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Journalism in the Network

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Journalists spent much of their first decade online learning to make use of one of the key characteristics of the internet: the fact that it is digital.

Being digital, as Negroponte (1995) put it in the early days of the Web, means all forms of content are just bits and bytes available to be seamlessly combined. For journalists, this creates an ability to accommodate `multimedia' content -- digital text, photos, video, audio, animation and more, blended in ways impossible in any single medium. Producing such content requires new technical and journalistic skills, as well as cultural adaptation. Newsroom processes and perceptions have had to change along with storytelling techniques (Boczkowski 2005; Singer 2004).

Yet significant and sometime stressful though it continues to be, that transition is much simpler than the one on which this chapter focuses. Multimedia content draws on complex and perhaps unfamiliar formats, but it still consists of stories produced and controlled by journalists.

In the Web's second decade, a different characteristic of the internet has become central: the fact that it is not just digital but also a network. In a network, all communicators and all communication are connected. The media space and control over what it contains are shared. This means a dramatic conceptual and practical shift for journalists, who face a rapid, radical

decline in their power to oversee the information flow (Bruns 2005; Deuze 2005). Professional and cultural consequences are likely to be even more significant than those stemming from the medium's digital nature (Deuze 2007; Robinson 2007; Lowrey 2006).

The following pages briefly highlight three studies of what working in a shared space means for journalists. They offer successively wider scopes, from a national newspaper website, to one with a more global outlook and reach, and finally to a project encompassing two dozen websites in 10 countries. Taken together, they indicate that journalists continue to see what they do and how they do it as clearly distinct – and relatively little changed from journalism is a more walled-off past. The chapter concludes with a suggestion about the opportunity that this networked environment offers for fresh thinking about what journalism is and does.

scotsman.com: Democratic discourse in the 2007 Scottish election

In May 2007, Scotland held only its third national election in modern history. Although part of the United Kingdom, Scotland also has its own national parliament, created in the late 1990s and empowered to set laws governing Scots but not those who live elsewhere in Britain.

In the 2007 election, a big issue was a pledge by the Scottish National Party (SNP) leader that if elected First Minister – which he ultimately was, by a one-seat majority -- he would call a national referendum on independence within four years. Users flocked to the shared website of three Edinburgh-based newspapers -- *The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday* and the *Edinburgh Evening News* -- to talk through the implications. I focused on a section devoted to the election and offering 428 stories in the study period, two months surrounding the May 3 voting day (Singer 2008). Those stories attracted 39,300 comments from every continent except Antarctica.

The study relied on a sample of about 12 percent of the comments. More than 70 percent of these comments came from people claiming to reside in Scotland, and a majority were directly related to the election, politics and civic issues. While SNP and pro-independence voices were dominant, views were expressed from every point along the political spectrum. There were energetic debates about candidate positions, government policy, the viability of splitting from the United Kingdom and more.

How did journalists support, encourage and share in this robust discourse about the future of the country? They didn't. In a total of roughly 4,800 comments in the sample, only two were from newspaper employees. The only other evidence that anyone in the newsroom was even aware that a conversation was going on was the occasional removal of a comment flagged by users as `unsuitable'. Approximately 1.5 percent of comments in the sample were removed.

The newspapers, then, provided a wide range of election stories that in turn formed the starting point for a robust online conversation, offering evidence of the sort of `virtual public sphere' (Papacharissi 2002) that scholars have suggested is possible. Thousands of people from all over the world -- but, importantly to the national papers, mostly from Scotland -- gravitated to the scotsman.com website to form a thriving online community, with the explicit purpose of talking about politics, elections and the country's future. That is what democracy is all about, and the fact that they chose the newspaper site, from among plenty of other options, suggests they still see information provided by the media as central to the process.

But having created the space for that community to exist, the newspapers as an institution then chose to remain outside it. The online activities of journalists and users moved on parallel tracks. Journalists provided the stories, but nothing more. Users provided the commentary, but

they talked only amongst themselves. An opportunity for the media company to strengthen its relationship with those users was thus ignored.

Things may be entirely different next time around. Much has changed at *The Scotsman* since this study; the website has a new editor, other new staff, new formats and new approaches. In 2007, though, the papers stuck to their traditional role, staying in a comfort zone that involved seeding the conversation with information – but then steering clear. Perhaps the political nature of the discourse made journalists uncomfortable. Perhaps they wrote the users off as a pack of rabid nationalists. Perhaps they were just too busy or had no guidance in the task of interacting. Quite likely, all those things and more came into play.

It can be argued that creating separate zones is appropriate. Yet I would suggest that the internet is not an environment that tolerates boundaries of the sort that have become routine in older media. It is a space characterized, again, by interconnections -- including between journalists and audiences, who must make mutual adjustments within the space they share.

guardian.co.uk: Norms and the network

One intriguing aspect of this adjustment to a network is how journalists see it affecting their norms and ethical practices (Hermida and Thurman 2008). Britain's *Guardian* newspaper is especially interesting in this context both because it has been a UK leader in engaging online readers and because of its unusual ownership structure. The *Guardian* is owned by the Scott Trust, which provides an explicitly normative framework for how the paper and its employees are to operate. Comment is free, then-editor CP Scott wrote in 1921, but facts are sacred. He outlined a set of norms to go along with that proposition, including the mandate that the newspaper should be a platform for a diversity of voices to be heard – friends as well as foes.

Current executives love the `comment is free' mantra so much that they named the main commentary section of their website just that. Comment Is Free, launched in 2006, is home to *Guardian* columnists, commissioned writers and bloggers -- and, mostly in the form of comments, to users from all over the world.

This study (Singer and Ashman 2009) focused on three key journalistic norms:

* *Authenticity*, a set of related constructs centred on credibility.
* *Autonomy*, or journalistic independence.
* *Accountability*, closely akin to responsibility.

Of these, *authenticity* is probably the most complex. For journalists, it seems closely connected with credibility, journalistic authority and accuracy.

Guardian journalists were concerned about user contributions potentially jeopardizing credibility. Interviewees felt that while they took adequate steps to ensure what they wrote was credible, they could neither assess nor affect the credibility of what users provided. They worried about how such material might reflect on the *Guardian* and on them personally.

Closely connected were concerns about challenges to their authority. Some saw a democratization of discourse as inherently healthy, viewing their own role as enabling robust debate rather than providing what one editor called `definitive answers'. But others saw a crucial ongoing role for, quoting another editor, `the expert journalist who can interrogate and understand and all those sorts of things in a way that the citizen reporter just can't'.

Users also confront journalistic authority in a direct way: through personal attacks, disagreement over opinions and disputes about facts.

Personal attacks were both easiest and hardest to deal with. They were easiest because just ignoring them was seen as the optimal response. But they also were hardest because ignoring a personal attack takes a lot of self-restraint -- more, some confessed, than they possessed.

Differences of opinion drew mixed reaction. Most journalists said they appreciated cogent disagreement, and several said it nudged them out of complacency. But how the disagreement was expressed mattered. `When users are just saying "I think this is crap", what can you say to that?' an editor asked. `"Sorry, but I don't"?'

Challenges to factual statements – to journalistic accuracy -- generally were valued: Interviewees said they were more careful about what they published because they knew they would get publicly slammed if it was wrong. But some veterans expressed concern that users were challenging what one called `basic assumptions'; responding was tedious and time-consuming. Users do not necessarily see the world in ways that journalists take for granted.

In challenging those basic assumptions, users are taking on professional *autonomy* as well as authority Hit logs and comment counts show which stories interest users. But most journalists were adamant that such information should not guide news judgment, both because they feared becoming what one called `traffic whores' and because they saw a potential threat to the *Guardian* brand. Celebrity gossip and weird animals were OK for the cheesy tabloids, but not for the *Guardian* – no matter how many hits such material might generate.

Our third ethical concept was *accountability*. Interviewees highlighted the quality of the content they provided -- `my responsibility to the community is to put up good quality stuff that is interesting and accurate', one said -- and the quality of discourse about that content. `There's a responsibility to maintain civilized discourse', said another. `It's a problem for everyone'.

They also felt their willingness to publicly admit they had made a mistake was not just vital but in fact differentiated them from users who had few if any such obligations. `With citizen journalists, it's all rights and no responsibilities', one writer said. They highlighted attributes

such as honesty and transparency in this context. Users expect them to step out from behind their articles in order to discuss and defend their own ideas.

Anonymity also was an issue: Users can be anonymous but journalists cannot. In particular, journalists saw anonymity as enabling users to be abusive. `People feel licensed to say things, in content and style, that they wouldn't own if publishing as themselves', an editor said.

In general, new relationships between users and journalists seemed valuable as an abstract concept but often proved difficult in real life. The open discourse invited by a `comment is free' philosophy sounds great in theory – all that good democracy-in-action stuff. But the reality was rougher, and many journalists expressed dismay over the disturbingly confrontational nature of user contributions to the conversation.

Unlike the people at *The Scotsman* in 2007, however, these journalists *were* wading into that conversation. Although at the time of this study, the *Guardian* had no set policy for how engagement should work, what seemed to be emerging was a sense that the best approach was essentially a carrot rather than a stick: finding ways to encourage the more cogent contributors rather than trying, futilely, to discourage the hostile ones.

That said, adjusting to life in a network takes time and considerable trial and error, as well as bruised egos along the way. Journalism is no longer simply about informing or entertaining but also about engaging and interacting with an enormously diverse range of unseen (but not unheard) people. There are strains as long-standing norms related to the exercise of power and control over content are stretched in new directions and as journalists negotiate what one interviewee called the transition from a professional discourse to a far more personal one.

Multi-national perspective: Participatory journalism

The last study involves joint exploration by eight researchers into how leading papers in 10 Western democracies are handling user-generated content and the rationales behind their approaches. It is a rapidly moving topic, with innovations appearing constantly. We started by dividing the process of news production into five stages and looking at how open the stage was to user participation at each newspaper (Domingo et al. 2008):

* *The access or observation stage*. Can users report stories themselves or serve as sources?
* *The selection or filtering stage*. Can users decide what journalists are to cover?
* *The processing or editing stage*. Can users contribute content to the website?
* *The distribution stage*. Can users disseminate stories produced by journalists?
* *The interpretation stage*. Can users discuss journalists' stories after publication?

This last stage is where most of the action was at the time of our content analysis in late 2007 and interviews with editors in 2008. The *Guardian'*s innovations, for instance, were largely at this *interpretation* stage. Indeed, comments are nearly universal; most journalists see them as serving a democratic function and as fitting nicely into the journalistic mission to provide a forum for civic discourse (Glasser 1999). As a Finnish editor put it: `What could be more proper journalistic work than acting as a medium for social debate?'

On these major newspaper sites, most of that debate is about big national or international topics: war, climate change, immigration. Both the volume and, as at the *Guardian*, the nature of the comments raise issues for editors. `The problems with forums are the same as with letters to the editor', said a Belgian editor. `But while we used to receive about 50 letters a day, we now host debates with 5,000 reactions per day'.

One question is whether to pre-moderate the conversation – to read everything before it is published – or publish first and see if anyone objects. The latter option terrified some journalists, such as the German editor who described un-moderated forums as `like a seven-headed snake

that cannot be tamed'. Still, many media organizations are counting on users to help police their own contributions, primarily by flagging problematic posts.

User contributions in other stages were more sporadic. Can users serve as sources for stories, part of our *access and observation* stage? Yes, journalists did talk about scanning user material and contacting individuals for additional information. But is that giving users more control, or just expanding the journalist's source file? Probably the latter.

Users also can report information, though most of what they report has a personal and/or local focus: my friends, my wedding, my cat. Again, this contrasts with the bulk of user input at the interpretation stage, where discussion centres on national or international topics covered in stories written by journalists. Few users are able to provide first-hand information on those topics. They are, however, able to contribute information that is *not* easily available to the journalists: information close, sometimes very close, to home.

The related *processing and editing* stage, in which users can submit their own items, is another rapidly changing area. National papers are increasingly likely to offer sections of their websites as user publishing platforms, for instance by hosting user blogs. But there are more opportunities to contribute `news' about topics such as travel destinations – places I visited, restaurants I liked – than to cover events of general civic importance, a core journalistic franchise.

That said, there is a growing trend toward relying on users for local news and sports, a development likely to continue as tools such as Twitter gain popularity. Local residents can cover things the nationals do not have resources to handle with comparable depth. For the 2008 French municipal elections, for example, lefigaro.fr created 38,000 pages, one for each of the nation's local *communes*. Citizens and candidates contributed, and a series of debates spanning two months became mini-forums for every town in France. Users thus enabled Paris-based *Le*

Figaro to cover elections at a hyper-local level – and to compete with the strong regional press on a story normally out of its reach.

User participation also is rapidly increasing in our *distribution* stage. Many sites offer widgets for recommendation sites such as digg.com, and use of internal recommendation systems is growing. Formatted usage data provide at-a-glance updates about stories that are most popular, most frequently e-mailed or most commented-upon. Newspapers also are developing their presence on social media sites such as Facebook, which enable user communities to form around the media outlet or particular content components.

Our final stage involved *selection* or *filtering*: Can users decide what journalists cover? The answer to date is `no'. As we saw at the *Guardian*, journalists are very protective of their autonomous news judgment. It is OK for users to comment on what journalists have written or to provide coverage in areas journalists cannot reach. But telling journalists how to do their jobs? No, thanks. That central role of journalists in a traditional media environment -- guarding the gate, deciding what is and is not news (Shoemaker 1991) – is one they are not letting go of easily.

For the moment, then, the largest chunk of content from users comes after the fact – comments generated about information gathered, structured and published by journalists. The other stages remain largely controlled by journalists and closed to users, who have little input into determining what is covered and published. While some websites are giving users tools and space to create content, much of it remains in separate `ring-fenced' areas. Despite exceptions such as our municipal elections example from *Le Figaro*, few of these areas are ones on which the newspaper is staking its own brand or reputation, such as hard national or international news.

In the meantime, users are gaining a louder voice at the hyper-local and hyper-personal level, with contributions about things important to the individual but not a more broadly

conceptualized public. This may gratify a user's ego, and it may benefit the newspaper by creating a local presence it otherwise couldn't have. But it is a considerable distance from the `pro-am' collaboration that some prognosticators have envisioned (Rosen 2008).

Barbarians at the Gate or Liberators in Disguise?

These studies suggest that although much is changing rapidly, many journalists today see users as somewhat akin to invading barbarian hordes. As individual voices separate themselves from the aggregate numbers of a Web 1.0 world, a lot of those voices are proving pretty rowdy. And many that aren't rowdy do not have anything to say that journalists consider especially interesting. Users, it turns out, don't talk the same way or about the same things as journalists.

In theory, most journalists value the presence of more voices in the mix. But coping with the reality is harder than they perhaps envisioned. We're all for an open marketplace of ideas when we're the ones selling the goods in that marketplace. A truly open market is scarier. If the gates are open and anyone can enter -- anyone can trade in this marketplace -- new relationships with different kinds of people will be necessary. We are seeing tentative steps in that direction.

But let me offer a different interpretation: Newly opened channels are a tremendous opportunity for journalists and the media industry.

What do reporters and photographers spend way too much time doing? Covering routine meetings, checking police logs, rewriting press releases and maybe covering events those releases announce (Lewis et al. 2008). Such relatively trivial tasks waste journalists' time and their employers' money, not to mention that of their readers.

Users can and should do a great many of those things – with newsroom guidance, perhaps from novice journalists. Media companies have a huge opportunity to free up their expensive

resources, the veteran journalists on their staffs, to do what they should be doing, which is what they – and not, by and large, these users – have the time, training and talent to do. Investigating stories that need investigating. Pursuing leads, following up tips and ideas. Telling stories well and fully, in the multiple formats that the digital medium facilitates.

Journalists should be providing not just basic information but also the context, the analysis, the explanations and the sense-making that the community or the nation needs to make sound decisions about how it is to work, how it is to move forward, how it is to be governed. That, after all, is what journalism is for in a democracy (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001).

It is frustrating, to journalists and to readers, to see newspapers filled with unimportant items taken straight from press releases or official pronouncements -- and that are old news by the time they appear in print. It is frustrating, too, to know that people who might provide a much more valuable service cannot do so because all their time and energy goes into processing this junk food and feeding it to a beast with multiplying, incessantly demanding mouths: a print mouth, an online one, maybe a mobile one.

Not only do we as members of the public derive little sustenance from these filling but not very nutritious titbits, but media companies don't, either. Revenues are plummeting, as are readerships, ad lineage and stock prices. All are in free fall in America, and heading that way elsewhere. Newsroom staff sizes are following, making it harder still for journalists who remain to focus on quality rather than quantity of output, what Davies (2008) calls `churnalism'.

Nor is this downturn wholly cyclical in nature. The economy will improve, but the media market will remain irreversibly fluid and fickle, creating unprecedented pressures for a centuries-old revenue model based on advertising. That model requires media companies to deliver to advertisers a stable audience that wants – or at least is willing – to see advertising within a media

product. But neither stability nor advertising receptiveness characterise the typical website user. This open, networked environment is well on its way to destroying the industrial-age business model, in which news media stood at a pivotal point on the information conveyor belt.

Media companies must be open to major, not just incremental, change. Amid various desperate efforts, I see only rare glimpses of the one approach that I think will work: recommitting resources to the unique thing these companies can provide better than anyone else.

That unique thing is solid, valuable – difficult and gutsy -- journalism.

A business strategy based on this sort of journalism involves considerable risk. Newspapers have been described as simultaneously a traditional enterprise -- a mature industry, producing and delivering information as they have done for centuries -- and an innovative enterprise, an emerging industry needing and trying to do something new, or at least to do it in new ways (Rosenstiel 2007). It is hard to succeed at both at the same time. A mature industry requires different approaches, behaviours and world views from an emerging one. But some degree of risk tolerance is necessary by media managers and, importantly, by shareholders whose newspaper stock once consistently delivered a safe, and high, return.

I believe recommitting to journalism is potentially profitable – though less so than the old newspaper business was. But then, 30 percent profit margins are gone anyway, and I do not think they will come back when the overall economy recovers. The journalism I am talking about is not cheap to produce. Good journalists, unlike bloggers or users, don't work for free. Besides, this kind of journalism is likely to appeal to a smaller audience than the truly massive one of a traditional, limited media environment. But that smaller audience also is likely to be relatively loyal, relatively well-educated and with relatively decent money to spend on the newspaper and on advertiser offerings.

Of course, many people love fast food, in news as at mealtime. But again, here's where the user contributions come in. Users can take on a huge chunk of what is now the journalist's workload and beef up the media outlet's website with it, creating a portal for both the strong journalism and the press releases, as well as the hyper-local, hyper-personal content they are already beginning to provide. Users can contribute to timely spot news, event listings and coverage, much of the sports (including youth events), traffic and weather reports, and celebrity spottings. The basic crime stories? The police can provide most of them – as they do now, but through the media. The upbeat business stories that make advertisers smile? Press releases – same as now. The local council meetings? City councils have their own websites anyway, not to mention their own PR spokespeople.

Even better, users will provide that information for free. Create a space that feels like a community, and people will want to belong. Give those with an agenda a place to promote it, and they will. What's wrong with that? Nothing, as long as the source is clearly labelled -- which, at the moment, the press releases that too often run almost verbatim are not.

All this content currently is costing media outlets money because they are paying journalists to churn it out. A rethink is needed about what they bring to the party and, more fundamentally, what the job of the journalist is all about.

The journalist's job is to keep the cops and the councillors honest. The journalist's job is to look out for the consumer who will frequent those businesses. The journalist's job is to keep an eye on all those volunteer sources, too, because while a few may be a bit unhinged, others are not only sane but actually know what they're talking about. Those in the second category provide a readily accessible database of fresh sources to supplement the old standbys. Importantly,

including them also enables people to feel a part of media investigations that benefit them and their neighbours.

So yes, I do see this growth in user-generated content not just as a democratic vehicle but also as a practical opportunity on two fronts. The first is that, again, these are people who can take on mundane parts of the journalist's job that currently waste the most precious resource: the human beings in the newsrooms. The second is that it offers innumerable ways to bring new voices into journalists' work, from using them as sources to incorporating their contributions, including multimedia ones, in larger stories that reporters are pursuing. Users even can work collaboratively with journalists on 'crowd-sourced' investigations.

If Web 2.0 is about social networks and about the power of ubiquitous communication and connection, then Web 3.0 will be about cutting through the clutter. The medium's next iteration will emphasize the tools, processes and people to help us grasp what is meaningful, important and trustworthy amid all the noise (Jensen 2007). That sounds to me like the job of a journalist in the network that we all inhabit.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Material in this chapter derives from the author's presentation at `Journalismo: Mudanças na Profissão, Mudanças na Formação', a symposium held at the Universidade do Minho in Braga, Portugal, in September 2008. A version of the presentation appears in the proceedings, published online at URL TK.

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