Hurricanes and hashtags: How the media and NGOs treat citizens' voices online in humanitarian emergencies

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Abstract

Twitter, Instagram and SMS messages have entered into the defining images and texts of humanitarian disasters, theoretically allowing survivors to play a role in the framing of such crises. Yet research suggests that both mainstream media and NGOs – whose symbiotic relationships traditionally framed such stories – have cloned and absorbed such content, restricting the voices that are heard. Issues around privacy and copyright are yet to be resolved in the mainstream media, while NGOs have turned to western bloggers rather than beneficiaries to mediate their message. This article draws on around 50 semi-structured interviews with those whose content was used by UK mainstream media; journalists from the main broadcast and print outlets in the UK; and members of each of the thirteen UK Disaster Emergency Committee aid agencies who responded to recent crises including the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake. It aims to answer how voices of citizens in crises are being mediated and mediatized, and what issues the use of this content raise around contextual integrity of privacy. It concludes by examining whether NGOs' engagement online allows the voices of the marginalized to emerge.

Keywords

NGOs

journalist

user-generated content

humanitarian crises

social media

disasters

Twitter

Introduction

> [Reproducing my] tweet ended up boosting my followers by at least 100 in an hour. [...] I realized I'd better stop joking and felt a responsibility to tweet actual news. (Anon. 2013a)

> I was pretty stressed about what I had seen [the Oklahoma hurricane] and felt guilty about my part in taking videos of it. I did not profit in any way from this and I have found it awkward in wanting to go back to using social media. (Anon. 2013b)

The above two quotations are from what can be called 'accidental journalists' eyewitnesses who created user-generated content in two recent humanitarian crises. The first was a tweeter in the 2011 Japan earthquake; the second was someone who took a 'Vine' video of the 2013 Oklahoma hurricane. Both posted content on the Internet with little realization that their pictures or words would go beyond a small circle of friends; in fact they both went global. While activists or NGOs may have tweeted, filmed or taken photos of this coverage, much of this content is shot by people dubbed 'accidental journalists': those who simply happened to find themselves caught up in a story – as Wardle puts it 'in the right (or wrong) place at the right (or wrong) time' (Wardle et al. 2014: 5).

The speed at which newsgathering has absorbed and utilized content created by non-journalists has been surprisingly fast. One journalist, interviewed by Wardle et al., admitted hearing people once say: 'Why would we want to use this [user-generated content]? Look at the quality of mobile footage; who would be interested in it? Now when a major story happens everyone is beating at the UGC [user-generated content] door' (2014: 5).

The result has been a challenge to journalists, and their traditional roles both as a person bearing witness and as a gatekeeper. When a tragedy, crime or disaster occurred in the past, journalists would have to physically leave their newsroom environment to perform journalistic rituals of the 'doorstep' (that is, when a journalist confronts a subject or a witness at their home) and the 'deathknock' (so-called when a journalist tries to speak to a family member following a bereavement, usually by physically going to knock on their front door and ask for an interview and photograph). But Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and SMS messages can now create defining images and texts of humanitarian disasters, theoretically allowing survivors to play a role in the framing such crises – and leave journalists playing catch-up.

Yet research suggests that both mainstream media and NGOs – whose symbiotic relationship traditionally framed such stories – have cloned and absorbed such content, potentially restricting the voices that are heard. Issues around privacy and copyright are yet to be fully resolved in the mainstream media, while NGOs have turned to western bloggers rather than beneficiaries to mediate their message.

How has the advent of social networking and user-generated content altered the way in which we perceive journalism? Bourdieu's field theory suggests that there is a shift in the journalistic field as new agents gain access. The theoretical question is posed: are bloggers, citizen journalists and those who create 'user-generated content' possible agents in this way – and if so does their entry into the media landscape suggest such a shift or an emphasis on

traditional journalistic norms (Vos et al. 2012; Russell 2007)? Added to this, do NGOs who act as sources for journalists covering disasters, but who have increasingly used the tools of both mainstream journalism and citizen journalism have a potential influence on the field?

Both Vos (2012) and Russell (2007) look closely at bloggers who critique the mainstream media, providing in fact a meta-discourse. This article looks less at critiques of the mainstream media but more at how the creators of 'user-generated content' – the accidental, DIY journalists could be influencing and transforming the field. What role do NGOs play as well in sustaining the *illusio* of the field – or challenging it? And how can they transform the field, given that they often find themselves straightjacketed into traditional 'conflict frames', with journalists looking for actors willing to present extreme views – conventions that Kunelius (2006) partly traces back to increasing commercialization and media competition.

In their conclusions, Russell (2007) and Vos (2012) take different views. On the one hand, Russell (2007) sees the explosion in new media as the chance of having a transformative effect on the field. She uses the example of the French city of Clichy sous Bois riots in 2005; there politicians and mainstream media cited mobile phone use as the preferred frontline means of communication – this prefigures for example the UK's 2011 riots when Twitter and then BlackBerry messaging (BBM) were demonized by many as the cause of the rioters' ability to gather.

Vos (Vos et al. 2012), in comparison, sees new media as maintaining the conservative status quo. He found that bloggers tended to accept the received journalistic 'doxa' (the so-called nature of the field) and thus favoured stability in it. In effect, while the bloggers might be critiquing the mainstream journalists for not doing their job properly, they were doing so by using the traditional standards of objectivity and professionalism. Such bloggers were very keen to distinguish themselves from the mainstream media – often by using pejorative terms – but by criticizing traditional journalism, they were effectively choosing to hold it up as an

authority. So Vos believes that the relationship that has emerged between new and old media is one of 'rivalry not reciprocity' (2012: 853).

Both are partially right but Russell is too optimistic and Vos is too pessimistic. It is clear that there has been a shift in how acute live events are reported, even as far as the first news of the 2010 earthquake was revealed by a Haitian tweeter than a news wire (Brainard 2010; Bunz 2010; Evans 2010; MacLeod 2010). Yet this has not seen as a total transformation. The key point that Russell makes is the discussion about how both mainstream media and UGC producers use each other's practices to gain and maintain legitimacy – the huge growth in news reporters 'tweeting' live events, the producers of UGC presenting their material in norms familiar to the seasoned news consumer.

As part of a wider piece of research, during 2012–2014, nearly 60 semi-structured interviews were carried out with such players – journalists, UGC creators and aid agencies. The interviews with mainstream print and broadcast organizations, and the agencies belonging to the UK's Disasters Emergency Committee were carried out between 2012 and 2014 either face to face in London, via phone or in cases of the UGC creators via Skype or e-mail. Interviews generally lasted around 45 minutes to an hour and in the case of journalists and aid agencies were focused around subjects such as the changing nature of the source–media relationship, how they worked together on the ground and their use of 'ordinary voices' via new technology. With the UGC creators the interviews focused on how they were contacted and their material was used, and their feelings about this. Of those identified from the *Guardian* and BBC liveblogs of the first day of the 2011 Japanese earthquake, sixteen agreed to be interviewed and ten could not be reached from the BBC blog, while seven from the *Guardian* blog agreed to be interviewed while six could not be reached. All were interviewed via e-mail or Skype because they were mainly still based in Tokyo.

Using these interviews, this article attempts to answer the following questions: how are

voices of citizens in crises being mediated and mediatized? What issues does the use of this content raise around the contextual integrity of privacy? Does NGOs' engagement online allow the voices of the marginalized to emerge?

The journalists

Early use of user-generated content was greeted with the idea that this would revolutionize the way that journalism was conducted, with the tsunami dubbed a turning point (Gillmor 2005), while the hope was that UGC would encourage a 'participatory journalism' with increased collaboration between mainstream and amateur journalists, with the result that it would shift from a 'top-down lecture to an open conversation' (Paulussen and Ugille 2008: 25).

This optimism has not been realized, as has been demonstrated by a number of studies that show that while there is more widespread adoption of the use of content not created by traditional journalists, there is still a reluctance for mainstream media to give equal credit or space to user-generated content (Hermida 2008; Ornebring 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008). The majority of journalists talked about how the growth of social media had allowed more diverse points of view to be heard. Journalists named Twitter as the most useful social network for this (mainly because journalists use Twitter themselves, finding it a quick and easy news source) (Clune 2013) but said that apart from the initial tweets breaking the story, the focus for them was on stills and video.

When the journalists talk about the stories they have covered by utilizing user-generated content, they focus on ordinary people. For example, in the case of the Haiti 2010 earthquake, journalists talked about the fact that it was not so much expats or aid workers but citizens they had engaged with:

> It was an eye-opener just how many people did take to Twitter, and they were locals. Then the aid workers, once they were on the ground, wanted to talk to us, and then expats, not many. (Anon. 2013c)

Yet research seems to bear out that the reason journalists recall the 'locals' is because they are unusual rather than the norm – or it appears to be wishful thinking. For example, a study on BBC convergent news of the Haiti earthquake shows that only eight web-stream entries came from 'average people' in Haiti whilst the remaining 42 are attributed either to western NGOs or to westerners who are indirectly touched by the earthquake (Chouliaraki 2010: 316).

This is backed up with the recent study by Lin et al. (2014), who looked at tweets around the 2012 US presidential election. They concluded that despite the potential for social media to create larger public squares with more diverse voices speaking, occasions for large-scale shared attention appear to undermine this deliberative potential by replacing existing interpersonal social dynamics with increased collective attention to existing 'stars' (Lin et al. 2014: 10).

The use of this content by journalists is particularly interesting in the growth of the liveblog. The liveblog is a relatively new web native format that has been introduced by newspapers on to their websites and by broadcasters such as the BBC, producing a synthesis of traditional journalism and contemporary digital technologies (Thurman and Walters 2013). In the UK, the live blog can be traced back to *The Guardian* newspaper in 1999, although for the first decade it was used mainly for sports commentary rather than breaking news; the first recorded live blog was for the 7/7 attacks in London in July 2005 and the first time readers' comments were integrated was in 2007 (O'Mahony 2014).

Today, the ubiquity of the live blog spans from left-wing tabloid (the *Mirror*) to right-wing broadsheet (the *Telegraph*). It has been used for subjects as diverse as the Arab Spring, the Boston marathon bombings, Prime Minister's Questions and even the announcement of the Duchess of Cambridge's second pregnancy (Tran 2014). Live blogs are often much more popular with the public than traditional news stories and picture galleries and the amount of time spent on the live blog is longer (Thurman and Walters 2013).

But while the live blog, with its informal tone, quick-fire updates and reliance on huge amounts of content for breaking news stories might seem an ideal place for creators of UGC to have their voices heard, the content that ends up on the blog does not always reflect that. A writer of one of the BBC live blogs (called live pages) attempted to explain what the blogs should consist of:

> A good live page should be engaging, informative, fast moving, comprehensive and clickable (i.e. lots of URL links). So I always aim to have a good mix of official sources/reaction, people on ground, ordinary punters, analysts, pictures/galleries, tweets. (Anon. 2013d)

In the semi-structured interviews, most of the editors named UGC as most useful in the immediate aftermath of a story – before a journalist could get there. But the kind of 'UGC' used in the liveblogs examined often comes from traditional sources. For example with the *Guardian*'s liveblog of the Great East Japan earthquake, the blog starts at 7.22 a.m. GMT. But the first time we hear any non-government, non-media organization or non-NGO speak is 9.41 a.m., when a tweeter has his audioboo (a web application that allows users to record and share sound files) reproduced on the *Guardian* site – nearly 2.5 hours later.

This is partly because it may take time for UGC to emerge. But in the meantime we have

heard from the *Guardian*'s Tokyo correspondent, Reuters, Al Jazeera, the BBC, the US Geological Survey, the UN, the Japanese prime minister (via wires), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Tsunami Warning Centre. There is also a reliance on 'below the line' commentators rather than wider use of UGC. Below the line commentators are those who have already registered with the *Guardian* so that journalists there can see how much they have posted in the past or whether they have been blocked for abusive behaviour. Again this prioritizes the 'helpful source' but is also selective; these below the line commentators are *Guardian* readers, rather than the general public.

Yet this is a rapidly changing media outlet. Looking at *Guardian* liveblogs two years later at the time of the Oklahoma tornado of 2013, there is already a very different approach. The focus towards mobile users rather than those using computers means that there are far more pictures. There are also far more examples of *Guardian* multimedia team editing UGC footage so that it comes under *Guardian imprimatur*.

There are now fewer 'below the line commentators' – reflecting the increasing dominance of Twitter. The noise on social media is now so loud that the *Guardian* live blog editors now use a stream of 'verified users' in early stages – meaning that the editor is largely dependent on other 'verified' users retweeting 'unverified' live stuff. So the institutions that have embraced Twitter get more play – Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Red Cross and even the British Queen in this scenario.

The 'accidental journalists'

There has been little examination of how those who created this content feel about the use of

such content. As a result, the decision was taken to contact all those who contributed to the first day of the Great East Japan earthquake (14 March 2011) on both the *Guardian* and BBC blogs.

There was a sharp but understandable divide between those who had posted information up on social networking sites such as Twitter and those who had gone on the mainstream media sites to post messages themselves. Most of those I contacted whose tweets had been used had had no idea that their information had been distributed to a wider audience in this way.

> I didn't know that my content had been used in the BBC's liveblog. Can you send me what was used and/or how? (Obviously, this question answers some of your questions) (Anon. 2014a)

> As far as Twitter, I don't really know. I do know that the NYT [New York Times] started a page that included my Twitter feed. But to be honest the first few days of the disaster were so overwhelming I couldn't keep up with what was going on (Anon. 2014b)

There was in the main, however, a fairly realistic attitude to the use of such content. Most explained that they had posted in a public place, and therefore, while they did not expect it to be picked up by mainstream media in this way, they felt that they themselves had put the information out in the public domain and therefore the media could not be blamed for picking it up. For those who had directly commented on the *Guardian* webpages, or had taken the time to fill out a form on a BBC website, there was again a lack of information that their content would be used, but a realization that by co-operating with the media organization in this way, their content could be very likely to be used.

What was revealed was that those whose work was used (and they were aware of it) started to change their behaviour as a result. There was a sense from some of the tweeters that they had to start thinking much more about the tweets that they were publishing, feeling that they had a public role.

> I felt it was wise to contribute at the time as people wanted to know what was happening. It's embarrassing looking back on it but the air raid sirens and tsunami warnings were blaring for 6-12 hours wear [sic] I lived and my area was also due a massive earthquake. (Anon. 2013e)

Supporters of UGC in humanitarian crises claim that it can move away from Chouliaraki's 'anaesthesia' of traditional disaster reporting. Yet where does this leave our perception of what privacy is and is not? As privacy theorist Helen Nissenbaum points out, the fundamental problem here is a breakdown in what she calls 'contextual integrity' (2004: 119). Privacy means different things in different situations, and that privacy is violated when people do not respect two types of contextual norms – those of appropriateness (what information may be shared) and those of flow and distribution (whom the information is shared with).

The problem with social media sites is that contextual norms tend to get violated all too often. UGC creators saw themselves as eyewitnesses, not journalists but by posting they were putting stuff out there. What they then found overwhelming was the volume of interest and also the personal interest in themselves; they often did not realize that the media was interested in who they were and the material they were providing, and this is what they found difficult. The virtual doorstep seemed threatening and stressful. Meanwhile the journalists often paid lip service to the idea that privacy should not be invaded but showed no

recognition of the stressful nature of the virtual pack.

The NGOs

Most NGOs make it clear that it is their duty to allow the voices of the marginalized to be heard. They make this clear in their mission statements, evaluation policies and media work. In such documents there is a commitment to hear ordinary people's voices: the idea that agencies speak for beneficiaries is not acceptable. In some cases this may even mean accepting criticism: 'the voices and views of minority, disenfranchised and other groups with perhaps contrary opinions should also be heard and considered' (CARE International 2013: 2).

But most agencies saw practical difficulties in actually ensuring that such voices were heard. While many praised efforts such as Oxfam GB's 'Twitter takeover' (where an inhabitant of the Jordan-based Za'atari refugee camp for Syrian refugees tweeted via the Oxfam Twitter handle for the day on 1 February 2013) or projects such as giving children in Syria cameras so that they could take pictures themselves, many were unsure as to how effective such projects were. They were seen as often labour-intensive and ineffective when it came to media work. Only one admitted that there were concerns about how this would affect the agency's ability to promote itself well: 'It's a risk, and it's opposite to a lot of our work, where it's about controlling the message' (Anon. 2013f).

For many a safer and easier alternative was to work with bloggers. These bloggers were not 'accidental journalists' in the way the previous UGC providers were. Instead they tended to be westerners with established blogs based around an interest that was suitable for the agency. So for example Save the Children targeted so-called 'mummybloggers' whose blogs typically

revolved around parenting dilemmas and child-friendly ideas, while TEAR Fund, a faith-based agency, focused its attention on Christian bloggers.

The genesis of this was Save the Children's mummy bloggers campaign, where instead of taking journalists on a press trip, in 2010 the charity took three prominent mummy bloggers to Bangladesh to raise awareness of the upcoming Millennium Development Goals conference. The three women tweeted and blogged with the hashtag #blogladesh, and as a result it received considerable mainstream media interest in the UK on their return (Cooper 2011).

Since then, other agencies in the UK have followed Save the Children's lead, running competitions for bloggers to 'win' a trip to visit the agency's projects in other parts of the world. This is, it can be argued, a way to bypass the mainstream media who may not be interested in running 'good news' stories about aid agency work that do not have a strong 'peg'.

But this approach does not necessarily allow beneficiaries to speak, any more than traditional media coverage. The bloggers who have worked with the agencies have also tended to be – although not exclusively – white, middle class and privileged, which raises issues about how different are they from the mainstream media journalists they are replacing.

Imagery was also sometimes a problem, with one TEAR fund blogger writing that she felt uncomfortable about a picture that was posted of her and a local child by another blogger: 'I felt like I was a throwback to the 19th century – a well-meaning white female missionary cuddling an African baby' (Clutterbuck 2013).

Cottle (1995) has argued that while 'ordinary voices' are often routinely accessed into news items, they are rarely granted an opportunity to challenge political or expert authorities. Instead they become what Beck calls the voices of the side effects (Cottle 1998) – a way of symbolizing the human face of a news story. With #blogladesh this was particularly acute,

with many of the blogs focusing at times on the bloggers' distress at what they saw, rather than the stories of those they had gone to meet.

> It is hard to find the words here. I didn't take pictures. Just staying upright and breathing in the space of so much […] so much horror, and horror it was, was the best I could manage.
>
> (George 2010)

Conclusion

Everything has changed, but nothing has changed. The same rules of good journalism still apply. The same rules of humanitarian aid still apply. It's about storytelling – and storytelling is not just a timeline of tweets or a stream of YouTube videos. Is there a future for humanitarian reporting? Yes, of course there is – if the reporting is done in the best journalistic tradition and as long as the human remains at the heart of humanitarian aid (Doucet 2014).

In times of crisis events, while these are seen as key moments for user-generated content (for example, the designation of Haiti as the 'first Twitter disaster'), it appears that journalists remained reliant on 'primary twifiners' – conventional authoritative sources who have learned to utilize social media networks in order to maintain their dominance of framing the story. While eyewitness accounts are important and certainly played a role in disaster coverage of recent times, in the aftermath of such disasters it appears that journalists still turned to governments, officials and businesses; as Lin et al. (2014) found in the political sphere, elite voices continue to crowd out more diverse voices when such disastrous events

take place.

For those ‘accidental journalists’ caught up in such catastrophic events, there is often a sense of pride and a compulsion to share either via social networks or via direct connection with mainstream media. Many of those whose words were used felt a responsibility to others to express what they had seen, even if they could not fully make sense of it. They often, however, had no idea that they themselves rather than their words would become part of the story, and felt overwhelmed by the attention that they then received from members of the media. While mainstream media in the aftermath of the Morel victory (Estrin 2013) now generally seeks permission to reproduce images,, if not words, this in itself can feel overwhelming: the ‘virtual doorstep’ can seem as intimidating as the old-style physical doorstep.[1] Good practice would be to follow what the BBC now argues that some pictures may be what it terms ‘hidden in the open’ (2010) – intended to be shared no wider than family – and that the intentions of the creator should be born in mind, and the impact of reuse. Meanwhile while NGOs had clearly engaged with the idea that they should allow beneficiary voices to be heard, there was still a nervousness and reluctance around this; while many were complimentary about such ventures as the Oxfam Twitter takeover, or the idea of giving cameras to beneficiaries so that they could record their own images and tell their own stories, many felt that this was not something that they themselves wanted to engage in. There was a concern both in terms of the amount of time and resources these kinds of projects took up, and also the value that was gained. There clearly appeared to be a reluctance to cede control of the framing of the story, whether consciously or not. Instead, many had turned to a ‘half-way house’ of utilizing bloggers, which had the advantage of moving away from the problems associated with interesting the mainstream media in NGO work. While this, it could be argued, has indeed brought a fresh perspective, it is not as fresh as it could be, thanks to the preponderance of white, middle-class bloggers. As Brendan Gormley, head of CDAC,

puts it:

> Communities are more and more connected through mobile and Internet technology, so survivors and their spokespeople can be heard around the world. The question is whether the international humanitarian community is willing to listen and put the voice of the survivors at the centre of their priorities and plans. (2014: 83)

The use of social networking sites and user-generated content in disaster stories is changing all the time; it is incredible to think that when the Asian tsunami of 2004 occurred, journalists were sent to airports to collect camcorder footage (Burrell 2005), while five years later tweets were the way the story of the Haitian earthquake was broken (Macleod 2010). The symbiotic, and at times uneasy, relationships between journalist, NGO and citizen in these vital stories continue to develop.

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Note

[1] The Haitian photographer Daniel Morel successfully sued Agence France-Presse and Getty Images for distributing pictures taken from Morel's Twitter feed in the aftermath of the 2010 quake. In 2013, he won $1.22m after a jury ruled that the organizations had wilfully infringed his copyright of eight pictures.