found that new technology in the late 1990s allowed journalists to cover a wider variety of international news stories, creating a glut of on-the-scene stories. This 'event-driven news', however, was initially spontaneous and appeared devoid of official sources within the traditional media setting, thereby seemingly creating news stories that fell outside the framework of traditional media. Livingston and Bennett reported that technological advances within institutions have not changed the core gatekeeping practice of 'officiating' news through official sources. Thus, despite the emergence of new technologies, gatekeeping practices within traditional media, at that time, were alive and well.

## The relationship between mainstream media and citizen journalism

Armed with camcorders, video phones, and first-person accounts, citizen journalists are now capturing major news events and spreading the word by posting information on social media networks, blogs, and personal websites. Arguably, to many people, they are generating a unique contribution to the journalistic landscape. Citizen journalism has emerged as a new genre of reporting and, despite ambiguities in its definition and the multiple monikers it goes by (e.g. participatory journalism, open source journalism), one thing remains obvious: citizen journalism invokes the ordinary citizen to play an active or integral role in collecting and disseminating news through a variety of media platforms (Allan and Thorsen, 2009).

Domingo and Heinonen (2008) examined the relationship between citizens and traditional journalists through an analysis of weblogs. They found that, although webloggers do not pretend to be journalists, much of their work approaches that arena. They explained that weblogs are challenging the very definition of journalism and may be causing a paradigm shift by altering our understanding of what journalism is. Studies have shown that webloggers are pushing against the norm of the journalist as the 'trained observer'. Bloggers are generally involved in the stories they are reporting on, thus giving first-hand accounts as they happen (e.g. Domingo et al., 2008). And traditional media are using this participatory content as an opportunity to give readers a chance to debate the current issues being reported on (Domingo et al., 2008).

However, citizen journalism is not without challenges. Through gatekeeping practices, mainstream media continue to maintain hegemony over information disseminated by citizen journalists. Singer and Ashman (2009) analyzed how journalists at *The Guardian* (London) incorporated and assessed UGC on its newspaper's website. By opening its site to readers, *The Guardian* created a space in which content generated by a large number of individuals was shared. This shared space, however, raised issues regarding the credibility, accountability, and newsworthiness of that genre of participatory content. The researchers found that, despite the growing amount of UGC, journalists interviewed were cautious of the contributing public and only incorporated those comments that fitted within the shared normative framework created by institutional routines and values. Core journalistic values of a particular news organization thus remain unchanged as traditional media professionals continue to maintain control over every stage of the news production process (see Domingo et al., 2008).

## Gatekeeping practices and citizen journalism

While there is a growth of UGC on news organizations' websites, content produced by citizen journalists does not threaten traditional media for good reasons. First, UGC is subjected to gatekeeping rules propagated by traditional news professionals. Second, the majority of UGC used is perceived to be entertainment news, reserved for affiliate news sites or 'soft news' sites. Studies have shown that UGC reinforces a tendency towards human-interest stories, leaving in-depth coverage for professional journalists (e.g.

Harrison, 2010; Hermida and Thurman, 2008). Third, because content has to be filtered before being published in mainstream media, the growth of information via citizen journalists has been slow (Hermida and Thurman, 2008).

Harrison (2010) examined how UGC is subjected to gatekeeping practices at the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) hub. Findings showed that, despite the tensions caused by UGC, senior managers at the BBC continue to use it for five reasons: (1) as a public service towards mass reach and inclusivity; (2) as a way of combating viewer disengagement from traditional media sources; (3) it allows the station to compete for audiences; (4) in anticipation of a more computer literate audience, as well as growth within the information and communications technology sector; and (5) the ability of the BBC editors to make UGC fit within the news routines and values of the news company. Although there is a public service factor to the incorporation of information by citizen journalists, the BBC requires that it continues to serve the frame of the institution (Harrison, 2010).

In the context of mainstream media and citizen journalism, the literature suggests two narratives are present (Karlsson, 2011). The dominant narrative suggests citizen journalism is restrained by traditional news institutions through the organization's gatekeeping process of selecting specific UGC to include. The second weaker narrative finds that journalism is gradually changing its practices to allow for more UGC. Karlsson suggests that traditional media are evolving to include more participatory journalism stories, but that those stories are restrained to fall in line with news organizations, and traditional news values.

Scholars have suggested that, outside the boundaries of traditional media, gatekeeping is not exclusively carried out by professional journalists. Many weblog publishers are now adopting the gatekeeping and journalistic practices of traditional news organizations (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008). These gatekeeping practices continue to force citizen journalists to fit within the confines of mainstream media.

## **State controlled media and citizen journalists**

Citizen journalists have often become targets in authoritative regimes. They may be subjected to harassment, intimidation, and even death. However, some individuals still find ways to circumvent their respective governments and bring first-hand breaking news to audiences, mainly Western ones.

According to Nguyen (2009), although technological advances have allowed citizen journalists to disseminate information beyond government control, the political elite have also become savvy to these advances and have found ways to largely keep these citizens' influences within boundaries set by them. For example, in Vietnam, citizen journalism began in the early 2000s, primarily as chat rooms and forum discussions. However, in 2006, bloggers took over and began to resonate throughout the Vietnamese online communities. Bloggers announced when former Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet died unexpectedly in a Singapore hospital nearly two days before the mainstream media were allowed to report on the story. Thus 88 million people were informed of his death back home before the story actually 'broke'.

In the past, the technology revolution in the Arab World was elitist (Ghareeb, 2000). However, in recent years, despite government blockages and intimidation tactics used to curb social media users in the region, the platforms have taken off. According to the Dubai School of Government's *Arab Social Media Report*, the total number of Facebook subscribers stands at over 21 million, which is up from nearly 12 million in 2010 (Salem and Mourtada, 2011a). Young people (between the ages of 15 and 29) are the largest demographic of users with an average 2:1 male to female ratio compared to the rest of the world with a 1:1 male to female ratio. With nearly 5 million users, constituting approximately 22 per cent of the total users in the Arab region, Egypt has embraced social media.

In another *Arab Social Media Report* by the Dubai School of Government (Salem and Mourtada, 2011b), social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter are shown to have grown exponentially. In April 2011, Facebook had over 677 million users, with the Middle East constituting one of the regions with the largest amount of new users (p. 2). At the end of March 2011, Twitter exceeded 200 million users with about 4 billion tweets a month. But how does this translate to the Middle East? During the 2011 protests, Egypt saw a 29 per cent growth in Facebook usage compared to a 12 per cent growth just one year previously. Salem and Mourtada (2011b) found that calls for protest on Facebook increased 5.5 per cent in Egypt on 25 January 2011 during the height of the Egyptian protests, while in Libya they increased by 4.3 per cent on 17 February 2011, marking that country's major protests.

## Iran: The so-called 'Twitter revolution'

Two hours after the presidential polls had closed, the Iranian government claimed President Ahmadinejad had won the elections with nearly 63 per cent of the votes. (CNN World, 2009). The day after, public protests erupted and, despite the throngs of skeptical voters, the political incumbent Ahmadinejad started his second reign as President of Iran, taking office on 13 June 2009.

Following the disputed election, the so-called 'Green Revolution' widely used social networking sites to document the struggle of protestors. A group of disconnected digital activists in Iran realized they had the technical ability to get textual and visual information out. These individuals or so-called citizen journalists began distributing content to members of the international press and general public via social networking sites. Specifically, Twitter (a microblog) was heavily used. It gave protestors the opportunity to reach audiences beyond Iran (*The Washington Times*, Editorial, 2009). As a result, Western media such as *Newsweek* magazine suggested that the 2009 post-Iranian election was the 'true birthplace of citizen journalism' (Human Rights Watch, Iran, 2010). The Iranian government, however, quickly unleashed a widespread crackdown and the revolution eventually failed.

Protestors, prominent opposition figures, journalists, editors, and bloggers were detained without trial and subjected to mistreatment and abuse (Baird, 2010). In regard to the media, the Iranian government increased restrictions on domestic and foreign news outlets, making it extremely difficult to get uncensored news (Corn, 2009; Human Rights

Watch, Iran, 2010). The government also deleted sites in an attempt to block the flow of information (CNN World, 2009). One particular video, however, still made it through the gatekeeping cracks. A video uploaded on YouTube showed the murder of Neda Agha-Soltan.

Killed during the protests by a single gunshot to the chest, Neda's death became the icon of the Iranian movement for freedom. Uploaded by citizen journalists in Iran through Current.com, the video was picked up by major US news networks such as CNN, ABC, NBC, and CBS (CNN World, 2009). Despite government efforts to gate-keep and censor information in Iran, the video went viral, attracting thousands of people across the globe. Eventually, the video elicited a response from US President Barack Obama who said: '(Iran must) stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people ... the Iranian government must know that the world is watching' (Palmer, 2009). Citizen journalists in Iran managed to keep their own stories in line with traditional media sources around the world. Arguably, it was not until traditional media organizations in the West picked up the story that those voices of dissent could be heard worldwide. Indeed the need for traditional media outside Iran to widely disseminate the video was to be expected. Social media sites such as Twitter became mobilizing tools that were used, albeit unsuccessfully, to facilitate a revolution (Harb, 2011).

Bowman (2008) found that, regardless of the insistence of social media users, traditional media continue to be in control when it comes to information dissemination. They continue to have a strong role in the gatekeeping of social media content. Bowman examined how traditional journalists are adapting their professional practice to incorporate online news sites that allow citizens to become a part of the news-making process. He found that traditional media, specifically broadcast news, are relevant in today's cyber world simply because they continue to select those stories provided by citizen journalists that fit the organizations' news narratives and routines.

Traditional media usually pick up human-interest stories regularly from social media sites (Hamdy and Goma, 2012). This is because providing coverage to stories for the public as reported by the public is considered public service. Therefore, while the Iranian revolution may have been fueled on Twitter and YouTube, Western media outlets needing to fulfill public interest snapped up the story and broadcast it to a wide audience. However, despite the revolution in Iran being dubbed the 'Twitter Revolution' by several Western news outlets (e.g. *The Washington Times*, Editorial, 2009), some scholars are skeptical.

Wall (2009) argues that the state holds a considerable amount of power and influence when it comes to censoring and blocking blogs from civilians during conflicts. In Iran, members of the authoritarian government were also using sites such as Twitter to monitor the protestors' actions, performing a strict gatekeeping role (Loewenstein, 2010). In other words, the government of Iran used analogous social media sites, creating the opportunity to counter the work of protestors. Wall (2009) suggests that the US government is showing a new face when it fears the potential power of social media and, as a result, focuses on extinguishing efforts by citizens through intimidation. She explains that most civilian journalists become vulnerable to such intimidation techniques.

Not surprisingly, media scholars claim that much of the protest in Iran happened in the old-fashioned way—word-of-mouth—and the more recent technology of text messaging

(Schechtman, 2009). Interviews with social media advocates and Iranian experts suggest that no particular social media outlet was influential in getting people out onto the streets. Rather it was Moussavi's supporters who organized grassroots protests to rouse the public to action. Schechtman explains that approximately 8600 Twitter user profiles do not indicate that they even from Iran, with no guarantee that all of them were active users during the protests.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, with the added complication of the government blocking sites like Twitter, that small number of active users became even smaller. While the few computer savvy hackers may have been able to circumvent government blocks, for the average user that was too much of a hurdle. All these factors clearly made door-to-door calling the conventional way of shaping post-election calls to action.

Indeed many critics of the 'Twitter revolution' believe that giving social media credit for starting the Iranian revolution is an injustice to the real sacrifice that protestors made. However, one can argue that visuals of the Iranian woman Neda who was killed during the uprising were disseminated through social networking sites and eventually used in different media platforms and as protest signs during the revolution. In fact, Esfandiari (2010) calls it the 'Twitter devolution' because the social media site actually complicated the picture of the Iranian people's struggle for justice and freedom. Despite the Iranian government's strong gatekeeping role in regard to all media, the social media's main role in Iran was to create awareness of the issues to other social media users outside the country and grab the attention of international media. In fact, a majority of the discussion on the uprising was by Americans tweeting each other.

On 13 February 2011, Iran once again exploded in protests marking the anniversary of the original 2009 election protests. Other countries such as Egypt and Libya also began calling the public to take action against their own oppressive regimes (Parvaz, 2011). Once again, social media were brought to the forefront as the catalyst for these revolutions.

## **Egypt: The so-called 'Facebook revolution'**

Frustrated with the poverty and growing inadequacies among Egyptian people, activists called for a response from the public to protest against unemployment, government corruption, and the rule of President Mubarak for nearly three decades. Further, Egyptian activists condemned Mubarak's government for continuing to maintain diplomatic ties with Israel, exporting natural gas to the Jewish state, as well as restricting movement between the borders of Egypt and Gaza (Shapiro, 2009).

On 25 January 2011, large numbers of Egyptian protestors took to the streets in Cairo and other cities in Egypt. Thousands of protestors marched to Tahrir Square, to the offices of the National Democratic Party, the Foreign Ministry, and the state-controlled television station in Cairo (Timeline: Egypt's revolution, 2011). Citizens mainly protested against inequality and corruption, and demanded the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak —chanting 'down with Mubarak'. Within a few hours, the police were called out, removing the demonstrators from Tahrir Square with tear gas and water cannons (Timeline, 2011).

While many citizens were out on the streets calling for reform and an end to the 30-year-rule of the Egyptian president, others focused on social media to proliferate

information about the uprising to a wider audience. In a final attempt to maintain power, Mubarak disrupted social media by blocking the internet. Blackberry Messenger services and cell phone users also experienced problems (Timeline: Egypt's revolution, 2011).

Despite Mubarak's efforts, however, citizens continued the proliferation of information on the internet. Like the 2009 Iranian protestors, Egyptians took their fight online (Ali and Fahmy, 2012). They published information on the social networking site Facebook, leading many to refer to the Egyptian uprising as the 'Facebook revolution'. Much like Iran's Neda, Egypt had its visual icon that became the forefront of the revolution: the death of Khaled Saeed.

Arguably, the death of Saeed, a young Egyptian businessman who was beaten to death by police outside a cybercafé in the Sidi Gaber area outside Alexandria on 6 June 2010 (Bradley, 2010), was a major icon for the revolution that prompted an unprecedented solidarity among Egyptians and eventually became a catalyst that brought the regime to its knees (Ali and Fahmy, 2012). Saeed was killed by police for posting video footage of police corruption. After viewing graphic photos of Saeed at the morgue, Wael Ghonim, a Google executive for the Middle East and North Africa, created the page: 'We are all Khaled Saeed'. The page caught on and, in the weeks before the revolution, the page had more than 350,000 followers who were invited to protest against the regime on 25 January 2011 (Heaven, 2011). Many of these followers replaced their personal pictures on Facebook with images of Saeed's face (pre-and/or post-death). Similar to Iran, the influence of the social media was exaggerated, giving Facebook credit for starting the revolution.

Indeed, social media were applauded for bringing justice. Most Egyptians and Western media, however, had never heard of its creator, Ghonim. It was not until 8 February 2011, hours after being released from a 12-day incarceration that Ghonim appeared on Dream TV (a privately owned television station in Egypt). On television he told his story about the creation of the Facebook page and wept for the people killed during the uprising (*The Guardian*, 2011). Ghonim's television appearance led to his popularity and the increased publicity of the Facebook page he created (see Ali and Fahmy, 2012; Heaven, 2011).

Historically, it is no secret that in the Arab world traditional media have been generally subjected to strict government control. In recent years, however, studies have shown that UGC has been allowed and made available to the public. In an ethnographic study examining the official website of Al-Arabiya during the 2003 Iraq War, Al-Saggaf (2006) found that, despite the perceived freedom afforded by UGC, its content is still subjected to gatekeeping processes that fall within the routines of a news organization. Although users had the freedom to add comments to stories uploaded by Al-Arabiya, Al-Saggaf (2006) found the comments lacked the authority of rational debate. Rather, most users added their opinions to stories, as well as links to other news sites such as Al-Jazeera. In addition, because the station is owned and managed by the Saudi government, some of the selected UGC 'is intended to serve the interests of the (Saudi) government' (p. 330).

Clearly the literature indicates that traditional media continue to maintain a stronghold on citizen journalists' comments. Meraz (2009) found traditional media were no longer the sole influence in setting the agenda but were still the driving force for creating political blogs. In addition, major news sources were the dominant choices for citizen



journalists to link their blogs to. In fact, many bloggers had ties to traditional media as former or current journalists. Thus, overall, traditional media continue to maintain the hegemony by being a major source of information for citizens. To illustrate this point more clearly in this context, it was Ghonim's appearance on Dream TV that led to the increased publicity of his Facebook page (Heaven, 2011). Ghonim's story appeared to fit within many traditional news routines and narratives of news organizations in the region. The Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Saeed' gained a stronger following once Al-Jazeera picked up the coverage of Saeed's visuals and the related protests. What is most interesting, however, is that for traditional media and social media this event created a 'symbiotic relationship' (see Ali and Fahmy, 2012).

Arguably, the images of Saeed became an icon once they were selected by traditional news organizations. Amid the massive protests in Egypt, traditional media found their so-called 'hook' in the form of Saeed's brutally battered image juxtaposed with his smiling face. Recent literature suggests that news organizations publish UGC they believe would be valuable to their audiences and thus benefit the news organization (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that UGC content is heavily filtered through gatekeeping processes in traditional media.

In a series of interviews with reporters and editors, Hermida and Thurman found that gatekeeping practices in organizations like *The Times* are keen to use a lot of UGC but only select those comments that 'fit their brand' (p. 350). Information that deviates from the story or does not meet the standards of audience expectations — as deemed by editors — is filtered out. Similar to text, TV stations are also large consumers of UGC, especially in the form of videos, photographs, and interviews with individuals who provide first-hand accounts. Television stations also seem to filter UGC based on gatekeeping processes that they consider valuable to their audiences. Williams et al. (2011) found that TV editors and managers use UGC as just another source for news stories. Their findings suggest that reporters have not changed the way they work; rather, the material provided by citizen journalists continues to remain embedded within the institution's framework, maintaining the status quo for traditional media. Finally, it is important to note that, although the Egyptian revolution was known as the 'Facebook revolution', the social networking site was just another tool used by citizens to spread the word of their struggles to Western and international media. Linda Herrera (2011) a columnist for a Middle-East online news organization argues that Facebook had little to do with the Egyptian revolution. It was the people on the streets calling for action who influenced events; their diligence and hard work was what made the real difference in the Egyptian revolution, not Facebook. While this claim might hold some truth, one must not underestimate the power of social media that allowed information to get out to a wider audience, many of whom were abroad. The photos of Saeed on Facebook were used as a catalyst not only on the internet but also as protest signs during the uprisings. Through the enthusiastic work of protestors utilizing a variety of resources from social media to word of mouth to mainstream media in the Arab world such as Al-Jazeera, Mubarak resigned as president of Egypt on 11 February 2011 and handed the country over to the military (Timeline, 2011). Encouraged by these recent revolutions in Iran and Egypt, Libyans then poured into the streets demanding President Gaddafi's resignation from office.

## **Libya: Twitter revolution take two**

President Muammar Gaddafi came to power in 1969 in a bloodless coup that overthrew the pro-Western Sanusi monarchy. He ruled the country—till his death in 2011—with a heavy hand that left little or no space for opposition (Vandewalle, 2011). With Freedom House (2009) ranking Libya in the top 20 nations with the highest level of media restrictions, Gaddafi was able to cement his power for almost 50 years. Further, he reinforced his authoritarian regime by creating a system of divide and conquer amongst the various tribes and ruling families in Libya's many provinces, as well as taking a purely anti-Western stance. His anti-American posturing, in particular, resonated with many of his citizens and supporters (Vandewalle, 2011).

However, that all came to a head on 15 February 2011 when protestors clashed with Gaddafi's militia, resulting in numerous deaths. Amidst UN allegations of wartime human rights violations against protestors and media personnel, Gaddafi's regime slowly started to crumble under massive international and public pressure. However, the flamboyant dictator continued to refuse to resign as president of Libya.

As soon as the protests began, Gaddafi's regime blocked all communication, including cell phones, television, and the internet, leaving the Libyan population cut off from the rest of the world. However, despite the communication blackout, social media once again came to the forefront. Much like in Iran and Tunisia, and more recently in Egypt, social media were touted as being integral to the Libyan revolution. Inspired by the movements in neighboring countries, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were used by protestors to upload raw footage, photos, and messages of the chaos. The majority of these visuals uploaded by Libyan citizens were shot using camera phones, resulting in images of poor quality. These videos, however, appear to have had the credibility of first-hand accounts, resonating with audiences worldwide.

Just as social media claimed to have united Libyans, they have also been used as a tool for government intimidation and control. Indeed, the literature suggests similar actions in other countries. During the Kenyan electoral crisis in 2007, for example, technology that was used by citizen journalists was also implemented by government authorities to rig the elections (Zuckerman, 2009). According to Zuckerman, bloggers in Kenya had more influence than just their online readership, especially if the content was picked up by a traditional media source. The Kenyan government recognized that social media coupled with traditional sources can have a powerful impact on the general citizen population and have since taken measures to limit their influence on the public. Similar to Kenya, the Libyan government used social media as an opportunity to deflect the work of online activists. It blocked sites such as YouTube in an effort to control information dissemination. These actions by the Libyan government, however, only created new pathways for citizen journalists to circumvent these restrictions of blocks and government intimidation (O'Neill, 2011). In general, social media were just another means that brought about the end of the Gaddafi regime. The blackout did not stop information from traveling. As Vandewalle (2011) writes: 'in a tribal society, news travels fast.' As was the case in Iran and Egypt, the most powerful tools for the spread of information have been simply word-of-mouth and door-to-door campaigning.

Indeed, shortly afterwards, the revolution successfully overthrew Gaddafi's regime as he was killed on 20 October 2011 at the age of 69. Nato had been bombing Libya for months, and the dictator was finally captured by the forces of the National Transitional Council (NTC) of Libya following his attempt to flee (Gatehouse, 2011). After his capture, a grainy video shot by a member of the NTC was released that showed a battered and bloodied Gaddafi being pulled from the back of a pickup truck, while other footage showed Gaddafi's lifeless body being dragged across a dusty road (Al-Jazeera, 2011).

An announcement by acting Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril stated that Gaddafi had been killed by crossfire between his loyalists and fighters from the NTC. Jibril's confirmation corroborated the video of Gaddafi being taken alive and he said that Gaddafi died of bullet wounds minutes before reaching a hospital. However, the video footage that was broadcast by Al-Jazeera, explained that it was unclear whether he was dead or alive at the time of capture. After his death was announced, Libyans took to the streets shouting 'Allah u Akbar' (God is Great) and handed out cookies and candy (later dubbed 'revolutionary treats') to passersby (Jawad, 2011).

## Discussion

Social media have been praised for their ability to unite people during uprisings and revolutions. The analyses here examined gatekeeping practices in the context of three uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya. Using the theoretical concept of gatekeeping, we examined the relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media and how gatekeepers continue to maintain the status quo in regard to news about and in these conflict zones. Theoretically, this research expands the study of gatekeeping theory by examining how citizen journalists manipulate their stories to remain in line with traditional media sources.

As Singer (2005) noted, citizen-generated materials, such as blogs, are being used by traditional media organizations to enhance their own coverage. Thus UGC is being adapted to fit the narratives and routine practices of the traditional media. These routines are part of the gatekeeping process. Gatekeeping theory is defined as the selection process of choosing stories and/or visuals that follow the organizations' news routines and narratives (White, 1950). Current literature indeed suggests that social media that are presented to audiences, namely Western, are the ones that fit into the framework of the traditional media.

The findings of this study confirm current scholarly literature regarding the role of traditional media as gatekeepers, particularly the relationship between traditional media and citizen journalism. Recent scholars suggest that there is a flourishing but restrained acceptance of UGC (Karlsson, 2011). Thus, despite the fact that many news stories written by citizen journalists are available in traditional media outlets, the stories that make the big headlines are the ones that make it past the traditional organizations' gatekeepers.

In fact, from the theoretical concept of gatekeeping, traditional media and social media have the opportunity to create a symbiotic relationship. Social media clearly provided much needed information for traditional media during the uprisings analyzed in this study (see Hamdy and Gomaa, 2012). In the context of the uprisings under study, social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube were important to traditional

news outlets because many of them were not allowed access in these countries. Further because covering these conflicts is dangerous and expensive, most traditional media now rely on citizen journalists, who often provide first-hand accounts as events unfold.

Control over media outlets has been a recurring theme in our analyses. In the three case studies, the governments maintained a strong grip over traditional media as well as citizen journalism. Particularly in the case of Libya, intimidation and brute violence were used regularly to control information. Moreover, some governments blocked internet communication during the uprisings such as in the cases of Libya and Egypt. Further, as Zuckerman (2009) suggested, these governments most likely infiltrated social media sites to continue intimidating their citizens online.

In addition, social media have been further restricted by traditional media hegemony. Despite the fact that the legitimate media tout the virtues of citizen journalism, mainstream media organizations have continued to filter UGC (Williams et al., 2011). The long established status quo maintaining traditions of accuracy, authenticity, and impartiality has continued to be the driving force behind the traditional media and a prime factor when considering the use of UGC.

Overall, however, this study has demonstrated how social media have many virtues: they provide a voice for those who may have no other way of reaching a wider audience. Nevertheless, to insist that social media were the sole cause of these three revolutions is misleading, especially when one considers that a large percentage of the populations in these countries are under the poverty line and illiterate. Rather, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were tools in the social media tool bag. One of the most important factors to acknowledge is that there would have been no revolutions without struggles. Social media made it logistically easier, but the revolutions in Iran, Egypt and Libya could not have happened without dedicated activists and the collective struggle of their people who spread news about the rallies and protests in the old fashioned way: word-of-mouth. Therefore, it is important to understand that social media were not the cause of these revolutions; rather they were used by ordinary citizens seeking change, to help elucidate and disseminate their frustrations to an international (mainly Western) audience. In the case of Egypt, for example, many critics argue that giving social media all the credit for the revolution discredits the work of the people on the streets of Egypt calling for action (Herrera, 2011).

Saeed's pictures on Facebook and Neda's video were used as catalysts not only on the internet but also as protest signs during the uprisings. Therefore it appears that successful online activism must have a successful offline beginning. It is also imperative to recognize that these revolutions would not have existed without the offline struggles. Despite the use of social media in these different countries, in the end they had very different impacts. This suggests that the success of these uprisings did not really depend on the use of social media but on the conditions on the ground. Social media's main roles were to provide a logistically easier avenue for multiple groups of dedicated activists, a free space in which to exchange ideas. Social media might have created the opportunity for citizen journalists to get their voices heard, but it was the traditional media's practices of gatekeeping that selected the information that would reach the wider audiences.

## Conclusion

Without a doubt, the future of journalism as a field and practice remains in a constant state of flux. Many news professionals in traditional media claim that the work of citizen journalism is shattering the very paradigm of the field because it is providing an 'authentic', first-hand perspective. Certainly in the case of the uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya, the work of citizen journalists provided a powerful source of news for the rest of the world; however, it also provided a valuable resource for traditional media that had the ability to pick and choose stories that fitted their organizations' routines. Future research should continue to examine the ever-growing world of citizen journalism and whether traditional media continue to maintain a strong foothold in current revolutions and uprisings, such as the ongoing situation in Syria.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Note

1. Iran is considered by many to be a computer literate society. In 2009, Iran's population was a little over 66 million, with approximately 32 million internet users. Thus, penetration was estimated at almost 50 per cent (see Internet World Stats, 2010).

## References

- Ali S and Fahmy S (2012) The icon of the Egyptian revolution: Using social media in the toppling of a Mideast government. In: Berenger R (ed.) *Social Media Go to War: Civil Unrest, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*. Washington, DC: Marquette Books.
- Allan S and Thorsen E (2009) Introduction. In: Cottle S et al. (eds) *Citizen journalism: Global perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang, 1–14.
- Al-Jazeera (2011) Muammar Gaddafi killed as Sirte falls, 21 October. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/10/20111020111520869621.html> (accessed 5 November 2011).
- Al-Saggaf Y (2006) The online public sphere in the Arab world: The war in Iraq on the Al Arabiya website. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12: 311–334.
- Baird J (2010) The revolution was televised. *Newsweek* online, 10 June. Available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/06/10/the-revolution-was-televised.html> (accessed 11 November 2011).
- Berenger RD (eds) (2006) Introduction: War in cyberspace. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, special issue, 12(1): 176–188.
- Bowman L (2008) Re-examining gatekeeping: How journalists communicate the truth about the power of the public. *Journalism Practice* 2(1): 99–112.
- Bradley M (2010) Anger on the streets of Cairo, 14 June. *The National* (the Abu Dhabi media company's first English-language publication). Available at: <http://www.thenational.ae/news> (accessed 18 June 2010).
- CNN World (2009) Ahmadinejad hails election as protests grow, 13 June. Available at: <http://articles.cnn.com> (accessed 10 October 2010).
- Corn D (2009) Torture in Iran. *Mother Jones* online, 8 July. Available at: <http://motherjones.com> (accessed 15 November 2010).

- Domingo D and Heinonen A (2008) Weblogs and journalism: A typology to explore the blurring boundaries. *NORDICOM Review* 29(1): 3–15.
- Domingo D et al. (2008). Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond: An international comparative study on initiatives in online newspapers. *Journalism Practice* 2(3): 326–342.
- Esfandiari G (2010) The Twitter devolution, Foreign Policy, 7 June. Available at: <http://www.foreignpolicy.com> (accessed 15 November 2011).
- Freedom House (2009) Freedom of the Press 2009. *Freedom House*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2009> (accessed 11 November 2010).
- Gatehouse G (2011) Libyan forces 'capture Gaddafi', 20 October. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15385955> (accessed 20 October 2011).
- Ghareeb E (2000) New media and the information revolution in the Arab world: An assessment. *Middle East Journal* 54(3): 395–418.
- The Guardian* (2011) Egypt activist Wael Ghonim tells TV station: 'I am no hero' – video in Arabic, 7 February. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed 10 March 2011).
- Hamdy N and Gomaa EH (2012) Framing the Egyptian uprising in Arabic language newspapers and social media. *Journal of Communication* 62(2): 195–211.
- Harb Z (2011) Arab revolutions and the social media effect. *M/C Journal* 14(2): 1–6.
- Harrison J (2010) User-generated content and gatekeeping at the BBC hub. *Journalism Studies* 11(2): 243–256.
- Heaven W (2011) Egypt and Facebook: Time to update its status. *NATO Review*. Available at: [http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/Social\\_Medias/Egypt](http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2011/Social_Medias/Egypt) (accessed 10 November 2011).
- Hermida A and Thurman N (2008) A clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites. *Journalism Practice* 2(3): 343–356.
- Herrera L (2011) Egypt's revolution 2.0: The Facebook factor, 12 February. *Jadaliyya*. Available at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com> (accessed 20 March 2011).
- Human Rights Watch (2010) *Iran*. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87713> (accessed 15 October 2011).
- Internet World Stats (2010) *Iran*. Available at: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm> (accessed 12 April 2012).
- Jawad R (2011) Libya's Col Muammar Gaddafi killed, says NTC, 20 October. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15389550> (accessed 20 October 2011).
- Karlsson M (2011) Flourishing but restrained: The evolution of participatory journalism in Swedish online news, 2005–2009. *Journalism Practice* 5(1): 68–84.
- Livingston S and Bennett W (2003) Gatekeeping, indexing, and live-event news: Is technology altering the construction of news? *Political Communication* 20(4): 363–380.
- Loewenstein A (2010) Viewpoint: Why Iran's Twitter revolution failed. BBC World Service, 24 March. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice> (accessed 10 October 2011).
- Meraz S (2009) Is there an elite hold? Traditional media to social media agenda setting influence in blog networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14(3): 682–707.
- Nguyen A (2009) Globalization, citizen journalism, and the nation state: A Vietnamese perspective. In: Cottle S et al. (eds) *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang, 153–162.
- O'Neill M (2011) How YouTube is aiding the Libyan revolution. *Social Times*, 26 February. Available at: [http://socialtimes.com/youtube-libyan-revolution\\_b39678](http://socialtimes.com/youtube-libyan-revolution_b39678) (accessed 13 December 2011).
- Palmer D (2009) Obama urges Iran to stop 'violent and unjust actions'. Reuters: US edition, 20 June. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com> (accessed 12 October 2011).

- Parvaz D (2011) Middle East: Iran opposition planning protests. Al-Jazeera English, 13 February. Available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net> (accessed 10 November 2011).
- Salem F and Mourtada R (2011a) Facebook usage: Factors and analysis. Dubai. [http://www.dsg.fohmics.net/en/Publication/Pdf\\_En/DSG\\_Arab\\_Social\\_Media\\_Report\\_No\\_2.pdf](http://www.dsg.fohmics.net/en/Publication/Pdf_En/DSG_Arab_Social_Media_Report_No_2.pdf) (accessed 10 December 2011).
- Salem F and Mourtada R (2011b) Civil movements: The impact of Facebook and Twitter. Dubai. [http://www.dsg.fohmics.net/en/Publication/Pdf\\_En/ASMR\\_Final\\_Feb\\_08Low.pdf](http://www.dsg.fohmics.net/en/Publication/Pdf_En/ASMR_Final_Feb_08Low.pdf) (accessed 10 December 2011).
- Schechtman J (2009) Iran's Twitter revolution? Maybe not yet. *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 19 June. Available at: <http://www.businessweek.com> (accessed 12 November 2011).
- Shapiro S (2009) Revolution, Facebook-style. *The New York Times*, 22 June. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html> (accessed 14 November 2011).
- Singer JB (2005) The political j-blogger: 'Normalizing' a new media form to fit old norms and practices. *Journalism* 6(2): 173–198.
- Singer JB and Ashman I (2009) Comment is free, but facts are sacred: User-generated content and ethical constructs at the Guardian. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 24(1): 3–21.
- Timeline: Egypt's Revolution (2011) Al-Jazeera English online, 14 February. Available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net> (accessed 10 November 2011).
- Vandewalle D (2011) Is this Libya's new revolution? CNN Opinion, 21 February. Available at: <http://articles.cnn.com> (accessed 10 November 2011).
- Wall M (2009) The taming of the warblogs: Citizen journalism and the war in Iraq. In: Cottle S et al. (eds) *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang, 33–42.
- The Washington Times* (2009) Editorial: Iran's Twitter revolution, 16 June. Available at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/> (accessed 15 October 2011).
- White DM (1950) The gatekeeper: A case study in the selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly* 27(4): 383–390.
- Williams A, Wardle C and Wahl-Jorgensen K (2011) Have they got news for us? Audience revolution or business as usual at the BBC? *Journalism Practice* 5(1): 85–99.
- Zuckerman E (2009) Citizen media and the Kenyan electoral crisis. In: Cottle S et al. (eds) *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang, 187–196.

### Author biographies

**Sadaf R Ali** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Media & Theater Arts at Eastern Michigan University. Her research interests include visual communication, communication technologies, and media framing, specifically audience attitudes towards different kinds of content. *Address:* Department of Communication, Media & Theater Arts, Electronic Media & Film, Eastern Michigan University, 106 Quirk, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, USA. [email: [sali8@emich.edu](mailto:sali8@emich.edu)]

**Shahira Fahmy** is a tenured Associate Professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Arizona. She holds an adjunct/courtesy joint appointment with the Department of Communication and an additional one at the School of Middle Eastern & North African Studies. Her research interests focus on visual communication and conflict reporting with a specific focus on the Middle East and North Africa. *Address:* School of Journalism & Department of Near Eastern Studies, The University of Arizona, 845 N Park Avenue, Marshall Building, Tucson, AZ 85721-0158, USA. [email: [shahira.f@gmail.com](mailto:shahira.f@gmail.com)]